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**Speaking in Parables:
Methods, Meanings, and Media**

Review & Expositor

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Speaking in Parables: Methods, Meanings, and Media

F. Scott Spencer, Issue Editor

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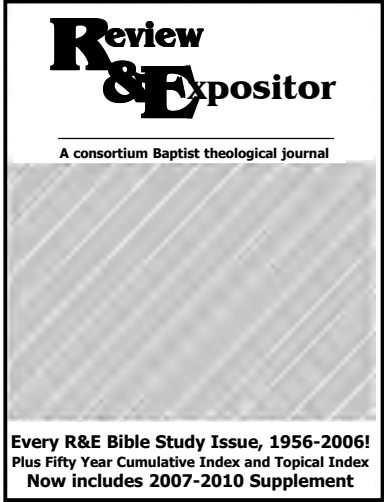
First Words . . .



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Speaking in Parables: Methods, Meanings, and Media

By F. Scott Spencer

While we have no record that Jesus ever spoke in tongues, we have abundant evidence that he spoke in parables. And in their own way, these parables prove to be just as much in need of translation and interpretation in order to capture their full import. Jesus' parables are often teasers. On the one hand, they are simple, pedestrian stories of everyday family, farming and business life that general audiences in Jesus' world would easily recognize. Today we need some help in understanding the ancient cultural contexts, but good resources are readily available.¹ On the other hand, while the literary-cultural plots of Jesus' parables are clear enough, the *theological points* he aims to make about God's kingdom—and our responses to it—are not so transparent. The punch line at the end more often than not leaves us a bit punch-drunk and off-balance, wondering what just hit us and what does it all mean. What is the word from God we are to hear in these simple-yet-strange stories?

The old Sunday School definition that Jesus' parables are "earthly stories with a heavenly meaning" hints at the interpretive problem but fails to grasp its thorny nettle. Jesus alerted the disciples to the element of "mystery" in his parables, revealed to some and hidden from others. Let the hearer/reader beware, lest you "look, but not perceive" and "listen, but not understand" (Mark 4:11-12). And perceiving and understanding this mysterious message involve much more than slapping some thin "heavenly" or "spiritual" veneer over the earthly tale. The real challenge is to apprehend—and act upon—the parables' disclosures and directives concerning the righteous rule of God *on earth*, as it is in heaven, a rule (kingdom) that shakes and remakes the present world order to its core.

¹ F. Scott Spencer is Professor of New Testament and Preaching at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, Richmond, Virginia.



Creative and critical interpretation of Jesus' parables has continued apace in the twenty-first century, in dialogue with a variety of innovative literary, historical, theological, sociopolitical, and ideological methods spicing New Testament scholarship overall. The present volume of essays, expository studies, and sermons aims to introduce readers to some of these recent trends (methods)

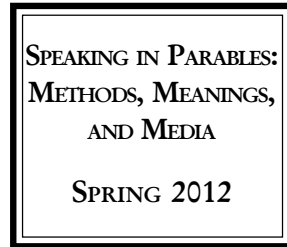
in parable scholarship and to provide new insights (meanings) into specific parables and suggestions regarding effective ways of preaching, teaching and otherwise communicating (media) the "truth" of these provocative stories in today's world.

The authors of our main articles are all seasoned scholars who have written or edited important books on the parables. I identify these works in the footnotes and encourage readers to consult them regularly in their study of Jesus' parables. While the essays presented here build on the authors' previous projects, they represent fresh reflections and investigations written for this journal. Klyne Snodgrass and Mary Ann Beavis take distinctive wide angle views on parable interpretation. Working within a traditional, but by no means stodgy or uncritical, framework, Snodgrass² offers a set of eight key questions that focus on ascertaining the intended meanings of Jesus' parables in the context of his overall teaching. In this vein, jarring elements of judgment and violence (alongside grace and mercy) in many parables must be confronted seriously (rather than dismissed or denigrated) as prophetic calls to repentance and obedience to God's word.

Beavis³ presents a stimulating overview of recent feminist approaches to Jesus' parables—and not just those that feature women characters. Those who might (mis)judge feminist biblical criticism as a narrow, blinkered, and arid enterprise should be pleasantly surprised: Beavis demonstrates the breadth, creativity, sophistication—and rich fruitfulness for preaching and teaching—of contemporary feminist readings of Jesus' parables.

The other three lead essays concentrate on specific parables, illustrating particular methods of analysis associated one way or another with communication media. William Herzog⁴ imagines the original oral setting of Jesus' foundational parable of the Sower (Mark 4:1-9) addressed to Galilean village-farmers struggling to survive under the crushing weight of Roman-Herodian taxation, land control, and other oppressive measures. Herzog gives creative voice to these first hearers, proposing responses that sense Jesus' sympathy with their plight and the parable's "hidden transcript" of resistance against the exploitative imperial economy.

Treating the parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:16-20), David Gowler⁵ also takes up a story with clear economic implications. Using a multiple “texture of texts” strategy developed by Vernon Robbins and adopting a sociopolitical viewpoint similar to Herzog’s, Gowler argues that Jesus’ Rich Fool story advocates “*vertical generalized reciprocity*—a redistribution [of resources] from the advantaged to the disadvantaged that expects nothing in return.” But Gowler also presses further, recognizing how this and all of Jesus’ parables defy reduction to a single meaning set in stone (monolith). By their suggestive nature, parables demand “dialogic” engagement with other stories and “media.” Gowler provides a sterling example in his wide-ranging conversation between Jesus’ Rich Fool portrait and a tantalizing painting by Rembrandt featuring his famous manipulations of light and shadow (*chiaroscuro* technique) to both reveal and conceal.



Finally, Peter Rhea Jones⁶ examines Jesus’ Two Foundations story concluding the Sermon on the Mount/Plain in Matt 7:24-27/Luke 6:46-49. Jones provides a careful, step-by-step analysis of this parable, using traditional methods of historical, literary, and redaction criticism. Ultimately, the parable drives home the “imperative of doing” God’s will, as expounded in Jesus’ teaching. Appropriately for Jesus’ conclusion to his “sermon,” Jones offers a number of prophetic and pastoral implications of what “you and I” need to know and do today in light of Jesus’ Two Foundations story. As a bonus, Jones further translates this message into the medium of an actual sermon, provided at the end of this volume. We thus are treated to a good example of the full process of thought “from text to sermon.”

Shorter expository “words” and other sermons focused on specific parables round out this collection of studies. Jonathan Kruschwitz discusses Nathan’s classic Rich Man/Poor Man tale told to expose David’s twin crimes of adultery and murder (2 Sam 12:1-15). Marianne Blickenstaff revisits Jesus’ parable of the Wedding Feast (Matt 22:1-14), featuring some of the most shocking cases of judgment and violence. Two articles examine a cluster of Luke’s challenging economic parables: Daniel Schumacher sheds light on the difficult parable of the Unjust Steward (16:1-8a) in conversation with the story of the Rich Fool (12:16-20), and Karen Hatcher unpacks the literary and cultural dynamics of the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31). Finally, Julie Perry offers a pair of stimulating sermons drawn from two additional parables in Luke, each including women characters: the diligent housekeeper who seeks and finds the lost coin (15:8-10) and the determined widow who fights for justice against her oppressor and an unscrupulous judge (18:1-8).



¹ In addition to major commentaries on the Gospels and parables, see the following studies of Kenneth E. Bailey: *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008); *The Cross & the Prodigal*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006); *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*, Combined ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

² See Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

³ See Mary Ann Beavis, ed., *The Lost Coin: Parables of Women, Work, and Wisdom* (London: Sheffield Academic, 2002).

⁴ See William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994).

⁵ David B. Gowler, *What Are They Saying about Jesus' Parables?* (Mahwah: Paulist, 2002).

⁶ Peter Rhea Jones, Sr., *Studying the Parables of Jesus* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1999).

A Word From

By R. Alan Culpepper

Parabolic Vision

In his exploration of parable as metaphor, Robert W. Funk took as his starting point C. H. Dodd's provocative definition of a parable as "a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought."¹ Teasing the mind into activity, the parable requires the hearer to (1) "break the grip of tradition"; and (2) "discover new meaning."² On the one hand, parables engage the hearer by their everydayness: shepherds tend sheep, fishermen catch fish, farmers sow seed, sheep get lost, and younger brothers rebel. On the other hand—and here Funk refines Dodd's definition of the surprise element in parables—there is often an element in the parable that is out of place, exaggerated, incompatible, or incongruous. Funk explains: "Like the cleverly distorted picture puzzles children used to work, the parable is a picture puzzle which prompts the question, What's wrong with this picture?"³ Even on cursory reflection incongruous elements in the parables come readily to mind:

The sower (who lost three fourths of his seed) has a thirty, sixty,
and one hundredfold harvest;
Not the priest or the Levite but a Samaritan stops to help the man in
the ditch;
The father throws a lavish party for the prodigal son;
The smallest seed grows into the largest shrub;

* R. Alan Culpepper is Dean of the James and Carolyn McAfee School of Theology, Mercer University, Atlanta, Georgia.



The laborers who worked only one hour
receive the same pay as those who
worked all day;
A woman who thought she could hide leaven
in a lump of dough leavened the whole
lump;

I am struck by the recurring appeal to vision, seeing, glimpses, and perspectives in Funk's seminal analysis of the nature of parables. When he summarizes his discussion, for example, he writes, "In sum, the parables as pieces of everydayness have an unexpected 'turn' in them which *looks* through the commonplace to a *new view* of reality" [italics mine].⁷ In other words, parables compel us as their hearers to see the world in a new way. Whether used in debate or didactic settings, parables point to the improbable in the midst of the ordinary and force us to pause to consider it. They shift our angle of vision. Like a skilled photographer or artist, the parables catch reality from a novel angle of vision and make us consider whether the common or the novel perspective is the truer representation of reality.

The parabler sees something no one else sees. We may call it "parabolic vision." Then, he or she conveys that vision metaphorically and paradoxically through the out of place in the midst of the common, inviting us to puzzle over the relationship between the two. The parables, however, are so unstable, elusive, and, when grasped, so revolutionary that the church has tirelessly found ways to resolve the parables' tensiveness, reduce them to morals or lessons, and beat the life out of them by making them tiresomely familiar. Funk documented this tendency in an article entitled: "From Parable to Gospel: Domesticating the Tradition."⁸ Note the subtitle.

Fortunately, Jesus' parables resist domestication, and we can still hear his distinct voice in them. Or to put it another way, they still force us, when we free them from later moralizing interpretations, to see the world as he saw it. He was not concerned about lost coins or clothes mended with unshrunk patches, but the only way he could get people to see life in a new way was to tell stories about the ordinary and the astounding, to stop them in their tracks and turn their bifocals upside down.

The gospel itself is inherently paradoxical and in that sense parabolic: God came among us as a child, utterly helpless and dependent. Those who hoard their possessions lose what they have, while the merciful receive abundantly in return. Life comes through death. The cross is not defeat but victory.

What would happen if we cultivated a parabolic way of seeing the world that passes before us every day? My modest suggestion is that in addition to

interpreting each parable individually we might consider how the parables as a collection undergird Jesus' teachings and lead us to develop the capacity for parabolic vision.

**SPEAKING IN PARABLES:
METHODS, MEANINGS,
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An important part of discipleship in following Jesus—one the original disciples notably failed to grasp—may be learning to see the world from Jesus' (parabolic) perspective. We might, for example, see a pattern in the age of the cars driven by the people who give homeless beggars on the exit ramps a handful of change and a word of encouragement. When we see the unemployed waiting to be given an opportunity, no matter how modest, to earn a day's wage, it might strike a chord with us, as it did George Buttrick. Hear him when he writes of "business brains too absorbed with profits to address themselves to the poor man's problem of insecurity of occupation" or observes that while some "in the rash hardihood of their powers can demand terms of the universe," others "drag crippling chains of inheritance, or beat against confining walls of circumstance."⁹ Eighty years later his words are still fresh and timely.

Peter Rhea Jones noticed that Lazarus and the rich man are "connected/separated by a table throughout."¹⁰ The rich man did not beat Lazarus or run him off; he just did not notice him. By contrast Cleopas and his companion shared their table in Emmaus with the stranger from the road and recognized the risen Lord. What might the rich man have discovered if he had shared his bread with Lazarus?¹¹ How many of us have shared a table with a beggar recently?

The value of reading the biblical texts is that they take us into a world that operates by values radically different from ours and the world in which we live. The parables are powerful because they embed themselves in our consciousness and tease us relentlessly to see as they see. Now, what do you see that is out of place and inconsistent with Jesus' vision?

¹ C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), 16.

² Robert W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 141.



³ Ibid., 158.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 141.

⁷ Ibid., 161.

⁸ In *Foundations & Facets Forum*, 1, 3 (August 1985): 3-24

⁹ George A Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1928), 161, 164.

¹⁰ Peter Rhea Jones, *The Teaching of the Parables* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1982), 144.

¹¹ Eugene S. Wehrli, "Luke 16:19-31," *Interpretation* 31 (1977): 280.

A Word About . . . Stories and Embodied Truth

By Ron Crawford*

“Let the story carry the theology,” I say often to students in The Life and Work of the Pastor course I teach at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond. A central component of the course is a funeral project: “Write-up a funeral service as you would write a play. I want to know everything said and done in the service.”

Students struggle most with the funeral meditation. Often their first effort is so crammed full of theology and Bible it feels like a hoarder’s bedroom closet. This is the moment I typically offer my line, “Let the story carry the theology.” Of course, I am looking for a story from the deceased’s life which embodies values and gospel truth. Then, the minister tells the story in a way that carries Christian theology.

In the case of my students, I want them to tell a story about Miss Bessie at her funeral in a way that deepens and embodies Christian theology. In essence, the story carries the theology and meaning of the funeral service.

Stories and parables often carried Jesus’ theology. After reading the words “A certain man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. . .” it is nearly impossible to disengage from the story; one is enmeshed in the drama long before the ‘punch line.’

There is something profoundly seductive about a good story; someone starts telling a story and we find ourselves gravitationally pulled into the story. There must be some near hard-wiring in homo sapiens which draws us to storytelling—something about distant human ancestors sitting around a small campfire. Jesus entices us with, “A certain man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho.” By the time the story gets to “beaten and left in the

* Ron Crawford is President of Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, Richmond, Virginia.



ditch,” we have swallowed the story hook, line and sinker; all resistance vanquished.

When we hear “passed by on the other side” we are outraged and wonder about the “sorry bums” who passed by the needy man. Our spirits are lifted by the Samaritan who helps, long before we figure-out the connection between Samaritans and the man in the ditch. In the end, we are ready

to offer a standing ovation to the *Good Samaritan*.

Reflecting on the story, we discover the connections: Levite, priest, Samaritan, and the man in need; of course, by then we are so deep in the story there is no easy escape.

In Jesus’ stories, there is a playful invitation to listen; and shortly we find ourselves enmeshed, unable and *unwilling* to disengage from the story.

Wandering around in a Jesus story is very disconcerting. We begin identifying with characters in the story. In some ways we are like the Levite, the priest and the guy in the ditch. Our most noble and rarely seen self may attempt to identify with the Good Samaritan, but it is a stretch on our best day. Stuck emotionally in the story, we want to kick the Levite in the shin every time we replay the story in our heads; we find ourselves trying to aid the Good Samaritan by helping him to his feet.

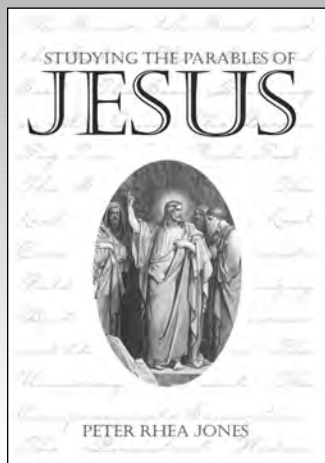
Wandering around in a Jesus story causes one to wake in the middle of the night with that strange re-occurring dream we have left something undone. Then we burst out, “Will someone get that guy out of the ditch so I can get some sleep!” Then, we remember he is yet in the ditch because our work is unfinished. There is something profoundly mesmerizing about the stories Jesus told.

This *Review & Expositor* issue focuses attention on Jesus’ parables. Expect the same excellence in scholarship as in previous issues. Yet, linger, wander for a spell in a Jesus story. These are the stories that reformatted western civilization and changed the trajectory of life for most of us.

Sweet Dreams!

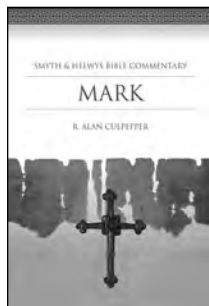
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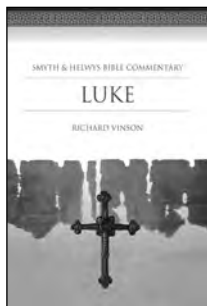
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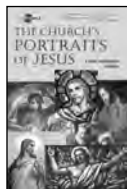


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Key Questions on the Parables of Jesus

By Klyne R. Snodgrass*

ABSTRACT

Assumptions about the nature of parables, the process of interpreting them, and why Jesus taught in parables determine how parables will be understood. Such assumptions should not be left unexamined. This article identifies eight key questions for interpreting parables. The questions deal with intent (i.e., whether recovering intent is a worthy and necessary goal and whether the nature of the Gospels allows recovery of Jesus' intent), with the nature of parables and whether they have reference outside themselves, with the importance of context for understanding parables, with whether classification of parables is necessary and helpful, and with the discomfort some parables cause with their emphasis on judgment and violence. In each case direction is provided to help readers understand and appropriate the intent of Jesus.

For all their attraction the parables have been problematic, and one must confess they have often been used and abused more than they have been heard and heeded.

For all their attraction the parables have been problematic, and one must confess they have often been used and abused more than they have been heard and heeded. Some are enigmatic, like the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-9); some cause consternation, like the Wedding Feast (Matt 22:1-14), which has two parts that do not seem to fit together and a strange sense

* Klyne R. Snodgrass is the Paul W. Brandel Professor of New Testament Studies at North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois.



of time with a war and the burning of a city taking place while the meal is on hold. Some use strong, violent language or raise questions about ethical practices. Even parables that seem clear like the Two Builders (Matt 7:24-27/Luke 6:46-49), the Talents (Matt 25:14-30), or the Prodigal (Luke 15:11-32) have been allegorized or reframed by modern ideological interpretations.

With the quite varied approaches to the parables, a variety evidenced in this journal, certain key questions must be addressed. Some of these questions are foundational and pertinent to any discussion of the gospel material. These questions will determine how one interprets and understands the parables. The key questions are:

1. What is the goal of our reading and is that goal achievable? Do we read to hear what *Jesus* communicated, and is it possible to recover that? Is understanding the intent of Jesus or any author a desired and attainable goal? Have the evangelists or the tradition so corrupted the material that Jesus' intent cannot be found?¹
2. Why did Jesus place in parables about one-third of the teachings recorded in the Synoptics, and what were/are people to conclude from them?
3. What is a parable and how does it accomplish its task? Do the parables have reference outside themselves? Do items in the parables "stand for" realities outside them, or is that allegorizing? To what degree are parables poetic works of art and to what degree, even if they are artistic and poetic, are they prophetic tools of communication?
4. In what context should the parables be understood, which is to ask specifically whether the contexts of the Gospels are to be trusted, whether Jesus' first-century Palestinian context is determinative, and whether one may legitimately place the parables in other contexts—ancient or modern, theological or sociological—and think in doing so they are interpreting the parables instead of violating them?
5. Should the parables be read—can they be read—by themselves or should they be read in relation to the rest of what is known about Jesus?
6. Is classification of the parables helpful and necessary?
7. What shall we do about the violence expressed in the parables? Is it not offensive to modern readers?
8. What shall we do about the emphasis in the parables on obedient action? Does it fit with salvation by faith?

Many other questions could be included, but these are key, and they are interrelated; so some will be treated together, even if only in cursory fashion, given the limits of this article.

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Intention

Regarding the goal of our reading, we need to be honest. Sometimes people are more concerned to *use* Jesus' parables than to *hear* them. Some people make the parables of Jesus function as a front for the expression of their own theological or ideological ideas. The history of parable interpretation is littered with the church's allegorizing and scholarly manipulations of the parables.² My book *Stories with Intent*³ is a protest against such abuse and an attempt to discern Jesus' intent, granting quickly that all of us have agendas when we come to the text. But if hearing Jesus' intent is not our goal, why do we keep reading *these* accounts?

Sometimes people are more concerned to *use* Jesus' parables than to *hear* them.

I assume, of course, that Jesus had intent when he told parables. Biblical parables are tools used by prophets. Virtually all the parables in the Old Testament are either in prophetic writings or in the mouth of a prophet in historical narratives.⁴ They are tools prophets used to force the nation to see itself in truth, even when it did not want to, and to give insight into God's purposes. Like the prophets before him, Jesus used parables to confront the nation and to provide insight, especially with regard to the new thing God was doing in the coming of the kingdom.⁵ This is the reason one-third of Jesus' teaching in the Synoptics is in parables. Jesus came as a prophet using a prophetic tool—parables—with a prophetic intent to confront the nation with the message of the Kingdom. Surely the goal of our reading is to recover that intent.

I am well aware of the difficulties people have with the word "intent," which is a heavily debated subject. Many doubt we can recover intent, especially in the Gospels, and some deny that an author's intent is important, even asserting that an author has only temporary ownership of his or her material or that intent with written communication is not the same as with spoken communication.⁶ To talk about intent is not to suggest some naive idea of intentionality, as if one could get in Jesus' head, understand all his motives, or understand his intent better than he did. Such notions of intentionality should be set aside. People often have been so taken in, however, by arguments about "the intentional fallacy" that they have not thought



through the issues. With intent people argue against intentionality. What we seek is not intention generally, which is not readily accessible, but *communicative* intent, and language is geared quite well to make communicative

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intent available. If that were not the case, none of our attempts to understand each other, to read ancient documents, or to argue about ancient documents would be possible. Further, even those who have given up on intent declare that some readings are better than others; but how is such a decision made? It presupposes that certain relations *in the text* guide reading. Intention is not something merely behind a text; it is framed within a text in the relations that are established. Further, intention often comes back surreptitiously in a different guise such as "Jesus' agenda," "his fictive vision of reality," or with the claim that the parables subvert worlds and undermine paradigms.

Intentionality is directly tied to genre. Different levels and kinds of intentionality exist with different kinds of literature. In interpreting the letters of Paul, discussions of intent usually disappear. The genre of a letter directs people to communicative intent, and even if we may disagree about any number of matters, we discern easily Paul's annoyance at the Galatians and what he wanted them to understand about his gospel of freedom. Parables have nuanced intentionality, for they point beyond their surface meaning to the intended message about the Kingdom.

Parables are not merely poetic structures, which is relevant to the discussion of intent. The classic treatment of the intentional fallacy by W. K. Wimsatt with Monroe C. Beardsley is not about intentionality in general, and it would help if people actually read the article. The concern of Wimsatt and Beardsley is with the interpretation of *poetry*, and they say that "poetry differs from practical messages, which are successful if and only if we correctly infer the intention."⁷ Are parables like poems and some paintings or part of a prophetic message with a clear, ringing communicative intent? I vote for the latter. M. Boucher commented:

The parables are literature, to be sure, but they are certainly not poetry, for it never happens that the aesthetic structures in them gain the ascendancy; when they occur, as they do, it is only that they might contribute to the parables' rhetorical aim. It has often been remarked

that it is because the parables are aesthetic that they have the power to move the hearer to decision or action. In reply to this, it must be said that if the poetic structures in the parables became dominant, their power to achieve an effect in the hearer would then be lost. The parables, then, are by no means independent of a social context, or autotelic.⁸

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In focusing on intent my concern is really on the *function* of a parable. What was its illocutionary intent; what was it designed to do? Texts are a result of actions and, especially for parables, were intended to produce action. To speak of intent is to address the function of the parables in the context of Jesus' ministry. Parables may well have layers of meaning and significance, as all language does, but Jesus told parables for quite specific purposes in relation to his proclamation of the Kingdom of God. The question for interpretation of a specific parable is how Jesus intended this analogy to confront or instruct his hearers and move them to action.

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Parables are analogies and by necessity have reference to reality or realities beyond their own borders. They mean other than they say in that they are not concerned with seeds or farming or what happened with certain people. They are a form of indirect communication. They entice one to look away from reality and at the analogy to enable one or force one to see reality in a way one otherwise could not or would not. They may or may not have correspondences—more on that later—but the question is not what some item stands for, but how the analogy works.

Even if intent is a desirable goal, is recovering Jesus' intent attainable? Some assume the evangelists have so distorted the parables that their message cannot be recovered with any confidence. Regularly the introductions and conclusions of the parables are deleted, even though Old Testament and rabbinic parables always have clear markers of the intent of a parable either before or after and often have lengthy explanations. It would be odd if Jesus' parables did not. I will address the issue of context below, but comment is required about the nature of the gospel material.

We do not have the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus. The parables have been shaped, structured, and grouped. They have been impacted by oral transmission and redactional shaping, but if they do not convey Jesus' intent, if Jesus' teaching



cannot be recovered with some confidence, why do people keep reading the Gospels? Issues concerning the evangelists' shaping have to be addressed individually for each parable, but the concern is with the overall picture *all* the parables⁹ give of Jesus' proclamation and how that fits with non-parabolic literature, not the

reconstruction of a diminished parable made malleable to theological or ideological concerns. Such reconstructions do not instill confidence and cannot be the foundation for the life of the church and its people. Jesus' parables and his non-parabolic teaching point in the same direction and give a coherent vision of the Kingdom and its demands.

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Context

With regard to the context in which parables are to be understood, if they are stories with intent, they must be viewed in the *context* of Jesus. Meaning is the value we assign to a set of relations, and if so, context is *the* determiner of meaning. There are actually two arenas for the discussion of context. One is the overall context of Jesus' ministry as an eschatological restoration prophet in first-century Judaism. The issue is not what we can make Jesus' parables mean by putting them in other contexts, but what he sought to convey to his Jewish contemporaries. *Any interpretation that does not breathe the air of first-century Judaism cannot be a legitimate hearing of Jesus' intent or a legitimate use of Jesus' parables.* To insist on hearing Jesus' parables in the context of Palestinian Judaism does not render them removed and irrelevant from our own context, but as with all of Scripture, it does require hermeneutical awareness and hermeneutical moves to understand how to appropriate them. They still speak because they still communicate an understanding of God and what God expects people to be.

The second arena of context is the literary contexts in the Gospels in which the evangelists have placed specific parables. The circumstances in which a few parables were told, such as the Wicked Tenants, have apparently been preserved, but for most the circumstances of Jesus' telling them is not preserved and was not considered important. Many parables would have been told more than once anyway, so we should give up thinking of *an original*

context. The evangelists have arranged the parables thematically in their larger narratives, and the literary contexts in the Gospels function as frames to provide insight. For some parables questions exist as to the legitimacy of the frame (such as the

The evangelists have arranged the parables thematically in their larger narratives, and the literary contexts in the Gospels function as frames to provide insight.

Workers in the Vineyard, Matt 20:1-16), but to ignore the

Gospels' contexts is foolish.¹⁰ We must read for both the intent of Jesus and the way each evangelist has adapted Jesus' intent. The intent of Jesus and the intents of the evangelists are not identical, but if they are not unified in their direction, we have no hope of understanding

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Jesus.

In addition, if we take the parables out of the context of the gospel narratives, *we place them in another context*, however hidden or unrecognized. They cannot be hung in empty space. The reader will place them in some context: contexts of social oppression, subverting traditional worldviews, psychological frameworks, feminist theology, the reader's kind of church, or something. Taken out of their contexts they are indeed polyvalent, for one has no control over what they might mean. Further, if we take them out of the contexts in the Gospels and place them elsewhere, *what Jesus is lurking behind our moves and how was that Jesus found?* In such cases, a Jesus backstage, whether secular or otherwise, assumed to be the "real" Jesus, guides our reconstructions. All of us bring our pre-understandings to reading the parables, even when we only see those that others have, but the only Jesus accessible to us with any confidence is the Jesus described in the Gospels, not one we reconstruct. A Jesus we create is not the Jesus we need to transform life.

This points to the importance of the question whether we may legitimately read the parables by themselves or whether we must read them in relation to the rest of what is known about Jesus. The obvious answer is that we must

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read the parables in relation to the rest of the Jesus material, but it is surprising how little studies of parables focus on the broader framework of Jesus' teaching and how little historical Jesus studies make use of the parables.¹¹ A principle that should guide us is that any teaching derived from a parable must be verified by non-parabolic

material. This is only a variation of the criterion of multiple attestation. Jesus did not offer one message in parables and a different one in non-parabolic



material. Parables do not treat all subjects Jesus taught, but the material taught in parables is taught in non-parabolic material and should be verified there. This would eliminate many questionable suggestions, but we will need to revisit this issue in connection with the question of the violent language of the parables.

Classification

Is anything to be gained by classifying the parables? Any classification system is a modern imposition and possibly distorts. Why not just call them all parables as some suggest?¹² Classification of parables does *not* presuppose that first-century hearers would have classified them or recognized our classifications. Even those who say they reject classifying parables distinguish different forms, even if only calling them longer and shorter parables. The images in John are not like the synoptic parables, but both fit the Hebrew category *meshal*. Parables range from one verse to twenty-two verses. It will not work to think we can just call them all parables like the evangelists, for the evangelists use the Greek word παραβολή (*parabolē*) of the proverb “Physician, heal yourself” (Luke 4:23) and of a riddle (Mark 3:23; cf. Luke 6:39).

I did not intend to create a new classification system but felt forced to because other systems, particularly Adolph Jülicher’s, do not work. Classification recognizes that parables come in different forms and that by grouping and comparing how these various forms operate we understand better how to interpret them.¹³ Similitudes (extended similes without plot) are not like interrogative parables, and neither functions the same way as narrative parables with a plot. No parable should be forced into a system, but to ignore that certain parables have similar structures or that some operate differently from others is myopic. For example, once one analyzes the interrogative parables that begin with the question “Who from you...?” (τίς ἐξ ὑμῶν [*tis ex hymōn*]), a question often lost in English translations, it is clear that the answer to the question is “No one,”¹⁴ and this eliminates some suggestions and gives clear direction for interpretation. It is also clear that similitudes do not depend on correspondences between the features of the parable and reality. The focus in a similitude is much more on the whole *process* depicted. Narrative parables with a plot are more likely to have correspondences. Even here, however,

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interpretation is not about finding correspondences but about determining how the analogy works. Furthermore, single indirect parables (those which treat the subject under consideration but speak of someone other than the hearer, e.g., the Rich Fool, which treats the subject of wealth) function differently from double indirect ones (those which treat a different subject and a different person or group, e.g., the Treasure in the Field, which is about the Kingdom). Classification helps us interpret but still requires us to be sensitive to the uniqueness of each parable.

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Judgment and Violence

But how shall we deal with the judgment and offensive violence expressed in the parables? Ernest van Eck even says parables like that of the Wicked Tenants *condone* violence, which, of course, is contrary to Jesus' non-parabolic teaching. He concludes that such parables in their current forms do not fit with Jesus. (It is easy to blame the tradition or the evangelists for the parts we do not like.) Van Eck and others suggest a social-scientific approach that sees such parables as the Wicked Tenants and the Talents/Pounds as texts of terror.¹⁵ Because of social realities such as oppression by the wealthy in an agrarian culture, parables with such violence supposedly are to showcase and confront oppression by the elite. This has recently become a common approach, but how do we get there from the text? You can say these confrontations with oppression are the parables you *wish* Jesus had told, you can *hypothesize* that these are the parables Jesus did tell and the evangelists corrupted, but you cannot demonstrate from the text or any convincing evidence they are the parables Jesus *did* tell. If such interpretations are right for parables with violent elements, no one got it for two thousand years, and we have no way now of knowing the interpretations are correct. If that is the case, perhaps we should give up reading the Gospels to know anything of Jesus. We want to and need to speak against oppression, and some texts do, but not these parables. A straightforward reading will not get you there.

Jesus' concern for the poor is a central theme of his message, but for all of his concern for the poor and all of our protests *rightly* against oppression, Jesus did *not* protest against oppression the way Amos and other prophets did. If Jesus' non-parabolic teaching does not confront oppression so directly, why should we think his parables do? Jesus cared about oppression, as is evidenced in accounts like the parables of Lazarus and the Rich Man, but even there the issue is a sin of omission, not the oppression of peasants.



Jesus' concerns seem to be much broader, more focused on the nation, and more related to the kingdom made present.

The violent language of the parables is not politically correct, but we would be foolish to think in using such language Jesus or any evangelist was condoning violence. Did anyone in the last two thousand years think this was the case? Van Eck

has confused the *teaching* function of the parables with *elements* of the parable *genre*. Parables have hyperbole and are *pseudo-realistic*. The key in understanding this language is in understanding parables as prophetic tools. The violence in Jesus' parables is because of the prophetic, confrontational, *pseudo-realistic* character of parables. What prophet did not use strong, violent language to confront the nation?¹⁶ The parables do not teach or condone violence; they use strong language to warn and shock people into taking their situation seriously.

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The parables still force theological ideas on us we would just as soon avoid. Hardly anywhere is the language of judgment more extreme than in the parables. People are cast into a furnace of fire, or into outer darkness bound hand and foot, or are cut in pieces and placed with the hypocrites, and there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30, 41, and 46). A rich man lifts his eyes in torment (Luke 16:23); a man is handed over to torturers (Matt 18:34); and people are slaughtered (Luke 19:27). How can this be the Jesus who proclaimed love of enemies? But do pay attention to the genre. They are parables, not theologies. They are forms of exaggeration to demand attention, the tool of prophets. The issue is what they teach, the function of the texts, not the images they use. What was a text, and for our concerns specifically, a parable attempting to do? If the passage speaks of the slaughter of the enemies as Luke 19 does, what is the ideal reader expected to do? Only a fool would use such a text to justify violence. The text comes as a confrontation, a mirror, forcing the hearer/reader to realize that people were rejecting the Messiah's reign, just as an earlier group had rejected the reign of Herod Archelaus, and to know that such rejection has consequences. We may not like violence, but can God's judgment be taken seriously without an implication of disaster?¹⁷ We like to speak of the grace of God, but the presumption of grace destroys grace. Grace has impact only where judgment looms.

Grace has impact only where judgment looms.

Judgment is a key and essential element of Jesus' teaching.¹⁸ If there is no judgment, decisions and actions do not matter, and whether one decides for or against Jesus makes no difference, a conclusion Jesus, the New Testament writers, and anyone perceptive at all would not draw. We must insist on the reality and necessity of judgment without reverting to earlier fire and brimstone preaching, which itself was a distortion of the gospel. *If there is no judgment, one does not need salvation.* If there is no assessment of how a life was lived, it does not matter how it was lived. Life is rendered meaningless.

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At the same time, judgment is a thorny issue, one about which the Bible refrains from giving any systematic treatment. Questions about life after death, the intermediate state, and eternity are not resolved easily. The Bible is far less clear than many people presume. What is clear is that judgment will occur and will be based on what one has done, a point most of us would like to ignore but which is the *consistent and frequent teaching of Scripture*. We do not have to solve the problems and issues regarding judgment. If God is just, God's judgment will be just and bound to God's mercy. There is no need to worry about those who have not heard the message or any number of other issues over which people wring their hands. Judgment will consider the secrets of the heart (1 Cor 4:5), and the judge of the earth will do right (Gen 18:25). Judgment will surely consider both the quality of the message delivered and the quality of the response. The message delivered by an abuser to the abused does not carry much quality or hope of reception.

The focus on judgment goes hand in hand with the emphasis in parables on obedient action, which some worry does not fit with salvation by faith, but then perhaps we have understood neither salvation nor faith.

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whether more fundamentalist or moderate, have diluted the message of Jesus as much as any other group so that the Gospel is a message about individual salvation. One can go to heaven without having to do anything. You cannot get to such a Gospel from the teaching and parables of Jesus—nor from the rest of the New Testament. Neither in the parables nor elsewhere is there much focus on going to heaven, and

the very idea of being joined to Christ (and his people) excludes any thought of individualism. The Gospel is individual *and* corporate and is concerned with life here on this earth way more than life in the future. The Gospel is about life with God given by God both now and in the future, and life with



God requires action, a life of discipleship, and life conformed to God's own character. The parables of Jesus confront our dilution of the Gospel and, if taken seriously, require discipleship. The New Testament knows nothing of a faith that does not act. The parables do not require merely agreement with the thoughts of Jesus; they require doing what Jesus teaches.

The purpose of the parables more than anything else is to elicit response, to cause us to act in keeping with God's Kingdom. We would rather reflect on them, as S. Kierkegaard points out people prefer to do with preaching generally.¹⁹ The parables challenge those with ears to hear to productive and wise living, to compassion, to faithfulness, and to mirror the character of the God who revealed his Kingdom in the ministry of Jesus. Preaching the parables should seek the same goal. Only when those professing faith actually demonstrate faith can or should their Gospel be taken seriously.

¹ Regarding the *Gospel of Thomas*, I am convinced this Gospel is dependent on the canonical Gospels and not a first-level source. See among many the recent work of Simon Gathercole, "Luke in the *Gospel of Thomas*," *New Testament Studies* 57 (2011): 114-44.

² See among many surveys my "From Allegorizing to Allegorizing: A History of the Interpretation of the Parables of Jesus," in *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 3-29.

³ *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

⁴ The only exceptions are Psalm 80, which itself uses the prophetic-like description of a vine to depict the history of Israel, and Eccl 9:14-18. See N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, vol. 2, *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), 147-97.

⁵ Matthew explicitly connects Jesus' parables to his *prophetic* activity in 13:34-35.

⁶ For more extensive treatment of this topic see my "Reading to Hear: A Hermeneutics of Hearing," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 24 (2002): 1-32; and Philip Esler, *New Testament Theology: Communion and Community* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005), 88-118 and 182-87.

⁷ "The Intentional Fallacy," in *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), 3, reprinted in *On Literary Intention*, ed. David Newton-de Molina (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1976), a collection of essays debating the issues.

⁸ *The Mysterious Parable: A Literary Study*, CBQMS 6 (Washington, DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1977), 16-17. She defines autotelic as having an end or purpose in and not apart from itself. Discussion of intent also involves the question of the quality and effectiveness of the communication. If the author has communicated ineffectively, intent will not be easily discerned.

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⁹ Often people focus on a limited number of parables that fit an agenda, an agenda that cannot be sustained with a consistent method treating all the parables.

¹⁰ See Birger Gerhardsson, "If We Do Not Cut the Parables Out of Their Frames," *New Testament Studies* 37 (1991): 321-35.

¹¹ N. T. Wright's *Jesus and the Victory of God* is a notable exception, even if most of his work focuses on the Prodigal and the Wicked Tenants.

¹² E.g., R. Zimmerman, "How to Understand the Parables of Jesus: A Paradigm Shift in Parable Exegesis," *Acta Theologica* 29.1 (2009): 157-82, especially 167-69.

¹³ I distinguish similitudes, interrogative parables, single indirect narrative parables, double indirect narrative parables, juridical parables (a specific kind of double indirect narrative), and "how much more" parables, a logic at work in several of the categories. See my *Stories with Intent*, 9-17.

¹⁴ The same is true of rabbinic and Greek parables that start this way.

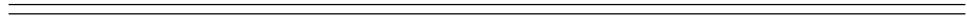
¹⁵ Ernest van Eck, Review of *Stories with Intent*, *Review of Biblical Literature* 10 (2008): 1-6, 5; see also Sylvia C. Keesmat and Brian J. Walsh's reading of the parable of the Pounds ("Outside of a Small Circle of Friends": Jesus and the Justice of God," in *Jesus, Paul, and the People of God: A Theological Dialogue with N. T. Wright* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011], 66-89, 78-84) and N. T. Wright's response in the same volume, pp. 89-91, rejecting their argument.

¹⁶ Note, e.g., Isa 1:28; 2:19-21; 5:25; 13:9-22 22:17-19; 59:17-18; 63:1-6; Jer 7:32-34; 13:13-14, 24; 21:6; 23:19-20; Lam 2:19-21; 4:4, 10-11; 5:11; Ezek 22:31; Hos 13:8; Nah 1:6; Hab 2, to mention only a few texts.

¹⁷ As Miroslav Volf points, the idea that God is a nice God is a figment of the liberal imagination (*Exclusion and Embrace* [Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996], 298). Volf goes so far as to say that God is the only one with the right to act violently (p. 301).

¹⁸ See e.g., Marius Reiser, *Jesus and Judgment: The Eschatological Proclamation in Its Jewish Context*, trans. Linda Maloney (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1997).

¹⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity and the Edifying Discourse which 'Accompanied' It*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1944), 227-30.



Sowing Discord: The Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:1-9)

By William R. Herzog II*

ABSTRACT

This experiment in biblical interpretation works with the parable of the sower (Mark 4:1-9) as a parable from the historical Jesus spoken in a village setting in Galilee. This study explores the character of the parable as an example of Jesus' oral communication. As its oral nature comes to the fore so does the potential for the parable to reveal a "hidden transcript" of village resistance to Roman and Herodian rule. This theme of resistance is pursued by creating an imaginary conversation among peasants in a village in Galilee on the model of the discussion of Gospel texts by the peasants in Solentiname. This conversation will break open the parable in a manner much different from the earlier discussion of the parable and the questions it raises. The experiment in interpreting the parable in these different ways raises questions about the role between critical and creative approaches to biblical texts.

Introduction

This essay is an experiment in biblical criticism using the parable of the sower (Mark 4:1-9; Matt 13:1-9; Luke 8:4-8; *Gos. Thom.* 82:3-13) as its subject, because this parable seems to attract interpreters and experimenters. Not only do we have a body of interpretations from contemporary readers, but we also have in Mark 4:13-20 one of the earliest interpretations of any parable found in the gospel traditions (Matt 13:18-23; Luke 8:11-15; *Gos. Thom.* has no interpretation attached). Perhaps one reason this parable has continued

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to attract so much attention is its perceived status as the parable of parables. Klyne Snodgrass claims that it is “the parable about parables,”¹ and J.P. Heil calls the sower “the master parable

... one reason ... this parable has continued to attract so much attention is its perceived status as the parable of parables.

which holds the key to understanding all the other parables.”² If this is the case, then, working with the parable of the sower carries implications for other parables as well.

This study assumes that the historical Jesus spoke the parable in Mark 4:1-9 so that its oral character needs to be respected and, where possible, preserved. The move from reading the parable as part of the gospel narrative to hearing the parable from the historical Jesus is, as Hultgren observes, “a somewhat tricky task beset with a level of speculation.”³ But the same could be said about any use of contemporary critical tools to interpret gospel texts. Juel’s suspicions about the current setting of the parable match his skepticism that “any convincing reconstruction of a setting in the life of Jesus can be found.”⁴ Juel may be correct, but this study seeks to do just that.

Three Questions

Any interpreter of this parable as a parable of Jesus must answer at least three basic questions: (1) Where was it taught and to whom? (2) How does Jesus shape the parable as an oral storyteller? and (3) What is the meaning of the unexpectedly bountiful harvest?

Question 1: Audience and Setting

The usual answer is that Jesus taught the parable either to the crowd outside or to the disciples inside, but there is good evidence that Jesus also taught in village settings which served as a social context for his pedagogy of the peasants and a setting for his problem-posing proclamation of the reign of heaven. To use James C. Scott’s language, Jesus used the village to remain “off stage,” where he could pursue his subversive pedagogy of the oppressed out of sight of the rulers who controlled the “on stage” interactions of the powerful and their peasants and other dependents. It is

... there is good evidence that Jesus also taught in village settings which served as a social context for his pedagogy of the peasants and a setting for his problem-posing proclamation of the reign of heaven.

clear that Jesus taught in the towns and villages of Galilee in places such as Bethsaida, Cana, Capernaum, Chorazin and Nazareth. Villages provided Jesus with the protective cover he needed to speak the parables and break “the culture of silence” so common in exploitive and oppressive societies.⁵ This observation says nothing new, for Kenneth Bailey has already shown how Jesus’ parables reflect Middle Eastern village culture even though he has not explored what that might have meant for a peasantry being exploited by Roman colonialism, the client kingship of the house of Herod, and High Priestly houses as sources of tribute and tithes.⁶ Economic issues, however, were only a part of the picture. In his work with peasants in Southeast Asia, James C. Scott learned that the “struggle between rich and poor is not merely a struggle over work, property rights, grain and cash. It is also a struggle over the appropriation of symbols, a struggle over how the past and the present shall be understood and labeled, a struggle to identify causes and assess blame, a contentious effort to give meaning to local history.”⁷ This is why the village can be the scene of resistance to the public transcripts and agenda of the ruling elites. In Scott’s words, the village becomes a “shadow society” and “alternate moral universe”⁸ where the villagers can cultivate their “little tradition” as a response to the “great tradition” that the rulers attempt to force on them. What is important from Scott’s point of view is that the “material and symbolic hegemony normally exercised by ruling institutions does not preclude, but rather engenders, a set of contrary values which represent in their entirety a kind of shadow society.”⁹ If this is the role and character of village life, a critical question is whether parables like the parable of the sower could contribute to this agenda in the villages of Galilee. We shall return to this later.

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Question 2: An Oral Parable

The second question grows out of the first. If we are to imagine Jesus teaching and interacting with villagers from towns like Capernaum, then we must acknowledge that his teaching was oral, and his speaking in parables was one facet of his many-faceted teaching. When discussing the parable of the sower, Brandon Scott reconstructs what he calls its “originating structure” by noting “the obvious triadic structure” that guides his

If we are to imagine Jesus teaching and interacting with villagers from towns like Capernaum, then we must acknowledge that his teaching was oral, and his speaking in parables was one facet of his many-faceted teaching.



reconstruction as well as the “repetitive patterning characteristic of oral tradition.”¹⁰ Restated as a narrative plot, the originating structure can be summarized as follows: “after three scenes of misadventure, the seed finally finds fertile soil.”¹¹ The variations among Mark and the parallels in Matthew, Luke, and *Thomas* are seen as individual oral performances of the same originating structure.

The introduction of an originating structure serves as a reminder that the parables are forms of oral communication, and oral traditions usually, though not universally, work by threes, not by fours. Fortunately, it is possible to view the parable as two sequences of three: three unpromising sowings and three sowings that lead to bountiful harvests

Three unpromising sowings	Three bountiful harvests
The path (v. 4)	30-fold (v. 8c)
The rocky ground (vv. 5-6)	60-fold (v. 8c)
The thorny ground (v. 7)	10-0fold (v. 8c)

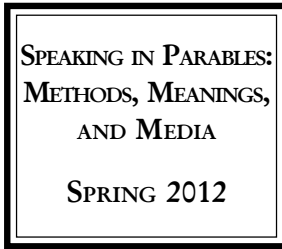
More importantly, the verbs suggest oral influence. For each of the unpromising soils, there is a three-fold pattern.

<i>Pattern</i>	<i>first seed</i>	<i>second seed</i>	<i>third seed</i>
Sowing	seed fell	other seed fell	other seed fell
Predator appears	birds came	sun rose	thorns grew
Violent outcome	devoured	scorched	choked ¹²

The problem caused by the relatively long and confusing description of the second seed (vv. 5-6) is solved by trimming the second seed until it is parallel to the other two: “other seed fell, and the sun rose and scorched it.” This means that all three unpromising sowings conform to a common pattern attuned to oral communication. In his study of the seed parables, Crossan draws four conclusions, three of which are relevant here: (1) the earliest form of the parable “worked with a threefold construction”; (2) the “triple ending of Mark 4:8c is more original” than the *Gospel of Thomas* ending; and (3) there is a “twofold distinction established formally between the losses of Mark 4:3-7 and the gains of 4:8 as compared with the fourfold distinction” in the other Synoptics.¹³

At the same time that the proposed reconstruction solves one anomaly, however, it creates an oddity of its own. Why does each of the three unpromising sowings lead to a violent ending? What accounts for the violent

outcome that erupts in this pastoral scene of sowing seed? If the parable is a parable about the reign of heaven, then God's reign evidently has some enemies who oppose the work of sowing, at least the kind of sowing that Jesus is doing.



Question 3: Bountiful Harvest

The final unanswered question is the yield of the good sowing, thirtyfold, sixtyfold and a hundredfold. Is this “miraculous or mundane” as McIver puts it? Jeremias concluded that the “abnormal tripling symbolizes the eschatological overflowing of the divine fullness, surpassing all human measure.”¹⁴ Citing the extravagant yields reported by Roman travelers (up to four hundredfold), Scott concludes that the yield found in Mark is “average to good.” Varro reports yields of one hundredfold in a number of places he had visited, and Pliny, who reports yields of one hundred fiftyfold in Africa, makes it clear that yields of a hundredfold up to three hundredfold were not uncommon. Malina and Pilch view the threefold sequence as “impossible yields,” an example of “parabolic hyperbole.”¹⁵ They believe that yields of twofold to fivefold were normal. McIver introduces a note of caution regarding the yields reported by Roman travelers. These reports “convey the impression of tall tales told by travelers, and the reported crop yields may well be as exaggerated.”¹⁶ McIver views the yield reported by Mark as “not only exceptional, it was miraculous in first-century Palestine.” Yet another factor may account for the yields reported by Roman travelers. Part of the propaganda of the empire was that the cosmos itself consented to Roman rule, and one of the signs of its consent was the way the earth yielded bountiful harvests, as though the land itself was blessing the empire. In this light, the outrageous yields were making a political statement about Roman rule, making each harvest a bearer of propaganda no less than each Roman denarius.

Is the sower a free-holding farmer sowing his seed on his plot of land, or is he a peasant sowing a crop for ruling elites that will benefit him very little?

Much depends on who the sower is. Is the sower a free-holding farmer sowing his seed on his plot of land, or is he a peasant sowing a crop for ruling elites that will benefit him very little? If the latter is true, then the discussion of yield is beside the point, for the peasant villager will be left with a subsistence living



and very little more, no matter how bountiful the yield. Whether twofold or a hundredfold, it does not matter to the peasant how large the yield is since he and his family will get very little of the crop. In the “moral economy of the peasant,” to use James Scott’s phrase,¹⁷ peasants will endure serious exploitation as long as their master promises to insure their subsistence in a bad year that could ruin everything the peasant villager has worked to build. When the harvest is harvested and winnowed, peasants will ask how much is left, not how much was taken. Peasants were concerned with protecting their subsistence, so this agreement is an extreme case of risk management on the peasant’s part, a form of life insurance in a year when the harvests are low or drought threatens the life of the village. Thus, the yield at the close of the parable may be misleading insofar as it implies good fortune for the sower.

Eavesdropping on a Peasant Village

Now that we have examined the three crucial questions, we turn to the final phase of this experiment, namely, to prepare an imagined conversation of small village Galilean peasants to see how they interpret the parable. In this venture, I have been inspired by the peasants in Solentiname.¹⁸ So far, the interpretation of the parable of the sower has followed well-worn paths and arrived at some predictable conclusions; but at this point in the article, we are going to take “the road less travelled by,” and, hopefully, that will make all the difference (with apologies to Robert Frost). We have spent a good deal of time talking about the parable. This portion of the experiment will listen to a village of Galilean peasants discuss this parable after Jesus has shared it with them and left them with the task of discovering its relevance for them. This may enable us to see and hear its sharper edges and subversive insights.

No sooner had Jesus left the hamlet, so small that it was not on the Roman maps of the area, than the elders gathered at the village gate, which was nothing more than an old olive tree that had from time immemorial been called the village gate where the village gathered to discuss important issues. This time, the elders were joined by the other villagers of the hamlet to share the conversation.

Simeon turned to Timaeus, the village griot (storyteller) who had hung on to every word of Jesus. “Tell us the parable again,” Simeon asked, “the one about the sower.” Timaeus closed his eyes and recited the parable. When he finished, the elders paused in silence as though pondering a text from the

sacred Torah scroll. At last, Simeon broke the silence, "It seems to be nothing more than a story of what we have all done many times before."

Heads nodded in silent agreement tinged with disappointment.

How many times have I
tried to sow my field right
up to edge of the path
leading back to the village
only to scatter some seed
on the path?

"He may be a carpenter's son," James noted. "But he sure knows what its like to work in the fields. How many times have I tried to sow my field right up to edge of the path leading back to the village only to scatter some seed on the

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path?"

James' neighbor Joseph shook his head vigorously, "and before you can so much as kick some of the seed back, the birds swoop down and grab it. There won't be a bird in the sky until that seed hits the path. Then out of nowhere, there they are feeding off your seed."

"Well," said Simeon, "there's nothing strange about that, and we all know about rocky ledges and hidden stones in Mattathias' field."

Mattathias smiled sheepishly. "Guess I had it coming. I learned the hard way—you just can't sow some soil. It's too shallow. But remember some of you were ready to sow your rocky areas until the sun rose and wilted my barley where it stood."

"And thorns," Simeon continued, "Heaven knows we have more than enough."

"And every year, we pull them back and stack them in a corner of the field where the rocky soil is, and every year they grow back and choke some of the seed sown near the weed pile," said Judas, as though telling a familiar tale.

"But the harvest," said Simeon, gazing in the distance as though trying to imagine such a bounty, "but what a harvest. Who can even imagine it?" He turned to Thaddeus and said, "What's the best you've ever gotten, Thaddeus? Your fields are by far the most fertile in the village."

Thaddeus paused and looked down, like a scribe consulting his ledger books. "Oh, I reckon about seven to fifteen per hectare, maybe twenty—once. But nothing like thirty, sixty, or a hundred. Nothing like that—ever—not even in the best of years. Something's wrong there. The parable doesn't make sense."

A new voice spoke up, "Oh, I don't know about that," said Miriam, Simeon's wife. Because she was considered to be a wise woman, she was granted the singular honor of being allowed to speak at village meetings. "If



you think about it, we raise thirty, sixty, and a hundred times what we need, but where does it all go? Just think about last year's harvest, one of the best in village memory. Yet, where were we after it was all gathered in, winnowed, and stored? We got our usual barely enough to survive portion, nothing more than the year before when the harvest was ordinary."

"The master got the lion's share, that's for sure," said James, speaking about the local elite, a Herodian, who controlled their village and extracted whatever he could from them. "He must take thirty or sixty times what we get from the land. We sow the seed, worry the crop along, and bring in the harvest before the master and his retainers swoop down and devour the harvest of our hard-earned work."

The master got the lion's share, that's for sure. . . .

Joseph nodded in agreement. "We do the work; he gets the grain, and we all know what he does with it—sells it for money while we struggle to feed our children!"

"Sounds like birds coming down and devouring our seeds," Miriam said.

"But we complain about the birds," James blurted out, "because we're" He stopped realizing what he was about to say.

"Afraid," said Simeon. After a pause, Miriam said, "Birds devour but the sun scorches." Heads nodded in agreement. "Whose scorched earth policies take our harvest before it can be accounted for? It seems like every harvest just withers away before we get a loaf of bread out of it."

Mattathias added, "We've got to pay rents, repay our loans, pay tribute to the Romans, tithes to the temple, and local tribute to Herod. We have to borrow every year just to plant the next crop. We use it all to feed our children and provide fodder for our animals."

We've got to pay rents, repay our loans, pay tribute to the Romans, tithes to the temple and local tribute to Herod.

"And the thorns," added Joseph, "remind us of the master's class who chokes us every year at harvest."

"And the tribute collectors choke us every year, too. They take most everything we have," added an anonymous voice from the villagers.

"And don't forget the dirty stewards," Miriam said with a bit of bitterness in her voice. "They take the master's share and a portion for themselves. They make sure we have barely enough to survive."

"And sometimes," noted Simeon, "not even that. Remember what happened to Andrew's family two harvests ago. He couldn't cover his debt,

and the village fund was empty. He just walked away and left his things for the stewards to rifle. He's near dead by now. You don't last long as a day laborer."

"Lots of candidates for the thorns. Lots of them. Seems that the parable is a bit sharper than we thought," Simeon said and fell silent. The silence was broken by Thaddeus, "But why end on a bountiful note?"

Maybe Jesus is saying that God will give us the full harvest to use.

"Maybe," said Miriam, "the parable gives us a glimpse of God's bounty, you know, how it will be when the reign of God comes, the one Jesus is always talking about. Maybe Jesus is saying that

God will give us the full harvest to use. Unlike the master's class who keeps so much for themselves."

"So," said Simeon quietly as though he was afraid of being overheard, "the parable contrasts the birds, the sun, and the thorns who exploit and oppress us with God's gracious bounty."

Miriam added, "What would we do with thirty, sixty, or a hundred fold? Would we hoard it like the master's class, each trying to outdo the others?"

"No," said James, "Remember the Torah reading last Sabbath. Do you remember Timaeus?"

Timaeus nodded and recited: "There will be no poor among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord God is giving you ... if only you will obey the voice of the Lord your God by diligently observing the entire commandment that I command you today" (Deut 15:4-5).

"Good enough Timaeus." Simeon said. "Quite good enough. If we had the bountiful harvest, we would share what we had as the Lord commanded in the Torah."

"The more you have, the more you share and the village fund would be full so that everyone has enough. No one goes hungry; no one's children go hungry," James emphasized.

"Yes, James. Well spoken. No more birds devouring, no more scorching sun, no more thorns choking. Just the land of promise living up to its name, yielding its bounty for all to share. As the Torah envisioned. A perpetual sabbatical year."

Jesus could get himself killed for teaching this if that is what he means by the reign of God.

The peasants sat in silence, reflecting on what they had said. "You know," said Simeon, speaking what was on everyone's mind, "Jesus could get himself killed for teaching this if that

is what he means by the reign of God."

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In the evening dusk settling in around the village, a figure crept off into the gathering darkness to report the peasants' conversation to a local steward who lived in a market town a few stadia away. He was a village informer, part of Herod's network of informers, from a nearby village so he could mix easily with the villagers. After he received his report, the steward rewarded him and asked him

to keep track of the potentially troublesome village. The steward would lay low for now, but if the time came, he would be ready to "disappear" Jesus or to execute him publicly, whichever action served the interests of the Herodians and Romans.

Back in the village, Simeon and Miriam retired to their hut to say their evening prayers. As they closed their eyes and slid into sleep, they saw visions of birds with human faces, and the faces were those of their master, his steward, the tribute collector and the toll collector, the temple priest, the local ruler of the synagogue swooping down again and again until there was hardly enough seed left to sow. Then, as if by a miracle, the fields were full of sheaves gleaming under the warm sun, awaiting the bountiful harvest that would leave no one hungry, ever again!

Sowing Discord through Hidden Transcripts

In his study entitled *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, Scott studies how every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a "hidden transcript" that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant and that is typically expressed openly – albeit in disguised form.¹⁹ When the peasant villagers' conversation about the parable of the sower is viewed through Scott's lens, it looks very much like an example of the emergence of the hidden transcript, a critique of an economic system that impoverishes the peasants to enrich the rulers and the powerful. The *campesinos in Solentiname* believe that Jesus is "using our language," the language of the hidden transcript of the reign of God.²⁰ As such, it becomes part of the struggle to appropriate symbols (a bountiful harvest), identify causes, and assess blame (birds, thorns and rocks are more than they seem). As William put it, "so this business of talking about the kingdom by means of parables is also a strategy."²¹

Of course, Jesus knew that hidden transcripts would emerge from his teaching, "for there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed, nor is anything secret except to come to light" (Mark 4:21-23).

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¹ Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 145.

² John Paul Heil, "Reader-Response and the Narrative Context of the Parables about Growing Seed in Mark 1-34," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 54 (1992): 278.

³ Arland Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 193.

⁴ Donald Juel, "Encountering the Sower, Mark 4:1-20," *Interpretation* 56 (2002): 276.

⁵ See Paulo Freire's works, especially *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Seabury, 1973).

⁶ Kenneth Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976, 1980).

⁷ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), xvii.

⁸ James C. Scott, "Protest and Profanation: Agrarian Revolt and the Little Tradition," *Theory and Society* 4 (1977): 1-38, 211-46.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1989), 351-62.

¹¹ Ibid., 351.

¹² Theodore J. Weeden, Sr., "Recovering the Parabolic Intent in the Parable of the Sower," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 47 (1979): 97-120.

¹³ John Dominic Crossan, "The Seed Parables of Jesus," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92 (1973): 249-50. See Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 146, who identifies the parable as a "fourfold similitude."

¹⁴ Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), 150.

¹⁵ Bruce Malina and John Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 202-3.

¹⁶ Robert McIver, "One Hundred-Fold Yield—Miraculous or Mundane?" *New Testament Studies* 40 (1994): 608.

¹⁷ James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976); see especially chapters 1-3.



¹⁸ Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname*, vol. 2 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), 36-43.

¹⁹ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), x – xiii.

²⁰ Cardenal, *Solentiname*, vol. 2, 36-41.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

The Enthymematic Nature of Parables: A Dialogic Reading of the Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:16-20)

By David B. Gowler*

ABSTRACT

Parables are apparently simple but deceptively enigmatic *meshalim*. A systematic analysis of a parable will thus not necessarily result in one “true” or “original” meaning, but a dialogic approach guided by the four “textures of texts” taxonomy enables interpreters to view texts more comprehensively and helps fill in some of the enthymematic gaps in Jesus’ parables.

Not all questions can be answered through analyses of the four textures of a text, even in this apparently simple example story of the Rich Fool. The first-century social and cultural texture of this parable demands, though, that the rich man be seen as rapacious even before God condemns him. The rich man and others like him in Luke ignore Jesus’ demand that life in the kingdom of God involves not only treasure in heaven but also vertical generalized reciprocity—a redistribution from the advantaged to the disadvantaged that expects nothing in return—in our lives on earth.

The essay concludes with reflections on a painting by Rembrandt, which may or may not represent the Rich Fool parable, a brief addendum that also sheds light on parables as dialogic, enthymematic works of art. In Rembrandt’s paintings scholars wrestle with issues parallel to those explored by scholars of Jesus’ parables, ranging from questions of provenance (e.g., did Rembrandt paint some of the paintings attributed to him?) to what these paintings are “intended” to represent.

Rembrandt’s manipulation of light and shadow, in this instance, along with the man’s seemingly introspective detachment, create a sense of mystery. The rays of light are reflected in various ways and sundry places, just as parables are reflected in different ways in different contexts and heard in numerous ways by various hearers. Both Jesus and Rembrandt illuminate some things clearly, while other aspects remain obscure, placed (deliberately) in the shadows.

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Two people are sitting in a room. They are both silent. Then one of them says, "Well!" The other does not respond.

– A Russian parable

Parables are apparently simple but deceptively enigmatic *meshalim*. As the church father

Irenaeus acknowledges, "Parables admit of many interpretations," but he also admonishes that "parables ought not to be adapted to ambiguous expressions. For, if this be not done . . . parables will receive a like interpretation from all" (*Against Heresies* 2.27).

Parables are apparently simple but deceptively enigmatic *meshalim*.

The reception history of Jesus' parables over the centuries validates Irenaeus's observation about the diversity of interpretations, but recent parable scholarship challenges whether parables can or even should "receive a like interpretation from all." The various responses to parables reflect their inherent and somewhat incongruous complexity and enigmatic nature. Jesus' parables are in fact profoundly dialogic; they do not intend to give the final word, because Jesus spoke them not only to challenge our hearts, minds, and imaginations but also with one ear already listening for our responses.¹

Because of the nature of parables, then, a systematic analysis of a parable will not necessarily result in one "true" or "original" meaning. Yet interpreting parables should not be a free-for-all. A systematic, interdisciplinary approach helps situate buoys in the channel of interpretation as we explore the meanings of the parables found in the gospels and, perhaps, we also can get nearer to the voice of the historical Jesus.

But it is not easy. Think, for example, of how one might interpret the Russian parable above.² As Voloshinov/Bakhtin notes, "For us outsiders this entire 'conversation' is utterly incomprehensible." No matter how carefully we analyze the parable's rhetoric or the phonetic, morphological, and semantic elements of its words, we are lost without more context. To understand the parable more fully, we need what Voloshinov/Bakhtin calls the "extra-verbal context": the "common spatial purview" of the interlocutors (they looked out a window and saw that it had begun to snow); their "common knowledge and understanding of the situation" (it was May and spring was long overdue), and their "common evaluation of the situation" (they were tired of winter and bitterly disappointed by snowfall in May).

In Jesus' parables such information is mostly unrecoverable. Discourse does not necessarily reflect "extraverbal context" as a mirror reflects an object.

Instead, parables often function like enthymemes: syllogistic arguments in which premises are assumed, not expressed directly, and these unspoken

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premises have to
be filled in by
readers/hearers of
the parables.³

Voloshinov /
Bakhtin gives us that information for the
Russian parable but then argues that once
the purview becomes wider, understanding
such stories depends upon larger social and

cultural factors: “constant, stable factors in life and substantive, fundamental social evaluations.”⁴ In the case of Jesus’ parables, specific historical reconstructions may be impossible and inherent ambiguities may always remain, but there were common social patterns in the first-century Mediterranean world—including a general world view of peasants in Palestine and, in particular, a view of the relationship between the poor and the wealthy that the historical Jesus clearly espoused—that allow us to ameliorate the enthymematic “alienating distancing” between the cultural contexts of these first-century parables and the cultural contexts of twenty-first-century readers.⁵

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The Textures of Texts and Parable Interpretation

A dialogic approach guided by the “textures of texts” taxonomy of Vernon Robbins enables interpreters to view texts more comprehensively through a variety of lenses and helps to fill in some—but not all—of the enthymematic gaps in the parables of Jesus. Robbins demonstrates that a text is like a rich, thick tapestry. When we explore a text from different angles, we see multiple textures of meanings, convictions, values, and actions—threads of inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture, and ideological texture.⁶

This essay will follow such a dialogic approach by first analyzing Luke 12:16-20’s rhetorical features (Robbins’ “inner texture”) by presenting an overview of the literary context, structure, and details—the specific manner in which a text attempts to persuade its readers. The text’s literary context reveals Luke’s reading of the parable, and a literary analysis of the parable produces additional insights into both Luke’s reading of the parable and, I argue, Jesus’ telling of it.⁷



This dialogic approach will then move into intertextual analysis: examining the parable's possible citations, allusions, and reconfigurations of specific texts and contexts. We will find that the intertextual evidence for the parable of the Rich Fool often proves inconclusive.

The next step is to situate Luke's rhetoric in the general social and cultural contexts of the first century through a brief examination of how the parable participates in first-century social and cultural attitudes, norms, and modes of interaction (Robbins' "social and cultural texture"). As we do so, we need to recognize the ideological point(s) of view a text evokes, advocates, and nurtures, as well as our own ideological point(s) of view (Robbins' "ideological texture").

Finally, the essay will conclude with some reflections on a painting by Rembrandt, which may or may not represent the Rich Fool parable, in a brief addendum that sheds additional light on parables as dialogic, enthymematic works of art.

The Literary Context of Luke 12:16-20

To illustrate how a dialogic four textures approach can illuminate our understanding of this parable in particular and the nature of parables in general, I will focus on only one aspect of the parable: its view on wealth, poverty, and ethical responsibility.

Luke's emphasis on poverty and wealth is clear from the very first chapter of the Gospel (e.g., 1:51-53), and the issue takes center stage when Jesus begins his public ministry with a programmatic statement of his mission (4:18-19).⁸ On one hand, Luke stresses God's care of and blessings upon the poor. The poor receive "good news" (4:18; 7:22); the Kingdom of God (6:20); (should receive) invitations to the banquet (14:13, 21); and the poor man Lazarus is received by Abraham (16:20-22). On the other hand, the rich receive condemnation. Not only has God "sent the rich away empty" (1:53), but Jesus pronounces woes upon the "rich" and the "full" (6:24-25; illustrated by the rich man in 16:19-31). It is impossible for mortals—but possible with God—for "someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God" (18:25-26). Indeed, it is a difficult question: what must one do—including the use of one's possessions—"to inherit eternal life" (18:18)?

The gospel of Luke appears to offer different answers to questions of possessions and entering the Kingdom of God. John the Baptist demands "fruits of repentance" that include giving one's spare

The gospel of Luke appears to offer different answers to questions of possessions and entering the Kingdom of God.

coat to someone who has none, tax collectors collecting no more than their due, and soldiers being satisfied with their wages (3:7-14). Zacchaeus proclaims that he will give or has given—depending whether his story is one of forgiveness or vindication—half his possessions to the poor, and Jesus proclaims that “salvation has come” to Zacchaeus’ house (19:1-9). At other times, however, more is demanded. Jesus says to the “large crowds . . . traveling with him” that none of them could become a disciple if they do not “give up all of [their] possessions” (14:33). Likewise, Jesus tells a rich ruler that to “inherit eternal life” he had to sell all that he owned and distribute the proceeds to the poor (18:18-23).

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The placement of the Rich Fool parable in the larger Lukan narrative, though, clearly illuminates Luke’s reading of the parable as far as issues of poverty, wealth, and one’s relationship to

when God calls the rich man in the parable a “fool” (12:20) . . . readers should see, after reading Luke’s narrative, connections between the rapacious foolishness of the Pharisees and the Rich Fool.

God are concerned. For example, a key element of the characterization of the Pharisees in Luke’s gospel is that they are “full of rapacity and the evil of covetousness,” and Jesus calls them “fools” (11:39-40).⁹ Being a fool is the equivalent of being a *denier of God*, someone “who contemptuously disrupts

fellowship between God and [humankind].”¹⁰ This accusation labels them as moral failures who disregard their social responsibilities,¹¹ and when God calls the rich man in the parable a “fool” (12:20) in the very next chapter, readers should see, after reading Luke’s narrative, connections between the rapacious foolishness of the Pharisees and the Rich Fool.

In addition, just two chapters after the Rich Fool parable, Jesus again (cf. 11:43) chastises social elites for seeking after honor and connects such self-aggrandizement to a love of possessions and a disregard for the poor (14:7-24; cf. “lovers of money,” 16:13-14). Instead, Jesus expects his wealthy host—and the rich men of 12:16-20; 16:19-31, and elsewhere—when having a feast to “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” (14:12-14).

The parable’s immediate setting makes Luke’s interpretation of it even clearer. A person in the crowd listening to Jesus interrupts him with a request for Jesus to adjudicate an issue of an inheritance. Jesus rejects the request and warns the crowd—implicitly rebuking the man for his own covetousness—to be on “guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (12:15). The Rich Fool parable



(12:16-20) thus illustrates Jesus' admonition about rapacity, and it is followed by an illustrative *nimshal* (12:21). Jesus then elaborates the point to the disciples when he enjoins them not to worry about material possessions and to strive for the Kingdom of God instead (12:22-31). The section concludes with an exhortation for them to sell their possessions "and give alms" (12:32-34; cf. 14:12-

14; 18:18-23). For Luke, then, the rich farmer exemplifies what to avoid (cf. the ravens in 12:24): someone who does not strive for the Kingdom, who does not care for those around him by selling his possessions and giving alms, whose treasure is material goods, not the "unfailing treasure in heaven" (12:33), and whose life consists "in the abundance of possessions" (12:15).

The Parable of the Rich Fool

The parable begins by stressing that a rich man's *land* "produced abundantly." The abundance came not through the man's hard work or diligence but through a gift of the land (i.e., from God). The man's wealth is accentuated by the word *χώρα* (*chōra*) instead of *ἀγρός* (*agros*) for "land" — Luke uses *χώρα* to indicate an extensive amount of land, not the smaller plots of land small landowners might have.¹² The verb *εὐφορέω* (*euphoreō*: "produced abundantly")—found only here in the New Testament—emphasizes the richness of the harvest. The very wealthy man owns a large estate that has produced an abundant harvest. What will he do with this abundance? Will he, readers may ask, illustrate the woe upon the rich in Luke 6:24? Will he give alms (11:41)? Will he tithe but neglect justice (11:42)?

The answer is that the rich man focuses entirely on himself. He utters a soliloquy that repeatedly uses the first person singular in just three verses—"I" six times and "my" five times, in addition to speaking to his "soul." The man's deliberations demonstrate his (fatal) error. He takes no account of others, and, most importantly, takes no account of God.¹³ He decides to build new storage facilities, not just for the bumper crop, but for all his "goods" as well. These possessions, he thinks, will ensure his well-being for "many years." That decision earns him the title "fool" from God (12:20)—in the only instance of God being a (direct) character in a parable of Jesus. "Fool," as noted above, denotes someone whose words or actions deny the existence of God (e.g., Ps 14:1).

Because of the dialogic, enthymematic nature of parables, scholars disagree on

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many aspects of interpretation even in this apparently simple example story. Hedrick, for example, sees the man's numerous first-person references as being "quite natural in the context of a soliloquy." Green, however, argues that people who engage in such soliloquies are "consistently portrayed negatively by Luke" (2:35; 5:21-22; 6:8; 9:46-47).¹⁴

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Interpreters also disagree about the farmer's competence. The wealthy man already has storage barns, but this crop is so extraordinary that his existing facilities are insufficient. At what point did he recognize this extraordinary harvest? Was he incompetent, as Hedrick suggests, because he did not see this unusually abundant crop until harvest time? A capable farmer would have seen it coming for weeks, so perhaps the parable caricatures the farmer (cf. how Jesus castigates the crowds for their lack of discernment about signs of the Kingdom: 11:14-32; 12:54-56). Snodgrass, however, "finds no evidence for such an interpretation."¹⁵

Scholars also debate the perspicacity of the rich man because he decides to tear down existing barns to build newer, larger ones. Why not merely build additional facilities?¹⁶ Does this aspect also function to caricature the farmer, or in Scott's words, "burlesque" the everyday, because the man misjudges both the harvest and the remedy?¹⁷ In addition, interpreters postulate different reasons for building the storage facilities. Perhaps the man's intention is to hold back his harvest to help drive up the price of grain — or at least to store it until the price goes up — and to receive a higher price for it later. Once again, scholars argue on both sides of that suggestion.¹⁸

Is he a bumbling fool or a shrewd agribusinessman? Is he a typical covetous member of the elite class seeking to hoard his wealth at the expense of others, or primarily an example of the uncertainty and fragility of life, a life that does not consist in the abundance of possessions?¹⁹ Some scholars argue that until 12:20, readers should make no moral judgment concerning the landowner.²⁰ The Lukan context suggests otherwise, but was there any moral judgment in the "original" parable of the historical Jesus before the apparently shocking intervention of God? It depends on how one decides to fill in the missing "social premises" of this enthymematic parable, and a glimpse of other textures of this text may supply additional clues.

The Intertexture of Luke 12:16-20

The most obvious comparative text for this parable is the version found in *Gospel of Thomas* 63. The similarities are striking: a rich man deliberates over his economic future, a future assured, he thinks, by the fertility of the



land. In the midst of his plans, however, he dies. Yet the stories have significant differences. In Luke, the land has already produced abundantly, and the man plans accordingly.

In *Gos. Thom.* 63, the man makes future economic plans to increase his wealth so

The Lukan story seems to focus on the use of one's possessions, whereas the *Thomas* version functions more as an admonition against greed.

that he "may have need of nothing." Furthermore, in *Thomas*, we hear of the man's death; in Luke, the man's "life is being demanded" of him "this very night" (12:20). The Lukan story seems to focus on the use of one's possessions, whereas the *Thomas* version functions more as an admonition against greed.²¹

Gospel of Thomas 63 assists with questions of the parable's authenticity, but scholars look to other comparative texts to give additional insights into the parable. Some texts, for example, stress that hard work and diligence lead to wealth (Prov 10:4, 22), and that God rewards those efforts with wealth and possessions (Eccl 5:19). Yet, even texts that have a positive view about gaining wealth can warn those who do so to be careful: "One becomes rich through diligence and self-denial, and the reward allotted to him is this: when he says, 'I have found rest, and now I shall feast on my goods!' he does not know how long it will be until he leaves them to others and dies" (Sir 11:18-19; cf. 5:1, 3).

Other comparative texts, though, chastise the wicked as being always at ease and increasing in riches (Ps 73:12). Some comparative texts assume that the wealthy will become increasingly wicked while bemoaning the plight of the poor: "Keeping watch over riches wastes the flesh . . . The poor man toils for a meager subsistence, and if ever he rests, he finds himself in want" (Sir 31:1-5). Still other texts condemn those who become wealthy through "unjust means," who "have grown rich with accumulated goods," and whose "granaries are (brim) full as with water"; such riches, we are told, "shall not endure" (1 *Enoch* 97:8-10).

We encounter several problems when trying to fill in the missing social premises of this enthymematic parable with information from comparative texts. First, many comparative texts stem from the elite in society, who obviously have very different views about wealth than the non-elite. The comparative texts used by Hedrick about farming practices, for example, come from Roman elites like Cato, Varro, and Cicero (who praises the "provident and industrious" farmer who always has storerooms and cellars filled with abundant provisions),²² whose views are far removed from that of the peasant artisan Jesus. Does it matter for the comparative texts we choose

that our story says nothing about either the farmer's diligence or on acquisition of wealth through unjust means?²³

Second, how we initially read the parable influences where we look for comparative texts. Moreover, once we find comparative texts, what we look for in them influences what we see and what we overlook. Do we use comparative texts to ascribe

a profit motive to the rich man? Roman farming manuals, for example, contain admonitions that storage facilities should be used so that the farmer can wait until a more propitious time to sell his crops. Cato, for one, advises that a farmer should "have a well-built barn and storage room and plenty of vats for oil and wine, so that he may hold his products for good prices; it will redound to his wealth, his self-respect, and his reputation" (*On Agriculture* 3.2). Proverbs 11:26, on the other hand, says that "people curse those who hold back grain."

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Thus, the quest for comparative texts still leaves the context ambiguous, and it drives us to examine the social and cultural texture of the Rich Fool parable to see if questions about the character of the rich man can be answered more fully.

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Texts and Contexts in Dialogue

The parables of Jesus, as William Herzog has shown, provide a vision of the Kingdom of God, but they also portray and critique the ruling class's oppression of the non-elites.²⁴ In brief, the first-century cultural setting of this parable demands—from the perspective of peasant artisans such as Jesus—that the rich man be seen in a negative light even before his condemnation from God.

In the pre-industrial, agrarian society of the first century, non-elites in agricultural production—approximately ninety percent of the population—were at the mercy of elite power-holders. Elites controlled any surplus produced by non-elites, so the vast majority of people lived on a subsistence level. These non-elite "subsistence farmers" or "peasants" had little control over the conditions that governed their lives, and this situation helped generate a belief that all desired goods were finite and always in short supply.²⁵ One of the strategies in these "limited good" societies was the formation of relationships based on reciprocity among those of similar rank and relationships of patronage among those of different socio-economic levels.²⁶



James C. Scott describes how patronage works in the “moral economy of the peasant.”²⁷ The economic situation of peasants is analogous to people standing permanently up to their chins in water—even a ripple in that

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water is sufficient to drown them. Because of their precarious existence, peasants believed in a “subsistence ethic”: everyone was entitled to eke a living out of the resources of the village through reciprocity or patronage.²⁸ Peasants thus view patronage—where the elite distribute goods to the non-elite—as a moral obligation; people who have resources are *expected* to help in difficult circumstances.²⁹ For Luke—and, I would argue, for Jesus—the rich man in Luke 12 who includes no one in his plans but himself (and the rich man in Luke 16:19-31 who ignores a destitute man at his gate) serves as a warning to those who have the economic means to help those in need.³⁰

How does the narrative of Luke expect such elites to live? No longer are these “lovers of money” (16:14) to be driven by rapacity. Instead, Jesus demands that they operate with *vertical generalized reciprocity*—a redistribution from the advantaged to the disadvantaged that expects nothing in return.³¹ Since God showers humankind with vertical generalized reciprocity, humankind should follow God’s lead in their relationships with each other (e.g., 11:11-14).³² Jesus advises the elite, for example, not to engage merely in reciprocity among equals by inviting their friends, relatives, and rich neighbors to their feasts, but instead to invite the poor, crippled, lame, and blind. The elites’ concern for money is linked to their lack of concern for human beings, and this connection between riches and unrighteousness can only be broken through such vertical generalized reciprocity (14:12-14; cf. 16:9, 19-31).

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In this parable, though, the rich man is a fool. As Moxnes notes, there was nothing morally wrong in the way he received this (additional) fortune, but his deliberations, which are directed solely at himself, give an example of “wealth guarded avariciously.”³³ Although the parable never says directly that the man wants to drive up prices, Green’s observation is apt: “Given the subsistence economy of the peasant population surrounding him, this need for increased personal storage space not directly related to his agricultural

activity must have seemed odd in the extreme, if not utterly monstrous.”³⁴ What elites like Cicero might deem good agribusiness practices actually have “detrimental consequences for the peasants and tenants who are [the Rich Fool’s] neighbors.” His elite status would have been enhanced—if he had survived—but his isolated and isolating decision would also have harmed the “regional economy.”³⁵

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Because of the enthymematic nature of parables, not all questions can be answered through analyses of the textures of the texts. The parables’ often deliberate ambiguity continues to “leave the mind in sufficient doubt about

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its precise application to tease it into active thought,” as C. H. Dodd famously put it.³⁶

We can endlessly debate whether the man is a laughable farmer who cannot recognize an extraordinary harvest or comically decides to pull down existing barns to build new ones, but the cultural realities of peasant society in the first century make it clear that this rich man and those like him are ignoring Jesus’ demand that life in the Kingdom of God

involves not only treasure in heaven but also vertical generalized reciprocity in our lives on earth.

Rembrandt’s Rich Fool/Old Usurer/Money-Changer (1627)

The room is dark, illuminated by a single candle. An elderly man sits at a desk/table overloaded with books and papers, some written in what appears to be Hebrew script.³⁷ The man, a pince-nez perched on his nose, thoughtfully examines a coin. The hand holding the coin—with fingers made partially translucent by the candle’s light—blocks the viewer from seeing the candle directly, but its glowing light illuminates the man, a small area of the desk, and other elements in the darkened room.

All inessential elements are cloaked in shadows. On the desk are a gold-weigher’s scale with a box of weights, as well as chaotic stacks of books and papers, with a huge (account?) book open on the man’s right through which large Xs have been marked through some of the entries. The man’s face is brilliantly lit, and we see virtually every detail of his aged, wrinkled face—including his reddened nose, right ear, and eyelids, as well as the soft shadows produced by his glasses—as he gazes at the coin in his hand. Other coins on



the desk glimmer in the reflected glow of the candle's light, as do the epaulets on the man's shoulder. The fancy ruff around his neck also glows in the light, which then reflects even more light onto the man's face.

Who is this man, and what does this painting say to its viewers? The painting resists characterization; it is a snapshot in time, with little

or no direct moralizing. In that sense, it is enthymematic—hence the various titles given the painting—just like Jesus' works of art, the parables.

Christian Tümpel argues that this painting is Rembrandt's representation of the Rich Fool in Luke 12:16-20. To make his case, Tümpel utilizes "intertextual" arguments from the iconography used in depictions of the parable in works prior to Rembrandt's, such as Hans Holbein's *Der Rych man*. Holbein's work portrays death as a skeleton stealing the rich man's coins from a table as the man raises his arms in protest. Other iconographical elements are also included, such as a clock and a money chest.³⁸

Christian Tümpel argues that this painting is Rembrandt's representation of the Rich Fool in Luke 12:16-20.

Because of his use of chiaroscuro, Rembrandt was able to paint interior "history scenes" that took place inside buildings—scenes his predecessors had often avoided—because he could use different light sources to assist in interpreting the scene. Tümpel then argues that this painting is a biblical history scene, not, as it had been interpreted before, a "genre painting," paintings that look like they are depictions of scenes from everyday life but instead seek to impart a deeper meaning. Rembrandt forsakes common iconographical elements from earlier paintings (e.g., a skeleton symbolizing death or the building of barns in the background) and focuses on the rich man surrounded and absorbed by the material aspects of this world.³⁹ Thus, the money, books, purse, scale, and papers are not just symbols of commerce or usury, Tümpel argues; they are also symbols of the transience of earthly goods. Rembrandt thus portrays the man studiously examining a coin to depict his dependence on transitory earthly possessions. The Hebrew-like letters found on various papers scattered on the desk represent a biblical theme or scene—Rembrandt sometimes used Hebrew or Hebrew-like lettering to lend scenes biblical color.⁴⁰ Therefore, in Tümpel's view, Rembrandt is the first artist to capture the heart of the parable without using allegorical elements or additions that go against the reading of the parable.

Rembrandt sometimes does seem to connect genre scenes with biblical narratives, such as his 1628 painting, *Two Old Men Disputing*, which some

argue portrays Peter and Paul as scholars debating aspects of scripture interpretation.⁴¹ Yet, as with many of Rembrandt's early works, such conclusions remain controversial because of a lack of direct

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evidence, ranging from questions of provenance (e.g., did Rembrandt paint some of the paintings attributed to him?) to what these paintings are "intended" to represent—issues parallel to those explored

by scholars of Jesus' parables.

Other "intertextual" connections argue against Tümpel's position, however. The man inspecting the coin in this painting is extremely reminiscent of an earlier Honthorst painting, *An Old Woman inspecting a Coin* (~1623/4).⁴² Rembrandt substitutes an old man for Honthorst's elderly woman, but the resemblances are striking—an elderly person in a dark room, wearing a pince-nez, holding a coin with a right hand, and examining it in the light of a single candle. This painting and similar works by other artists seem to use this scene to personify avarice, with an elderly person as an example of someone who should have better things to do than to count and appraise his/her wealth.⁴³

Take, for example, van Straten's arguments about the painting, which he calls by a more traditional title, *The Old Usurer*. The Hebrew letters on the documents make clear the man's Jewishness. The man is comfortable (financially as well, according to van Straten, since he lends money at "exorbitant interest") near a warm stove on a dark night. Van Straten argues that there is no convincing evidence that this painting depicts the Rich Fool in Luke 12:13-21. The comparison with the Honthorst painting indicates that this Rembrandt is indeed a genre painting that depicts avarice.⁴⁴

Likewise, van den Boogert argues that Tümpel has misread the painting. Depictions of the Rich Fool usually portray a middle-aged man in expensive clothes surrounded by treasures, as well as the requisite skeleton holding an hourglass. Rembrandt includes "books, promissory notes, gold coins, and moneybags," which are undoubtedly symbols of "Vanitas," but there is no symbol of death—other than the man's age. Van den Boogert also declares that what Tümpel envisions as a clock symbolizing the man's approaching death actually is a rectangular stovepipe.⁴⁵

Even the Hebrew-like script does not necessarily portend a biblical scene; it more likely, based on intertextual evidence, designates a Jewish usurer. As van den Boogert argues, "in the 17th century Jews were generally associated

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with speculation and money-trading,” which led to stereotypical depictions of the “Jewish usurer.”⁴⁶ As Perlove and Silver note, Rembrandt’s early works depict Jews as general types, including “demonic caricatures of Jews as fanatical persecutors of Christ.”⁴⁷ For example, in Rembrandt’s *The Stoning of Saint Stephen* (1625)—

itself notable for the first self-portrait of Rembrandt—the Jews on Stephen’s left are harsh caricatures.⁴⁸ Van den Boogert thus argues that Rembrandt likely paints this elderly man not as the Rich Fool in the parable but as a stereotypical Jewish usurer who portrays avarice.

Rembrandt clearly wants us to focus on the elderly man. He illuminates the man’s face and mutes elements in the background, so the man draws our attention, much like an actor on a stage under a sole spotlight. Rembrandt’s manipulation of light and shadow, in this instance, along with the man’s seemingly introspective detachment, create a sense of mystery. As Joseph Netto notes about Rembrandt’s portraits in general, the

Rembrandt’s manipulation of light and shadow, in this instance, along with the man’s seemingly introspective detachment, create a sense of mystery.

result is that the portraits appear to offer us a glimpse into the mind of Rembrandt’s figures, even though the contents of their thinking remain shrouded in shadow. Thus the psychological depth opened up by Rembrandt’s *chiaroscuro* is seemingly bottomless. That is, we get a strong sense of something serious going on in the mind of these figures, but the precise nature of their thoughts and feelings is, at best, only darkly implied.⁴⁹

Chiaroscuro, for Rembrandt, is not only a dramatic means of portraying a scene, but also an effective way of suggesting inner character with psychological insight subtly portrayed with a sense of mystery. The rays of light are reflected in various ways and sundry places, just as parables are reflected in different ways in different contexts and heard in numerous ways by various hearers. Rembrandt illuminates some objects clearly, while other aspects remain murky or obscure, placed deliberately in the shadows, creating uncertainties and provoking debates. In a similar way, the parables of Jesus illuminate some things as clear as day; other aspects become more clear as we learn more and more about the first-century contexts in which Jesus created and his followers preserved, transmitted, and transformed his words;

whereas still other elements—because of the nature of the parabolic word—remain deliberately in the shadows, provoking our responses as we endeavor to construct ideological bridges to try to understand Jesus’ parables more clearly in his context and ours.

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¹ David B. Gowler, *What Are They Saying about the Parables?* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000), 102-3.

² The parable and this paragraph are based on the discussion in V. N. Voloshinov, “Discourse in Life and Discourse in Art,” in *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique* (New York: Academic, 1976), 93-116. I use “Voloshinov/Bakhtin” to indicate that I agree with those scholars who argue that Mikhail Bakhtin played a primary role in authoring this essay.

³ Voloshinov/Bakhtin uses the common example: “Socrates is a man, therefore he is mortal.” This is an enthymeme instead of a syllogism because one of the premises is assumed, not stated: “All men are mortal” (Voloshinov, “Discourse in Life,” 100).

⁴ Voloshinov, “Discourse in Life,” 101.

⁵ David B. Gowler, *Host, Guest, Enemy, and Friend*, Emory Studies in Early Christianity, vol. 1 (New York: Peter Lang, 1991; ppk. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 11.

⁶ See, for example, Vernon K. Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996).

⁷ See, for example, David B. Gowler, *What are They Saying about the Historical Jesus?* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2007), 142-44.

⁸ For an analysis of how this mission is fulfilled by Jesus over the next several chapters, see David B. Gowler, “The Limits of Radicalism: A Dialogical Response to ‘Liberation’ in Luke 13:10-17,” in *Radical Christian Voices and Practice*, ed. Zoë Bennett and David B. Gowler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming, 2012).

⁹ See David B. Gowler, “Hospitality and Characterization in Luke 11:37-54: A Socio-Narratological Approach,” *Semeia* 64 (1993): 213-51. I am speaking only of the Pharisees as Luke portrays them; the “lovers of money” charge is historically suspect. If any Jewish group during Jesus’ ministry could be stereotyped in this way, the Sadducees are the most likely candidates.¹⁰ Georg Bertram, “ἄφρων,” *TDNT* 9:225.

¹¹ Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World*, 3d. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 50.

¹² A check of Luke’s use of χώρα shows that Scott is correct that in Luke it denotes an extensive amount of land—even a district or region (Luke 2:8; 3:1; 8:26; 12:16; 15:13, 14, 15; 19:12; 21:21); see Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables*



of *Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 132; *pace* Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 106. That fact, however, tells us about Luke's understanding; it does not tell us what Jesus said. The term in the form of the parable found in *Gos. Thom.* 63 is of little use to help us in this deliberation; it uses a term that denotes money or possessions (χρῆμα [*chrēma*]).

¹³ E.g., "his" crops (12:17), which are God's gift. Numerous commentators note that the man acts in isolation. See, for example, John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 178; Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 303-4; Halvor Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 88-89; Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 490-91. Note how the narrative becomes more and more focused on the man. As Scott observes, the rich man even usurps the narrator's role in the parable. The soliloquy transforms the rich man from being the subject of the story to the narrator of the story as well (Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 135).

¹⁴ Charles Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 159; Green, *Luke*, 490.

¹⁵ Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions*, 155; Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 398. The difference is that Hedrick interprets the aorist form of the verb εὐφρορέω (*euphoreō* "produced abundantly") as designating that it was already harvest time before the farmer recognized his extraordinary crop.

¹⁶ Hedrick offers some possible answers to this question (*Parables as Poetic Fictions*, 147-48).

¹⁷ Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 134.

¹⁸ Green and Hedrick believe the farmer plans to store the crops to get a better price (Green, *Luke*, 490; Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions*, 156-57). Snodgrass argues that since those plans are not explicitly stated in the parable, such interpretations read "into the parable intentions that are not there" (Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 397-98).

¹⁹ Cf. Green (shrewd agribusinessman, *Luke*, 490) with Snodgrass (*Stories with Intent*, 398), who offers the latter more generic interpretation. Snodgrass does not take into account Luke's and Jesus' negative views of the wealthy.

²⁰ See Hultgren, *Parables*, 106; Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions*, 156; Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 399, says: "At least until the intervention of God in v. 20 we are tempted to react positively to the man and say 'Good for you!'"

²¹ Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 131.

²² Cited by Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions*, 157.

²³ Even without a hint of the farmer's perceptiveness, for example, could this parable evoke memories of the Joseph story, with its years of abundant crops and years of famine? Suggested by Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 134.

²⁴ William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 3. Much of following is dependent on David B. Gowler, "At His Gate Lay a Poor Man': A Dialogic Reading of Luke 16:19-31," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 32 (2005): 249-65.

²⁵ George Foster, "Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good," *American Anthropologist* 67 (1965): 293.

²⁶ S. N. Eisenstadt and L. Roniger, *Patrons, Clients, and Friends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). For an excellent list of the characteristics of such alliances, see K. C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 72.

²⁷ James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976). Although the author of Luke is above the social level of a peasant, the "voices" of the peasants (e.g., the peasant artisan Jesus and his first followers who transmitted this parable) still echo dialogically in the parable. See Gowler, *What Are They Saying About the Parables?*, 38-39, 101.

²⁸ Scott, *Moral Economy*, 1, 5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 11, 27, 51.

³⁰ Luke uses characters like the Roman centurion who helps the community (7:1-10) or Zacchaeus (19:1-10), on the other hand, as moral examples to emulate.

³¹ Moxnes, *Economy of the Kingdom*, 127-28.

³² Jerome Neyrey, "Ceremonies in Luke-Acts," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, ed. Jerome Neyrey (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 385.

³³ Moxnes, *Economy of the Kingdom*, 89.

³⁴ Green, *Luke*, 490. Cf. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 303.

³⁵ Green, *Luke*, 491.

³⁶ C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, rev. ed. (Glasgow: Fount Paperbacks, 1978), 16.

³⁷ Approximately half of Rembrandt's earliest works (i.e., from the 1620s) depict people of advanced years. Such older figures were seen as being *schilderachtig*, "worthy of painting," and these figures tend to have loosely-painted and mottled skin, with suggestions of "tiny burst veins, uneven pigmentation, and unkempt stubble." These older personages not only demonstrated the virtuosity of the painter, but they also were common in many Dutch paintings in the 1620s: humble but picturesque and evocative subjects. Noted in Mariët Westermann, *Rembrandt* (London: Phaidon, 2000), 51, 54.

³⁸ Christian Tümpel, "Ikonografische Beiträge zu Rembrandt. Zur Deutung und Interpretation einzelner Werke," *Jahrbuch der Hamburger Kunstsammlungen* 16 (1971): 29.

³⁹ What Tümpel omits is that the iconography even after Rembrandt remains unchanged for centuries as the rich man/miser is portrayed in work after work. For example: Vogtherr

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(1544), Scharffenberg (1576), Kieser (1617), Valvasor (1682), Mechel (1780), Bewick (1789), Anderson (1810), Douce (1833).

⁴⁰ Tümpel, "Ikonografische Beiträge zu Rembrandt," 30.

⁴¹ Shelley Perlove and Larry Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 11-12.

⁴² Other possible influences include a painting by Hendrick Bloemaert that depicts an old woman selling eggs or Matthias Stom who, among others, paints a woman counting coins on a table at night.

⁴³ Gary Schwartz, *Rembrandt: His Life, his Paintings* (New York: Viking, 1985), 50.

⁴⁴ Roelof van Straten. *Young Rembrandt: The Leiden Years, 1606-1632* (Leiden: Folio, 2005), 67-68.

⁴⁵ Bob van den Boogert, "An Old Usurer Examining a Coin," in *The Mystery of the Young Rembrandt*, ed. Ernst van de Wetering, Bernhard Schnackenburg, and Ed de. Heer (Wolfratshausen: Edition Minerva, 2001), 210. My reading of the painting, both in person in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin and in various digital images, is that the shadows in person in the painting make a definitive answer impossible. There does appear to be a circular figure on the rectangle, but in the shadows of this painting, many things are possible. The imagination may produce other possibilities, even the (unlikely) presence of a ghost-like figure created by the shadow of the money purse, which might take the place of the "requisite skeleton"!

⁴⁶ Van den Boogert also notes the similarities of this painting with those of usurers and tax collectors by Quinten Metsijs and Marinus van Reymerswael ("An Old Usurer Examining a Coin," 211).

⁴⁷ Perlove and Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith*, 5.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

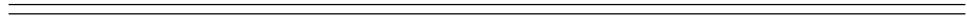
⁴⁹ Joseph Netto, "Rembrandt and the Technique of Chiaroscuro" <http://www.nettonet.org/Nettonet/101%20Painting/Studies/Chiaroscuro.htm>. Accessed May 25, 2011.

⁵⁰ Rembrandt, "The Rich Fool," public domain photo located at http://ookaboo.com/o/pictures/noindex/picture.original/25092304/The_Parable_of_The_Rich_Fool_Rembrandt_1. Accessed May 3, 2012.

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Fig. 1. Rembrandt, "Der reiche Narr (The Rich Fool)"⁵⁰



"Like Yeast that a Woman Took": Feminist Interpretations of the Parables

By Mary Ann Beavis*

ABSTRACT

This article introduces feminist approaches to parable interpretation by summarizing three books published in the first decade of the twenty-first century: Mary Ann Beavis, ed., *The Lost Coin: Parables of Women, Work and Wisdom* (2002); Luise Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus* (2005); and Elizabeth Dowling, *Taking Away the Pound: Women, Theology and the Parable of the Pounds in the Gospel of Luke* (2007). Beavis' multi-authored anthology identifies fourteen parables of "women, work and wisdom" that have received little attention in "mainstream" parable interpretation. Schottroff's approach is not limited to "women parables," but applies a feminist-liberationist approach to the parables of Jesus. Dowling uses Luke's parable of the Pounds (19:11-28) as a lens through which she critiques the evangelist's portrayal of women. The article is offered not as the last word on feminist parable interpretation, but as an invitation for preachers and teachers to discover the parables of "women, work and wisdom," to search for other submerged traditions of women and the female in the scriptures, and to explore new methods of interpretation.

Introduction

At first blush, the idea of feminist parable interpretation seems peculiar, and, from a Christian feminist perspective, rather discouraging. After all, there are only four gospel parables that feature women characters: the woman seeking a lost coin (Luke 15:8-9), the persistent widow (Luke 18:2-5), the ten

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bridesmaids (Matt 15:1-13), and the bakerwoman (Matt 13:33; Luke 13:20-21). The small number of parables about women might lead to the conclusion that Jesus was not particularly interested in women, and that women should simply try to see themselves in the many parables about men—after all, the parables are for everyone. Moreover,

the four “women parables” have often been overlooked, or given short shrift, in academic and homiletical writings: the woman is silly for making such a fuss over a small coin; the widow plays second fiddle to the judge, who is supposed to stand for God; the unprepared bridesmaids are foolish, and their “wise” friends are harsh; the “unclean” leaven reveals the point of the parable, not the woman kneading it through the dough—if she is mentioned at all, she is made out to be as “unclean” as the leaven!¹

. . . the four “women parables” have often been overlooked, or given short shrift, in academic and homiletical writings

In the 1980s and 1990s, feminist interpreters such as Susan Marie Praeder,² Luise Schottroff,³ and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza⁴ made some headway in addressing the lack of attention to the parables featuring women. In particular, each of these scholars has brought the four “women parables” forward in their feminist exegetical writings. For example, Schüssler Fiorenza interpreted the parable of the woman kneading dough as pointing to the “fomenting” activity of God’s Wisdom (personified as the woman Sophia) at work in feminist theologies; the parable of the woman seeking the lost coin as the search of Wisdom for those who have “fallen through the cracks”; the assertive widow who demands justice from the corrupt judge as Wisdom and her followers pursuing justice and righting wrongs; and the story of the wise and foolish bridesmaids as cautioning against being unprepared for long haul of the struggle for justice.⁵ However, these examples do not exhaust the possibilities for feminist parable interpretation, nor are there only four parables relevant to feminist teaching and preaching.

This article will introduce three works published in the last decade that bring new feminist perspectives to the parables of Jesus: my own *The Lost Coin: Parables of Women, Work and Wisdom*;⁶ Luise Schottroff’s *The Parables of Jesus*;⁷ and Elizabeth Dowling’s *Taking Away the Pound: Women, Theology and the Parable of the Pounds in the Gospel of Luke*.⁸ My aim is not simply to review the feminist work that has been done, but also to encourage further efforts in this direction.

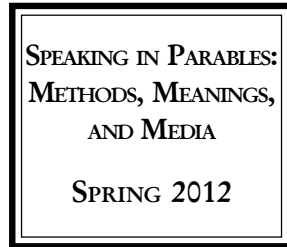
The Lost Coin

The edited book *The Lost Coin* was the first—and to date, the only—substantive collection of feminist interpretations of early Christian parables about women, women’s work, and the biblical figure of Wisdom/Sophia. As might be expected, it includes chapters on the four “woman parables,” placing the women characters at the center of the parables, questioning both traditional interpretations and the parables themselves insofar as they reflect the social realities of first-century women’s lives, and asking whether they slight, demean, or honor the women they portray—and the women to whom they are preached.

The “lost coin” of the title alludes not just to the parable by that name, but to the question whether a closer look at the Gospels might reveal more “lost” parables particularly relevant to women.

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Since there is no agreed-upon enumeration of the parables, and the definition of parable/משל (*mashal*) can include metaphorical speech forms such as proverbs, allegories, oracles, similitudes, and fables,⁹ this is not difficult to do. With this more inclusive understanding of parables in mind, the range of parables involving women and female figures expands to include other synoptic sayings that refer to women’s work (e.g., patching garments and filling wineskins, weaving cloth, female slavery) and that refer to the divine with female metaphors (as Mother Jerusalem mourning over her children, a mother hen with her chicks, Wisdom offering her easy “yoke” to the sage). If the Johannine “figures” or “similitudes” (παροιμιαί [*paroimiai*]) are included, metaphors of labor and childbirth (entering a second time into a mother’s womb and being born again; woman in travail) and nuptial imagery (“he who has the bride has the bridegroom”) come to the fore. If the boundaries of the “canon” of parables are stretched to include the extra-biblical *Gospel of Thomas*, the parables of a woman carrying a jar of meal (97) and of babies nursing (22) become part of the picture.¹⁰ These criteria revealed fourteen relevant parables, all of which were assigned to feminist women interpreters. While most of the contributors were academic biblical scholars, some were academics in other fields (e.g., English literature), and some were women in ministry. The collection encompasses both academic and homiletic approaches, recognizing that “the bible functions for many as sacred scripture, and as such has the potential to have both positive and negative impacts on human lives. In





particular, as many feminist exegetes have observed, the bible has frequently been used to define women's roles, rights and opportunities."¹¹

Since most of these parables have received relatively little scholarly attention and even less from feminist inter-

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preters, the book includes collaborative efforts (two chapters) as well as one chapter—on the parable of the persistent widow—that contains three distinct interpretations by three different authors.

Parables of Women

Linda Maloney's interpretation of the "lost coin" parable (Luke 15:8-10) sees the woman's search as symbolizing feminist theological inquiry:

It is hard work; it is a struggle to find what we are seeking in the darkness that has covered it for so many centuries. But it is also characterized by joy and celebration, and by hope: a hope that assures us that God is with us. God has her skirts tucked up and is busy sweeping and searching, too.¹²

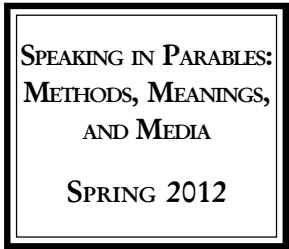
Three women, Mary Matthews, Carter Shelley, and Barbara Scheele, provide complementary perspectives of the parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:2-5).¹³ For Matthews, the judge of the parable portrays the reality of structural injustice, and the widow is "every Christian," constantly confronting unjust authority until it surrenders. Shelley subverts the homiletical stereotype of the widow as a nagging shrew: "The parable exhorts the believing community to *pray* and *act*."¹⁴ Scheele sees the widow as God's Wisdom, praying and actively searching for people faithful to the codes of justice inscribed in scripture.

Vicky Balabanski's feminist commentary on the parable of the bridesmaids (Matt 25:1-13) reconstructs the story from the perspective of the patriarchal elders of the village in which the wedding takes place, where the men of the town have a laugh at the expense of the "foolish" young women. She then imagines the parable from the point of view of the women of the first-century marketplace, who judge the unprepared women as socially inadequate and indiscrete. Her interpretation raises the provocative question of whether this parable can speak to us of Christ

the liberator,¹⁵ and warns against allowing the "closed door" that shuts out the unprepared girls to have the last word

[Balabanski's] interpretation . . . warns against allowing the "closed door" that shuts out the unprepared girls to have the last word

opened to "the marginalized, to those who are, like so many of us, 'the foolish'."¹⁶



Parables of Women's Work

Holly Hearon and Antoinette Clark Wire interpret the parable of the woman kneading dough (Matt 13:33; Luke 13:20-21; *Gos. Thom.* 96) and the similitude of the lilies of the field (Matt 15:28-30; Luke 12:27-28; *Gos. Thom.* 36) with the awareness that they describe the activities that take up much of the time of poor women in the "three-fourths world" today, as they did for the women of Jesus' time.¹⁷ Pheme Perkins provides a class analysis of the parables of patching garments and filling wineskins (Matt 9:26-17; Mark 2:21-22; Luke 5:36-37), noting the social gap between the privileged audience of the parables and the marginality of the people—women or men, slave or free, child or adult—who actually did the work.¹⁸ Kamila Blessing's interpretation of the parable of the woman carrying a jar of meal (*Gos. Thom.* 97) points out that the emptying of the jar as the woman proceeds "on the way" illustrates the positive value of "emptying" in the world-denying theology of ancient Gnostic Christianity.¹⁹ Deborah Core critiques the "troubling tale" of the faithful and unfaithful stewards (Luke 12:41-45), and finds the master's punishment of the negligent slave of the parable to be antithetical to feminist—and Christian—ideals of social justice.²⁰

Brides and Birthgivers

The "similitudes" of the gospel of John are usually not considered as parables, but as brief figurative sayings of Jesus, they fall within the range of parabolic speech. Adele Reinhartz notes that John the Baptist's comparison of himself to the "friend of the bridegroom" and the messiah to "he who has the bride" (John 3:29-30) invites a feminist reading of the parable that envisions a relationship of mutuality between the disciple/bride and Jesus the groom.²¹ Kathleen Rushton's examination

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of the “procreative parables” of labor and childbirth (John 3:1-10; 16:21-22) finds that they are “woven into the very fabric of theological meaning-making of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and Johannine discipleship.”²² Contrast this with the parable of the breastfeeding infants in the *Gospel of Thomas* (22), which, as Kathleen Nash notes, devalues the women’s work of childbearing and

nursing in a Gnostic worldview where those “born of women” are not eligible for the Father’s Kingdom.²³

Parables of Wisdom

The figure of Wisdom/Sophia is the leading biblical image of the divine as female.²⁴ In several parables, Jesus speaks as a prophet of Wisdom. In her examination of the parabolic saying where Jesus, as messenger of God’s Wisdom, invites Wisdom’s “children” (disciples) to assume her “yoke” (discipleship)

In several parables, Jesus speaks as a prophet of Wisdom.

(Matt 11:28-30), Edith Humphrey develops multiple themes, including Wisdom’s generous invitation to follow her, the Sabbath “rest” that she offers her disciples, the humility of Jesus, the prophet of Wisdom, and the gift of divine law.²⁵ Elaine Guillemin interprets the metaphor of God’s Wisdom as a mother hen (Matt 23:37-39; Luke 13:34-35; cf. *Gos. Thom.* 21) within the context of maternal imagery in the Gospels: mother Jerusalem (Matt 2:3-4; 23:37-39); Rachel and the Foremothers (Matt 2:18; cf. Jer 31:15; Matt 1:3, 5, 6, 16); and the Queen of the South, emissary of Sophia (Luke 11:31; 12:49): “Sophia and the Queen of the South provoke the reader to reflect on the consequences of accepting or rejecting Jesus, whose works they justify and whose identity they recognize.”²⁶ Barbara Reid comments on the promise of the parable of Wisdom’s resistant children (Matt 11:16-19; Luke 7:31-35; cf. *Gos. Thom.* 21), which “brings to the fore the image of Sophia as the female personification of the Divine.”²⁷ Reid warns against interpretations of the biblical Wisdom traditions that combine a positive understanding of divine Sophia with negativity toward actual historical women.²⁸ Reid concludes that both male and female followers of Jesus “can understand themselves to be children of Wisdom, made in the divine image, redeemed by Christ who is her incarnate presence on earth, and whose deeds they continue to replicate.”²⁹

The Parables of Jesus

Luise Schottroff is a feminist biblical scholar whose book *Lydia's Impatient Sisters* demonstrated the involvement of early Christian

women in every aspect of their social world. Her pioneering interpretation of the four "women parables" in that book asserted the principle that the parables must be interpreted within the social setting of women's (and men's) lives in antiquity. . . .

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The parables speak of social reality, including the so-called parables of nature. The parables describe and then turn upside down the world of owners of large estates and farms, of the female and male daily-wage earners, tenants, and slaves. It is therefore necessary to make the social-historical exploration of this world the point of departure. What is a drachma worth, and what does it mean when a woman who possesses ten drachmas does not stop searching for the one she has lost? In order to know where in a parable God's reign upends the "commonplace," what I call social reality, I must undertake social-historical research or else I open myself to blunders.³⁰

Schottroff answers the question of what a drachma was worth by noting that while the "lost coin" of the parable would have been a day's wages for a male day laborer, it would have been two days' pay for a woman.³¹

Schottroff's more recent *The Parables of Jesus* is not explicitly feminist in that it is not specifically woman-centered or overtly concerned with feminist analysis. However, it is feminist in the sense that she uses her well-known feminist/liberationist hermeneutic to disengage the parables from their

[Schottroff] uses her well-known feminist/liberationist hermeneutic to disengage the parables from their canonical and church contexts in order to purge them of the dualism and anti-Judaism typical of many traditional Christian interpretations, disclosing a relational and Torah-obedient perspective on the part of Jesus as revealed in the parables.

canonical and church contexts in order to purge them of the dualism and anti-Judaism typical of many traditional Christian interpretations, disclosing a relational and Torah-obedient perspective on the part of Jesus as revealed in the parables. Her "eschatological" perspective on the parables construes eschatology not as the expectation of the imminent return of Christ by the early church but as an expression of early



Christians' sense of the nearness of the reign of God, a hope "for the coming of God . . . and of the justice that will put an end to all injustice and violence."³²

A shortcoming of Schottroff's approach is that she insists that the parables in their gospel contexts do not contain potentially harmful depictions of God, Jews, or the church, an insistence that may tend to "rescue" texts that need critique. For example, in

the parable of the "good and faithful steward" (Luke 12:41-48), the negligent slave ends up being "cut in two" (διχοτομησῆι [*dichotomēsei*]) by his angry master. Where is the "critical awareness" of the reality of abusive behavior of masters toward slaves in this parable? Whether it originated with Jesus or with Luke, the metaphor of slavery to God is not conducive to freeing anyone from slavery. Schottroff's answer to this kind of criticism is that the metaphor of the believer as slave was directed *against* the social reality of slavery in the Greco-Roman world, as the liberating kingdom of God was antithetical to the oppressive Roman Empire.³³ Nonetheless, the image of slavery to God falls short of the message of justice and freedom that Schottroff sees as essential to the gospel. A feminist-liberationist perspective must be willing to acknowledge such a parable's embeddedness in a social world that included slavery and violence, and be prepared to read against the grain when necessary. Like contemporary preachers and teachers, the gospel writers had their cultural blind spots.

Like contemporary preachers and teachers, the Gospel writers had their cultural blind spots.

Taking Away the Pound

Elizabeth Dowling's *Taking Away the Pound* is a feminist-liberationist interpretation of a single parable, the parable of the Pounds (Luke 19:11-28), which she uses as a lens through which to consider the portrayal of the women characters in Luke's gospel. Dowling takes the minority position that the third slave who hides the money entrusted to him in a napkin rather than trading it for profit is the hero of the parable, as opposed to the more usual view that he is an example of laziness or negligence. In this interpretation, the nobleman "who went into a far country to receive a kingdom and then return" (v. 12) is not God or Jesus, but simply an oppressive master whom, as the parable states, was hated by his citizens, who sent an embassy to complain about his rule (v. 14). This interpretation is supported by the description of the master as "a severe man," who took up what he did not lay down, and reaped what he did not sow (vv. 21, 22), and who had his "enemies" executed in his presence (v. 27). The third slave, unlike the others,

refuses to imitate their master's unscrupulous dealings and make windfall profits, but honestly keeps the money given to him until the master's return. For this act of resistance to an unjust regime, the third slave is deprived of his pound, whereas the others are lavishly rewarded with political power (vv. 17, 19). For Dowling, the sympathy of the audience is with the resistant slave, rather than with the tyrannical master or his accomplices.

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Dowling's interpretation is a fine example of how a feminist-liberationist perspective can be applied to a parable that does not feature any female characters. As Barbara Reid observes in her *Parables for Preachers* volume on Luke: "feminist methods advance the dignity and equality of all persons by challenging texts and interpretations that promote domination of any sort,

... with few exceptions, the women of Luke have their metaphorical pound taken away one way or another.

particularly [but not only] that of males over females."³⁴ In the rest of her book, Dowling goes on to use the resistant slave who loses his pound as a lens through which Luke's characterizations of women are viewed. She finds that with few exceptions, the women of Luke have their metaphorical pound taken away one way or

another.

- The women witnesses to the resurrection are not believed or are denied when they speak the truth (Luke 24:9-11);
- Women are rebuked or corrected when they speak in the presence of men or address Jesus directly (e.g., Luke 2:48-49; 10:41; 11:27-28);
- The words of women who do speak are not recorded (e.g., Luke 2:36-38; 7:11-15; 10:13-17);
- Jesus' women supporters are portrayed as having been demon-possessed, which tends to discredit the women and devalue their ministry (Luke 8:2-3).³⁵

Female characters, however, who speak only in the company of other women (e.g., Mary and Elizabeth) or who stay silent (e.g., the woman who anoints Jesus' feet [Luke 7:44-50], or Martha's silent sister Mary [Luke 10:42]) are portrayed positively, in terms of "prophetic speech, paradigmatic faith, independent action, taking initiative, offering hospitality, being a beneficiary of Jesus' healing and affirmation, and modeling characteristics of discipleship."³⁶ For Dowling, *both* groups are dispossessed of the metaphorical "pound" of public speech: the women characters who are devalued and



silenced are “subject to a form of violence, not a physical violence but nonetheless debilitating. . . . The rhetorical effect . . . is to reinforce that public speech for women is inappropriate or to be diminished in significance, and the roles in which the women are engaged are marginalized.”³⁷ More subtly, the women whose “feminine” behavior is praised are also dispossessed:

Women who are portrayed as faithfully modeling openness to the word of God but who do not progress to the stage of proclamation can also be considered to have their role marginalized. The silent women characters of the Lukan Gospel may not explicitly “lose their pound” in the Gospel narrative but they do lose it in the ongoing story of the Church as portrayed in Acts.³⁸

That is, like the third slave, the women characters who “resist” the patriarchal norm of female silence have their “pound” of public speech taken away, while those who uphold the status quo by being seen but not heard (particularly by men) are “rewarded” with patriarchal approval. Thus, the evangelist, like the oppressive master of the parable, consistently “takes away the pound” of women characters.

Dowling, however, does find a woman in Luke who does speak publicly and receives justice: the persistent widow who repeatedly confronts the unjust judge (18:1-8). She “achieves justice for herself and does not ‘lose her pound’.”³⁹ Dowling suggests that it may be her status as a character in a parable that enables the widow’s public speech to be effective in a way that no other Lukan woman achieves: “Perhaps in the parable we hear a different voice from that in the dominant narrative. Whereas the dominant voice reinforces the public silence of women, this widow’s voice reflects the voice of resistance to women’s public silence and marginalization.”⁴⁰ Thus, the parable of the persistent widow functions as a story within the larger story of the Gospel that, with the parable of the pounds, undermines the evangelist’s tendency to restrict the speech of his female characters—and of the women in the audience then and now. Dowling’s feminist-liberationist interpretation of the gospel-in-parable illustrates another aspect of feminist exegesis: “Feminist scholars see in Jesus’ proclamation of the reign of God

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an alternate vision by which relationship patterns as well as social, political, economic, and ecclesial structures can be transformed."⁴¹

Conclusion

The approaches introduced here do not exhaust the directions that feminist parable interpretation can take. Schottroff's book, especially, illustrates that a feminist perspective can be brought to any parable, whether or not female characters figure in the narrative. The fourteen parables of "women, work and wisdom" covered in *The Lost Coin* are not offered as the last word on these parables but as "an invitation to discover these 'parables of women', to recover other 'lost' traditions of women and the female, and to create new ones for the future."⁴² The Gospels contain other parables and parabolic sayings featuring women characters and female imagery (e.g., Mark 12:20-23; Matt 18:23-35; Luke 17:35). The larger biblical tradition abounds with parables of Wisdom-Sophia, e.g., Nathan's parable of the ewe lamb (2 Sam 12:1-4); the wise woman of Tekoa's parable of the two brothers (2 Sam 14:5-7); the parable of the lioness and her cub (Ezek 19:1-9); and the mother like a vine planted by the water (Ezek 19:10-14). Like the "yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour" (Matt 13:33; Luke 13:21), the feminist interpretation of these parables of women, work, and wisdom can express the reign of God in unexpected ways.

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¹ See, e.g., Robert Funk, Bernard Brandon Scott, and James R. Butts, *The Parables of Jesus: The Red Letter Edition* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1988), 29.

² Susan Marie Praeder, *The World in Women's Words* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988).

³ Luise Schottroff, *Lydia's Impatient Sisters: A Feminist Social History of Early Christianity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1995), 69-120.

⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Sharing Her Word* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 181-82.

⁵ *Ibid.*



⁶ Mary Ann Beavis, ed., *The Lost Coin: Parables of Women, Work, and Wisdom* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

⁷ Luise Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005).

⁸ Elizabeth Dowling, *Taking Away the Pound: Women, Theology and the Parable of the Pounds in the Gospel of Luke* (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2007).

⁹ J.D. Crossan, "Parables," *Harper's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Paul D. Achtemeier (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1985), 747-49.

¹⁰ While the *Gospel of Thomas* was excluded from the NT canon, it may contain versions of sayings of the historical Jesus.

¹¹ Beavis, *Lost Coin*, 30-31.

¹² Linda Maloney, "'Swept Under the Rug': Feminist Homiletical Reflection on the Parable of the Lost Coin (Lk. 15.8-9)," *Lost Coin*, 35.

¹³ Mary W. Matthews, Carter Shelley, and Barbara Scheele, "Proclaiming the Parable of the Persistent Widow," *Lost Coin*, 46-70.

¹⁴ Shelley, "Proclaiming," 61.

¹⁵ Vicky Balabanski, "Opening the Closed Door: A Feminist Rereading of the 'Wise and Foolish Virgins' (Mt. 25.1-13)," *Lost Coin*, 71-97.

¹⁶ Balabanski, "Opening," 97.

¹⁷ Holly Hearon and Antoinette Clark Wire, "Women's Work in the Realm of God (Mt. 13.33; Lk. 13.20, 21; Gos. Thom. 96; Mt. 6.28-30; Lk. 12.27-28; Gos. Thom. 36)," *Lost Coin*, 136-57.

¹⁸ PHEME PERKINS, "Patched Garments and Ruined Wine: Whose Folly? (M. 2.21-22; Mt. 9:16-17; Lk. 5.36-37)," *Lost Coin*, 124-35.

¹⁹ Kamila Blessing, "The Woman Carrying a Jar of Meal (Gos. Thom. 97)," *Lost Coin*, 158-73.

²⁰ Deborah Core, "Who is the Faithful Steward? Luke 12.41-45," *Lost Coin*, 196-205.

²¹ Adele Reinhartz, "The 'Bride' in John 3.29: A Feminist Rereading," *Lost Coin*, 230-43.

²² Kathleen Rushton, "The (Pro)creative Parables of Labour and Childbirth (Jn 3.1-10 and 16.21-22)," *Lost Coin*, 228.

²³ Kathleen Nash, "The Language of Mother Work in the *Gospel of Thomas*: Keeping Momma out of the Kingdom (Gos. Thom. 22)," *Lost Coin*, 174-96.

²⁴ See, e.g., Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus, Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994); Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1993).

²⁵ Edith Humphrey, "The Enigma of the Yoke: Declining the Parables (Mt. 11.28-30)," *Lost Coin*, 268-86.

²⁶ Elaine Guillemin, "Jesus/Holy Mother Wisdom (Mt. 23.37-39)," *Lost Coin*, 355.

²⁷ Barbara E. Reid, "Wisdom's Children Justified (Mt. 11.16-19; Lk. 7.31-35)," *Lost Coin*, 301.

²⁸ Reid, "Wisdom's Children," 303.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 305.

³⁰ Schottroff, *Lydia's Impatient Sisters*, 52-53.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 95.

³² Schottroff, *Parables*, 2.

³³ *Ibid.*, 175-77.

³⁴ Barbara E. Reid, *Parables for Preachers: The Gospel of Luke – Year C* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 23.

³⁵ Dowling, *Taking Away the Pound*, 211-12.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 212.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

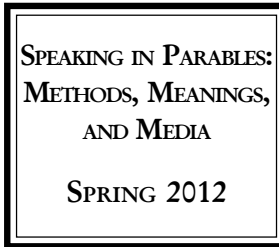
³⁸ *Ibid.*

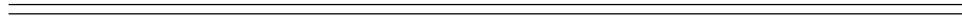
³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁴¹ Reid, *Parables for Preachers*, 23.

⁴² Beavis, "Introduction: Seeking the 'Lost Coin' of Parables about Women," *Lost Coin*, 31.





On Rock or Sand? The Two Foundations (Matthew 7:24-27, Luke 6:46-49)

By Peter Rhea Jones, Sr.*

Context

Of course context is routinely related to critical exegesis, but it is exceptionally important for this text for reasons that will become immediately evident. We cut to the chase.

Location and Function

How do the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:1-7:49) and the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20-49) conclude?¹ Notably they not only finish in similar fashion, but with a parable that insists upon the enactment by the disciple of the entire preceding sermon. Given that the sermon, if that categorization be accepted,² enjoys worldwide recognition, then the pericope we focus upon takes on unusual importance since it overlooks the famous sermon. This strategically placed passage overlooks the entire SM/SP and provides direct answer to the oft posed question whether disciples can/should follow its precepts. It leaves little margin of doubt concerning those critical and classic questions, though it does not address issues such as the literal interpretation³ and spheres of application.⁴ It also appears that this final unit answers the controverted question, "To whom the SM/SP was primarily directed?"

The location of the Two Foundations at the climactic position for both the SM and SP (might we speak of its *Sitz im Bergpredigt* [setting in the Sermon on the Mount?]) is itself auspicious,⁵ but its claimed function adds immeasurably. Matthew, for example in his performance, will use the word *therefore* (οὖν [oun]), in a postpositive position (7:24a) to introduce the passage

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and apply the parable to “these words of mine,” hence assigning the text the role of overlooking the entire SM explicitly. Scholars make the natural deduction that this parable stood in Q at this position.⁶ This text, functioning as an ending, underlines emphatically the

[The Two Foundations] text, functioning as an ending, underlines emphatically the necessity of obedience by faithful disciples. . . .

necessity of obedience by faithful disciples, as does its combination with the neighboring eschatological warnings.

The Eschatological Epilogue

The texts in Matt 7:13-27 and Luke 6:43-49, sometimes designated as eschatological epilogues, form a kind of juxtaposition to the introductory beatitudes of the SM/SP. They apparently stood in Q together.⁷ Note how intertwined are the texts in Matthew, especially the dualities. Remarkably, the reader finds bundled two ways (Matt 7:13-14; cf. Luke 13:23-24), two kinds of trees (Matt 7:15-20, Luke 6:43-45), and two builders or foundations (7:24-27). Furthermore, the phrase naturally translated “bear fruit” in Matt 7:17-19 is actually the same Greek verb utilized in vv. 21-27 that translates as “do,” though by no means an obvious translation.

These admonitory warnings include numerous images that could be read as eschatological. Examples include “destruction” (Matt 7:13c), very possibly the alternative “life” (Matt 7:14c), “fire” (Matt 7:19b; cf. 3:10; Luke 3:9; 13:6-9; John 15:6), “enter the kingdom” (Matt 7:21), possibly “fall” (Matt 7:25e, 27e), and particularly “on that day” (Matt 7:22a).⁸ Indeed, eschatological warnings ripple throughout the SM (5:13, 19, 20, 22, 25, 29, 30; 6:14, 15; 7:1, 2, 13, 14, 19, 21-23, 27).

Matthew 7:24-27 seems particularly correlated with 7:13-14, the narrow and the broad way. Presumably, the narrow way corresponds to hearing and doing (7:24), “living the life of surpassing righteousness” (5:20),⁹ the broad way to hearing and not doing (7:26). Each text informs the other.

Rabbinic Parallels

Notable rabbinic parallels also inform our texts.¹⁰ One frequently cited parallel derives from *ʿAbot* 3:18 in the Mishnah. The text, attributed to Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, concerns the study of the law. In parabolic form, he raises the problem of a student’s works exceeding his wisdom, asking rhetorically what he is like, reminiscent of Matthew and Luke.

To a tree whose branches are abundant but whose roots are few; and the wind comes and uproots it and overturns it, as it is written, *He shall be as a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out his roots by the river, and shall not fear when good cometh; but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness.* But he whose works are more abundant than his wisdom, to what is he like? To a tree whose branches are few but whose roots are many; so that even if all the winds of the world come and blow against it, it cannot be stirred from its place . . .¹¹

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The similarities are immediately observed. Eleazar stresses works, winds that come, blow and threaten. The analogy here turns on trees and is addressed to students of Torah who did not engage in good works. It stresses the tree reflecting good works standing even if all the winds of the world blow against it. The structure features two alternatives. The parable of Jesus does not contrast knowledge/wisdom and good works as much as the necessity of both hearing and doing. Eleazar's comparison incorporates scriptural bases for its claims.

A somewhat closer parallel is ascribed to Elisha ben Abuja.

With whom can we compare a person who has many good works and has learned much Torah? With a person who builds underneath with stones and afterwards with adobe; even if a great deal of water comes and remains beside them, it will not loosen them from their place. But with whom can we compare a person who has no good works and learns no Torah? With a person who first builds with adobe and then with stones; even if only a small amount of water comes, it will topple them at once.¹²

This text stresses the foundations quite specifically and also offers positive and negative examples to affirm and warn regarding knowledge alone and deeds. The similar antithetical structure with its stark alternatives certainly offers similarity. Elisha's "topple" closely compares with "fall" in Matt 7:25, 27/Luke 6:49, as does "at once" with "immediately" in Luke 6:49e.

Of course there are numerous differences, such as stone and adobe foundational components versus different locations in Matthew, knowledge and hearing versus hearing and doing, a great deal of water and a small amount of water versus the same weather elements befalling both houses. The most dramatic difference concerns the study and application of Torah



and obedience to the very words of Jesus (Matt 7:24, 26).¹³ Since the rabbinic parallels apparently appeared post-Jesus, one could argue that the dominical tradition influenced the rabbis; but more likely, we have independent uses of a rather common stock metaphor.¹⁴

Since the rabbinic parallels apparently appeared post-Jesus, one could argue that the dominical tradition influenced the rabbis; but more likely, we have independent uses of a rather common stock metaphor.

Comparison of the Two Synoptic Accounts (Matt 7:24-27; Luke 6:46-49)

Side by Side

Taking it from the side of Luke, we enumerate primary similarities with Matthew. Luke also ends his SP with the image of building a house on a foundation. He puts two opposites alongside, uses the common introductory preposition “like” to set up a comparison, speaks of hearing and doing the words of Jesus, marks the contrast of outcome, portrays a house without foundation falling, comments on why the house fell, and connects response to the words of Jesus to both examples. Both apply to everyone who hears (Matt 7:24a/Luke 6:47a).

On the other hand, the differences are rather pronounced. Luke speaks of one who comes to Jesus, makes no mention of the wise and foolish, stresses digging deep until finding rock,¹⁵ explains the destruction in terms of a house without foundation, uses the word “foundation” twice, portrays a river not strong enough to shake the house,¹⁶ and observes that the house was well built. Most strikingly, Luke depicts a flood (πλημμύρης [*plēmmyrēs*]) resulting from a river near the new house that has overflowed its banks.¹⁷ Luke surprisingly makes no mention of rain or wind or sand!¹⁸ He does portray the collapse as happening “immediately” (6:49d), a typical Markan expression.¹⁹

Redaction in the Lukan Performance (6:46-49)

In comparison to Matthew, Luke’s performance is far more clarifying and interpretive, interlaced, as it were, with commentary (as 48e).²⁰ Quite likely, he, or his predecessors, reoriented the parable skillfully to a more Hellenistic audience and circumstance. Luke does not reflect Galilean weather

conditions or building procedures. His emphasis upon digging deeply undoubtedly served the good

Quite likely, [Luke], or his predecessors, reoriented the parable skillfully to a more Hellenistic audience and circumstance.

purpose of encouraging disciples to master the SP. The Lukan portrayal turns not on the location of the

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house site, but on preparation of the foundation. Bovon creatively suggests, concerning the digging of the foundation, "This probably illustrates for Luke the decisive first burst of faith, μετάνοια [*metanoia*]." ²¹ Both parables do concern the critical function of a house's foundation when tested.

Luke effectively reaches out to his readers. As the crowd came to hear and be healed by Jesus (6:18), so Luke or his tradition seems to have added "the one coming to him" (6:47a). ²² While Jesus took the initiative and called disciples to do mission with him (Luke 5:1-12), here Luke projects volunteers coming to Jesus for training in discipleship. In his context, Luke may well have envisioned disciples who went on mission as itinerants and others being discipled and serving locally. In any event, "the one coming to him" may have been existentially riveting to some inquirers. Strikingly in Luke and elsewhere (1), sinners such as tax collectors *come* to Jesus (5:29), (2) parents on behalf of the sick *come* to Jesus for healing (9:41; 15:25), (3) parents bringing children *come* (19:14), and (4) hostile authorities *come* to Jesus and challenge his authority (20:2). Perhaps importantly for Luke 6:46-49, the would-be followers come to Jesus (9:57-62).

If the persons saying "Lord, Lord" at 6:46a were disciples in name but not yet in active reality of embodying the SP, then this expressed both for Jesus and Luke an intolerable inconsistency. This context may elucidate the term "Lord" as neither something cosmic and post-Easter nor merely a common title, but a relationship with Jesus as disciple that implied radical obedience. Thus, vv. 46 and 49 function as a kind of *inclusio*. Luke 6:46 may be more original.

Redaction in the Matthaean Performance (Matt 7:24-27)

Though signs of redaction are far less apparent in Matthew, several words are frequently flagged. ²³ First of all the inferential οὖν (*oun*, "therefore," 7:24a), plays a pivotal role since it "draws the conclusion with view to all that has been said beginning with 5:3." ²⁴ This opens the possibility of the SM as an intentional compendium or epitome, at least for Matthew's gospel and



perhaps for Q/Matt and even earlier.²⁵ The word τούτους (*toutous*, “these,” 26a) also singles out more emphatically than Luke 6:46 the necessary obedience in particular to the SM, heightening its intrinsic importance! While numerous critical scholars also attribute the reference to wise and foolish persons to the evangelist, this is highly questionable. Jeremias, crediting Preisker, took the

wise person in context quite dynamically as the one who recognized the eschatological situation.²⁶ I think it very likely that these categories precede Matthew inasmuch as the parable is itself so inherently sapiential.²⁷ The expression “for it had been founded upon the rock” (7:25) could also be a later commentary. These questions lead on to the more urgent issue of authenticity.

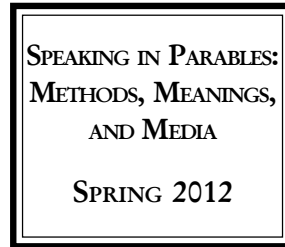
Authenticity

Not only might similarity to rabbinic parables raise questions concerning authenticity, but the apparent emphasis upon judgment has caused some critics to pronounce the text as lacking dominical credentials. In particular the Jesus Seminar tradition, though assigning the text to Q, consigns it to a black color as lacking the character of Jesus, being not only reminiscent of rabbinic lore, but also stressing the final judgment considered uncharacteristic of Jesus.²⁸ The motif of eschatological warning in Q, however, seems far too widespread to be so easily jettisoned.

The near pristine character of the Matthean performance speaks for authenticity. Grundmann calls attention to its classic antithetic structure, its poetic force and originality, and its belonging to the oldest layer of the tradition.²⁹ Luz reckons that it is linguistically closer to the Semitic narrative style, reflects a rural Palestinian setting, and so could easily derive from Jesus.³⁰ One might add that the developing weather of torrential rain, wind, and rivers fits a Galilean context, as do building options on sand or rock, both prominent around Capernaum. Could we be near the *ipssima verba* of Jesus in Matthew’s performance? The elements of sand and rock function as superb opposites given their inherent difference. As to continuity, connections to rabbinic lore abound as previously indicated, but as to discontinuity, both with Judaism and some post-Easter faith, the parable contains an unparalleled emphasis not merely on the authority of Torah, but on a kind of new Torah based upon the expressed authoritative teaching of

Could we be near the
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Jesus. As to coherence, considerable parallels can be found to other parables such as Mark 4:1-9 and Matt 25:31-46. The relation to a constellation of insistences upon active doing also represents a strong coherence as do common formal literary characteristics with other parables. This prudential parable with a strong eschatological orientation can fit the reconstruction of Jesus as sage in the current “Jewish Jesus” era.³¹



One might comment in passing that the two accounts of this parable represent potential support for the new model of the oral tradition that puts the eyewitnesses back into the picture and keeps them around as guarantors.³²

Literary Analysis

The next step can well be toward the literary analysis of the Matthaean performance in particular.

Genre

While we have used the designation *parable*, some scholars prefer to designate our text as a similitude, even a proverb, or more frequently as a double parable,³³ a categorization that picks up in this instance on the antithetic parallelism.³⁴ While each segment of this parable could be fashioned to stand alone, parables of Jesus characteristically utilize internal juxtaposition,³⁵ sometimes called *synkrisis*. Of course, the comparative “like” very often introduces a parable. In Matthew the kingdom of heaven parable, for example, often begins with ὁμοία (*homoia*, “like”) in such texts as 13:31, 33, 44, 45; 20:1 and in Luke 13:18, 19, 21. This type of parable, along with others of Jesus, tends toward the general situational—that is, an event that predictably could be repeated over and over with similar outcome.³⁶

Narrative Stages

A slow reading of the parable turns up mini-scenes or stages of the story. Act I (Matt 7:24cd-25), as it were, contains three scenes: the building of the house on the rock (7:24cd), the coming of the storm (7:25abcd), and the standing of the house (7:25e). The coming of the storm, like a cartoon with frames, in turn has the stage of the rain, the rivers, the winds, and the cumulative strike force against the newly built house. Act II includes the building of the house on the sand (7:26cd), the coming of the storm (7:26abcd),



the cumulative strike force against the newly built house (7:27e), and the great fall of the house (7:27fg). Despite the admitted brevity, the text demarcates narrative stages that may be visualized individually. The Lukan performance additionally would require a scene regarding digging (6:48bcd).

Rhetoric of the Parable

One should note the passion to persuade, the pastoral intent to protect, the desire to motivate and to invite change, and the willingness to warn prophetically by laying out a stark choice. From the side of epideictic rhetoric, we recognize the desire then to encourage, to bolster the disciples' endurance, to deepen commitments to core values, and to utilize the oratory of praise and blame. Jesus urges in effect a positive verdict as in juridical rhetoric. He dares to awaken. [Jesus] dares to awaken. Bovon speaks of the closing verses of the SP as "a very serious parting shot, emphasizing the highest degree of human accountability . . ." ³⁷ The text also functions in an advisory capacity and focuses on future benefits as deliberative rhetoric.

Metaphors in the Matthaean Performance

Although the story holds together inherently, in context and beyond, it marshals several evocative metaphors. Jesus himself as a τέκτων (*tektôn*, "builder, carpenter" [Matt 13:55]), who might have built houses in Nazareth and Sepphoris, would have been skilled in the use of wood, stone, and possibly metal,³⁸ thus bringing forward out of experience a building story. Firstly, building a house can be used literally and figuratively.³⁹ Significantly, building a house and wisdom are sometimes associated (Prov 9:1; 14:1; 24:3). In the context of SM and of Matt 7:21, building suggests not only constructing a life, but specifically a life of discipleship.⁴⁰

Secondly, the building of a life upon a rock, a good foundation, functions metaphorically as well as narratively. The image of a rock reverberates in Matthew,⁴¹ appearing not only in the narrative proper (7:24d), but also in the interpretive aside (7:25f). The foundational rock becomes the critical factor whether the house withstands the storm or collapses. "The Word of Christ," observed Cullmann, "is the only foundation of the existence of the community."⁴² Luke went out of his way to stress the foundation, both its preparation in digging into the rock (6:48de) and in the interpretive aside that it was not strong enough because it was not well built (6:48hi).

Additionally, as if to leave the import in no doubt, he appended “without foundation” to invalidate the second builder (6:49b). Luke, for all his leeway in the telling, left his readers in no doubt about the faulty foundation, concurring ultimately with the basic intent in Matthew.

The calamitous rains that turn into rivulets flooding wadis on mountain sides and winds that

The calamitous rains that turn into rivulets flooding wadis on mountain sides and winds that pound everything in their path could suggest the duress of persecution.

pound everything in their path could suggest the duress of persecution. It would certainly fit the persecution beatitude (Matt 5:10-12; Luke 6:22-23). In Luke’s version the disciple is hated, excluded, reviled, and his or her name cast out (6:22), while Matthew’s rendition speaks of persecution, being reviled, and false evil accusations (5:10-11). Still later

in the SM the issue of persecution persists as it urges the disciple to love enemies and pray for those who persecute (5:44). One could even say that the segment on love of enemies shows how to cope with persecution.

The imagery of falling is dramatically emphatic in both accounts. Matthew stresses it not only with the matter of fact “did not fall,” but also with the explanatory “for it had been founded upon the rock” (7:25). Luke only generalizes about the standing of the first house with the comment that it was built well (6:48), but says of the house built on the ground that it was “without foundation” (6:49c). Both stories imply a judgment upon the builder who built on the sand or ground and connect the falling with the faulty foundation. Both evangelists include the proverbial final touch on the greatness of the fall.⁴³

Another parable focused on right hearing depicts three soils that did not bear fruit (Matt 13:3-9; Luke 8:5-8). One observes that Matt 13:6 explicitly notes the absence of sufficient roots (also Mark 4:6), loosely parallel to the rock. The explanation of the parable explicitly mentions tribulation and persecution. The explanation also speaks of the cares of the world and delight in riches. The issue of perseverance is spelled out (Matt 13:21b; Mark 4:17b), and Luke more brazenly says “they believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away” (8:13ef). These accounts mention falling away as a reaction to persecution (Matt 13:21d; Mark 4:17d; Luke 8:13g). Granted, the Greek verb for “fall away” in the Sower parable is not precisely the same as the falling of the house (Matt 7:27ef; Luke 6:49d);⁴⁴ but this parallel opens a distinct possibility of a connection. Could the “fall” represent various forms of final failure in discipleship (cf. Matt 7:13; Luke 8:13)—giving up one’s faith? Both parables, the Sower and the Two Foundations, deal with hearing,

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though the interpretation in Matthew centers on “understanding” (13:19, 23) as critical, while the Two Foundations insists upon “doing.” Both parables may address would-be disciples. The testing of disciples under stressful conditions belongs to the intent of the parable.

Having staked out this line of interpretation, I realize that it may not be complete. A bevy of first-rate scholars take the parable of the Two Foundations as directly related to the last judgment.⁴⁵ Considerations favorable to this opinion include the eschatological context at Matthew 7:13-27, especially 7:22, along with numerous eschatological warnings in SM/SP and Q, storm language in the Old Testament (Isa 8:7-8; Ezek 38:22), emphasis upon the greatness of the fall, and parallels with texts like Matt 25:31-46. We do well to concur with David Hill, who reckons with the eschatological but allows that “the testing of the foundations may take place at any time throughout life as well.”⁴⁶

The Imperative of Doing

Jülicher referenced the stark alternative of the parable as follows: “ποιεῖν [*poiein*] [or] πίπτειν (*piptein*)” (“to do or to fall”).⁴⁷ The verb “to do” occurs 19 times in Q, all but 6 times in the Sermon. Careful reading of the SM turns up both doing and not doing reiterated insistently. This is rather remarkable given the parable with its two wings of doing and not doing. In both the SM and the SP, it is not simply a matter of failure to do the teachings of Jesus, but doing things contrary.

What not to do in SM includes not putting your light under a bushel (5:15), not relaxing the commandments and so teaching (5:19), not killing or being angry with your brother/sister (5:22), not committing adultery or looking lustfully (5:27-30), not divorcing ((5:31-32), not retaliating (5:38-42), not hating enemies (5:43), not giving alms, praying or fasting in public to be seen (6:1-18), not laying up treasures on earth (6:19), not serving two masters (6:24), not being anxious about your life (6:25-34), not judging others (7:1-5), not throwing pearls before swine (7:6), not entering the wide gate (7:13-14), and not following false prophets (7:15).

The overt stress on doing appears in several programmatic verses. Early on in the SM those who may *do* and teach the law and prophets as fulfilled by Jesus will be called great in the kingdom of heaven (5:19). Then famously and climactically at 7:12, whatever you wish that others would *do* (ποιῶσιν [*poiōsin*]) for you thus *do* (ποιεῖτε [*poieite*]) for them. At 7:21 the emphasis falls squarely upon “doing the will of my father,” the will of the father

revealed in the words of Jesus as he fulfilled the law and prophets. The Lord's Prayer concerns the passion for the will of God as revealed in Jesus to appear (Matt 6:10). Crucially, the *doing*, in the Lord's Prayer and these texts, stands in the closest association with the kingdom.

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Given the persistent insistence on *doing* as the burden of the SM, what does it look like? One can dispense with the mystery or vagueness. To draw from Luke, it includes loving your enemies, doing good to those who hate you, blessing and praying for them, turning the other cheek, giving your garment, and giving alms (6:28-30). It is about doing good to others, including these least likely (6:32-35). To draw from the SP, we would add being poor in spirit, meek, and mourning, being merciful, being peacemakers, and being salt and light on mission.

This imperative of doing mandated by both the parable and numerous texts in SM/SP is well urged in the obligation for the disciples to begin to let their light shine in front of people so everyone can see the good deeds and glorify the father in heaven (Matt 5:16).

Conclusions

This analysis concludes that the parable is essentially authentic, that it stood in a commanding position in the inaugural sermon of Jesus, that Luke's tradition in particular made changes to communicate with a more Hellenistic context, that the Matthean performance reflects a Galilean context and evokes

... the true disciple must not only hear but act. . . .	through its images that foundations are pivotal, that the true disciple must not only hear but act, and that would-be disciples will face duress. Hence, disciples must base their existence on the teachings of Jesus, particularly the SM/SP. The fall
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happened because of a faulty foundation. The parable limits its focus to the aspect of building related to the choice of foundation and so is best referred to as "Of Rock or Sand" or simply as "Two Foundations." The would-be disciple inflicts on herself a fall that can be avoided. The parable intends to alarm and awaken. The rock is not merely the person of Jesus but focuses upon the SM/SP, though the context reflects a personal relation to Jesus as a disciple (Luke 6:46). The parable does not so much call attention to itself as



to the SM/SP. The SM/SP provides the disciples' foundation that proves sufficient in the storms of life.

Hermeneutical Ruminations

The authority Jesus asserts in the parable as well as the SM/SP is astounding and supports substantially the reported reaction of the crowds as referenced in Matt 7:29. Jesus spoke both parable and SM/SP with an extraordinary confidence in their binding truth.

The parable alerts the contemporary Christian and church to the absolute necessity to give the SM/SP a higher profile, perhaps to make it required catechesis in preparation for baptism. It makes one wonder if Christians should commit it to memory or virtually so. Furthermore, the SM/SP can function as a heuristic device for the Christian in the sense of providing a kingdom perspective for the world, evaluating personal values, the priorities and program of the church, and even the foreign policy of nations. Disciples are held accountable to Jesus' inaugural sermon.

You and I Have a Choice

We can choose rock or sand for the foundation of our lives. Both the priest and Levite made one kind of choice and the Samaritan another in the parable of the Compassionate Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37). If we do not obey, the world will not benefit from our salt and light. Strecker writes of "a graphically executed call to decision."⁴⁸

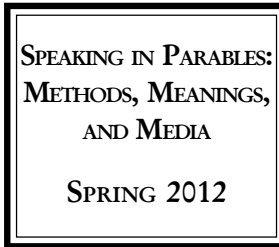
You and I May Slip and Slide

The expectations of the SM/SP are sky high. We may fail miserably on occasion. We may succeed partially sometimes as we approximate and grow. In dependence on grace, we may be heroic on occasion. The original disciples could fail dismally, from betraying to denying Jesus, to squabbling over power and position, to fleeing. They could also stand up at Pentecost and preach, and risk a new vision like Stephen and go on mission.

The original disciples could fail dismally, from betraying to denying Jesus, to squabbling over power and position, to fleeing. They could also stand up at Pentecost and preach, and risk a new vision like Stephen and go on mission.

You and I Can Change Course

In the Jesus story about the two sons, one refused to obey his father and work in the vineyard, and then changed his mind and went. Unfortunately, the other son promised to obey and then did not (Matt 21:28-32).



You and I Will Encounter Storms

Those of us who do the words of Jesus are not spared the storm as the two examples indicate. The storms may not be just diagnosis and disease and death; we may also encounter storms of anxiety about survival needs, sexual temptations, and criticism of our mission. One of my students, Mike Glover, wrote in his paper, "The rains, floods and winds are all symbolic of the opposition and violent reaction against these countercultural teachings." The winds will blow. It occurs to me that the hymn "The Solid Rock" is missing a critical verse:

I dare not trust the
sinking sand but give
myself to his
command.

Jesus' demand is nothing less
than for us to do His righteousness;
I dare not trust the sinking sand
but give myself to his command.

¹ Hereafter Sermon on the Mount as SM and Sermon on the Plain as SP.

² See Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 70-80. He considers the category of sermon too broad. He notes rightly that Matthew calls the SM "the sayings" (7:24, 26) and "the teaching" (5:19). Luke 7:1 calls the SP "the pronouncements." Jesus is teacher at Luke 6:40.

³ See Marcus Dods, James Moffatt, and James Denney, *The Literal Interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, nd). These essays were originally published in the *British Weekly* in 1904 (reprinted by BiblioLife). See also Dale Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount* (New York: Crossroads, 1999), 9-15.

⁴ See discussion by Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, trans. W.C. Linz (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 221-23. He rightly challenges the Reformation notion of the unfulfillability of the SM (221).



⁵ In the OT, both Lev 26:1-46 and Deut 28:1-68; 30:15-20 end with blessings and curses.

⁶ See the invaluable synopsis by James Robinson, Paul Hoffman and John Kloppenborg, eds., *The Critical Edition of Q* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000). It represents extensive spadework by an international team and provides a superb platform for further study. Note the convenient concordance.

⁷ Matt 7:13-14 is parallel at Luke 13:24, and Matt 7:21-24 at Luke 13:25-27; hence, all four texts of the Matthaean eschatological epilogue stood in Q but not all in the SP. The Lukan format is the more likely setting in the life of Jesus. Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, rev. ed., trans. S.H. Hooke (New York: Scribner's, 1963), 195, reads 13:24 as disciples needing the courage to cut themselves off from the masses and to walk the *Via Dolorosa* with the little flock (7:13f).

⁸ Georg Strecker, *The Sermon on the Mount*, trans. O.C. Dean (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 219n, calls attention both to the day of Yahweh's judgment in the OT (Isa 2:11, 17) and also in the NT (Matt 24:36; 26:69; Rom 2:16; Acts 17:31). The reference to Matt 26:69 appears to be a misprint. See also Luke 6:23a, 10:12, and 21:34 in particular.

⁹ Robert Gundry, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 127.

¹⁰ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1991), 114n, also references Hellenistic philosophy as Seneca, *Moral Epistles* 20:1 and *Sentences of Sextus* 177.

¹¹In Herbert Danby, ed., *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 452.

¹² Quoted in Strecker, *Sermon on the Mount*, 170. Strecker dates the Elisha text to 120 CE and the Eleazar passage to 100 CE.

¹³ This is not to say that the words of Jesus obviate the Torah, certainly not for the "Antitheses" (Matt 5:21-48). Indeed, for Matthew, Jesus came to fulfill the Torah (5:17). Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*, trans. E.J. Sharpe (Lund: Gleerup, 1961), 327, takes the position not only that Jesus did in fact come to fulfill, but also that "he wished to transform the pre-messianic Torah into the messianic Torah." Gerhardsson's study remains underestimated.

¹⁴ See the discussion of Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 334; also Harvey McArthur and Robert Johnson, *They Also Taught in Parables* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 184-85.

¹⁵ This may not be Lukan but a variation in oral performance before his version of Q was settled. Jeremias, *Die Sprache des Lukasevangeliums* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980), 150, took the position that the Greek was not Lukan. See Edward Robinson, *Biblical Researches in Palestine, and in Adjacent Regions* (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1856), 2:338, who mentioned staying in a new house. The owner had dug down thirty feet to build on rock.

¹⁶ This comment is clearly Lukan. Note extensive usage at 8:43; 13:24; 14:6, 29, 30; 16:3; 20:26; also in Acts 6:10; 15:10; 19:16, 20; 25:7; 27:16.

¹⁷ See Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 194. A river overflowing its banks is “an unlikely occurrence in Palestine.” Ironically, the identification of the water with the Deluge advocated by Jeremias, generally unaccepted, fits Luke’s diction best, but Jeremias himself rejects the Lukan reconstruction. Cf. 1 Cor 11:26.

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¹⁸ See the helpful chart by Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 331. He does seem to downplay the considerable differences. See comments by Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 559, including his opinion that the redactional activity evident in both accounts was most likely pre-Synoptic, even before Q/Matt and Q/Luke.

¹⁹ Francois Bovon, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*, trans. Christine Thomas (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 255, considered the “immediately” an over-dramatization. Jeremias, *Die Sprache des Lukasevangeliums*, 150-51, took the position that the word is not Lukan since Luke leaves out the numerous Markan usages.

²⁰ This explanation is Lukan. In support of this reading, see Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971), 142.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. J. Marsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 173, hazarded the idea that both “the one coming to me” and “I will show you” may have stood in Q, though admitting this does not settle whether it went back to Jesus. Coupled with Luke 7:1, it appears likely that Luke 6:47a included would-be disciples among the hearers of the SP as well as called disciples (6:20).

²³ As Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 451. He also singles out τούτους (*toutous* [24a, 26a]), ὅστις (*hostis* [24c]), and probably ἀνδρὶ φρονίμῳ (*andri phronimō* [24b]) and ἀνδρὶ μωρῷ (*mōrō* [26c]). See also Strecker, *Sermon on the Mount*, 169.

²⁴ Robert Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Waco: Word, 1979), 403. In context, this “therefore” is as pivotal as at Rom 12:1. John Paul Heil, *Matthew’s Parables* (Washington: Catholic Biblical Association, 1998), 32, adds perceptively the possibility that it excludes teaching of the false prophets (v. 15). The Greek οὖν (*oun*) is not in the Lukan parallel.

²⁵ See Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount*, trans. L.L. Welborn (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 12-16, who sees the SM as an epitome pre-existing Matthew. Indeed, Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 561, thinks that the SM was written down immediately but used as “a manual for oral instruction.” One suspects that Jesus himself reiterated it in whole or in part. Disciples may have used portions of the SM/SP while on mission.

²⁶ Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 194.

²⁷ T.W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1961), 61, preferred Luke’s “man” to “wise man” in Matt because the narrative “shows plainly enough that one is wise and the other foolish,” opposite to my argument above. It is true that only Matt utilized the



wise and foolish alternative in parable as also in Matt 25:2, 4, 8, 9, but Luke did use φρονίμως (*phronimōs*) in a parable (Luke 16:8). Observe in Matt 25 that women can be wise persons. Extensive Q sayings reference wisdom. Certainty here is not obtainable. See Sir 14:20–15:6, where in contrast to the wise, the foolish are prideful; cf. also 2 Enoch 52. Alexander DiLella, “Wisdom of Ben Sira,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 5, 937, comments, “Personal behavior distinguishes the wise from the foolish (21:11–22:5). Weep for the fool; he is worse off than the dead (22:11-12).”

²⁸ Robert Funk, Roy Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 159. See James Robinson, *Jesus according to the Earliest Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 119, who takes the position that the redaction of Q superimposed a judgmental slant. A considerable academic force centers currently on a stratigraphical approach yielding three layers of Q (Q1, Q2, Q3), John Kloppenborg being particularly influential. See his *The Formation of Q* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999). Christopher Tuckett, *Q and the History of Early Christianity* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), resists the simple identification of Q with the sapiential.

²⁹ Walter Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Mattheus* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1981), 242.

³⁰ Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 452. Graham Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 304, deemed Matthew’s account “more carefully structured and rhythmic.” Guelich, *Sermon on the Mount*, 411, observed that Luke lacks the sharp antithetical parallelism of Matthew’s construction.

³¹ See James Charlesworth, ed., *Jesus’ Jewishness* (New York: Crossroads, 1998); and monographs from Jewish scholars David Flusser, *The Sage from Galilee* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); and Geza Vermes, *Jesus in His Jewish Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

³² See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 240-63. He rightly credits Kenneth Bailey. Scholars as influential as N.T. Wright and James Dunn also embrace a version of this model.

³³ See Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 451; Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 90; Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 259; Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus*, 61. Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 558, takes the position that it “stands between a parable and an allegory,” as a similitude supplied with its own interpretation.

³⁴ The antithetical belongs to the SM itself as in 5:21-48, 6:1-16, 7:13-27!

³⁵ See Peter Rhea Jones, *Studying the Parables of Jesus* (Smyth & Helwys, 1999), 22.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 51-52.

³⁷ Bovon, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*, 254.

³⁸ “τέκτων,” Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 45.9.

³⁹ See Siegfried Warner, “*banah*,” *TDOT*, 2:166-181, who points out that *banah* not only has extensive usage literally of building houses (Gen 33:17; Deut 8:12; 20:5; 22:8; 28:30), even rules for new houses (Deut 22:8; 20:5), but also played an important role figuratively in conveying theological ideas.

⁴⁰ “Builders” can be used as a description for students in rabbinic lore. So Otto Michel, “οἰκοδομέω,” *TDNT*, 5:137. He also noted that “building” can be apocalyptic and messianic.

⁴² Cullmann, “πέτρα,” *TDNT*, 6:97, who himself may have meant the Pauline connotation primarily. See also K.L. Schmidt, “θεμέλιος,” *TDNT*, 3:63-64.

⁴³ See Philo’s *De Ebrietate* 38.156, where in his essay “On Drunkenness” he pictures a drunkard who falls down and is not able to stand back up and labels it a great fall (μέγα πτώσις πιπτούσιν [*mega ptōsis piptousin*]). Also in his essay *De Migratione Abrahami* 15.80, “The Migrations of Abraham,” Philo commented about speech lacking clarity and stepping on empty air and having a bad fall (μέγα πτώσις ἔπεσεν [*mega ptōsis epesen*]). In both these instances, the person involved is not able to recover from the fall.

⁴⁴ In the interpretation of the Sower (Matt 13:21d) the Greek verb is σκανδελίζεται house falling συνέπεσεν (*synepesen*) in Luke 6:49d, meaning “fell” or “collapsed.” In Matt 7:25e, 27e the simpler ἔπεσεν (*epesen*) means “fell” and the noun πτώσις (*ptōsis* [7:27f]) means “fall.” Of course, scholars contest the source of this explanation of the parable, but it is in any event relevant for the evangelists.

⁴⁵ See Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 194; Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 453; Tuckett, *Q and the History of Early Christianity*, 142; Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 335; Strecker, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 171-72, and numerous others.

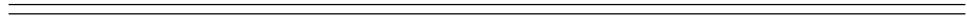
⁴⁶ David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Greenwood: Attic, 1972), 153.

⁴⁷ Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 267.

⁴⁸ Strecker, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 170.

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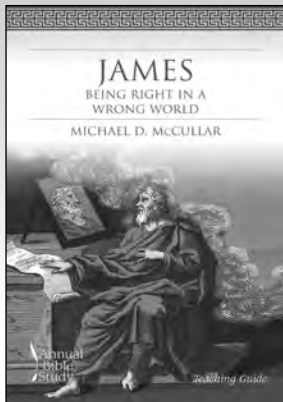
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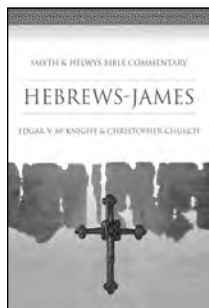
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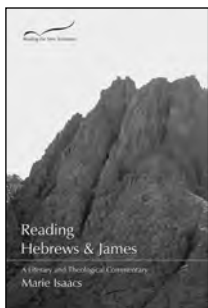


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2 Samuel 12:1-15: How (Not) To Read a Parable

By Jonathan A. Kruschwitz*

As a plant takes root in fertile soil, so a parable takes root in its context. Context holds a parable in place and imparts to it a specific meaning. Even so, Jesus' parables commonly suffer the fate of dislocation. Uprooted from their original narrative habitat and packaged personably into sermons and faith reflections, they are grafted into new contexts, and their meaning is pruned to address their respective audiences directly.¹

Perhaps the parables of Jesus lie particularly prone to displacement from their narrative context because there is little that keeps them fastened therein. In particular, the Gospel narrator rarely provides extended details of a parable's afterlife: how it was received or what consequent effect it had on its audience. The parable thus remains vulnerable to a generation-hopping "leakage" of communication: the contemporary listener hears herself addressed in any "you" that falls from Jesus' lips.² Like a Pevensie child who has fallen into the world of Narnia, the listener falls into the world of the parable.

Can a parable not survive and bear fruit outside of its intended context?

But is it so wrong for a listener to fall into the world of a parable and hear himself addressed by Jesus? Can a parable not survive and bear fruit outside of its intended context?

The Old Testament "Parable"

The Old Testament, oddly enough, engages these questions more clearly than its counterpart. On the surface, looking into the Old Testament for information about parables seems counterintuitive. The Greek word παραβολή (*parabolē*) has no direct lexical equivalent in biblical Hebrew. But the lack of a signifier does not necessarily indicate a lack of the signified.

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Most scholars agree: Jesus' parables center on an analogy, a similarity or comparison drawn between one or more points of resemblance.³ The closest correspondent to παραβολή (*parabolē*) in the Old Testament is מָשַׁל (*mashal*), the root of which means similarity or comparison.⁴ So while *parabolē* and *mashal* lack an explicit lexical connection,⁵ they do share a similar meaning. In addition, they both

appear predominantly within contexts of confrontation and judgment, and often in a prophetic voice.⁶ These correspondences, joined with the fact that Jesus clearly drew inspiration from the Old Testament, suggest that the *mashal* represents the primary forebear of Jesus' *parabolē*.⁷

In the past few decades, scholarship has increasingly understood *mashal* as a label of function rather than form. A *mashal* is not so much a genre as it is a function of any number of genres—taunts, riddles, short stories, proverbs, and various other forms of communication. The *mashal*, whatever genre it invokes, *functions* to draw a comparison. One might therefore consider the parable to be a subset of the *mashal*. The parable qualifies as a *mashal* by its analogical function, and it tends to invoke the specific genre of the short story. Thus, in the language of Old Testament exegesis, one might best classify a parable as a “short story *mashal*.”⁸

So how might looking at an Old Testament “parable,” or short story *mashal*, benefit our endeavor to observe the relationship between a parable and its intended context? As Jesus' parable of the sower suggests, a parable draws a comparison for the express purpose of being heard and bearing fruit (Mark 4:20). The Gospel narrator, however, often neglects to provide details of how a parable fares—how, or even if, it bears fruit. The parable thus does not take enduring root in its narrative context. It falls prey to being uprooted and replanted in a variety of different situations. Such is not always the case, however. In the Old Testament, the story of Nathan's confrontation of David affords one the distinct opportunity to examine a “parable” rooted firmly within a specific situation and in direct dialogue with its audience.

... the story of Nathan's confrontation of David affords one the distinct opportunity to examine a “parable” rooted firmly within a specific situation and in direct dialogue with its audience.

Nathan's Story, David's Response, and Reality Revealed

Immediately before Nathan presents his renowned fable to David,⁹ the narrator exercises his storytelling omniscience and drops a seemingly casual,

but rather telling, observation: “The thing that David had done displeased the Lord” (2 Sam 11:27).¹⁰ It does not take a moral authority to know that what David has just done—lying with Bathsheba and having her husband, Uriah, killed—is wrong. Underneath the narrator’s words, however, lies the prosecution of not just anyone, but the Lord. The audience can now confidently expect some sort of reprimand or punishment for David. The context for Nathan’s divinely ordered visit to David stands quite clear.

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Scholars remain divided on whether David hears Nathan’s story as real or fictive.¹¹ Our concern, however, is not how David hears the story, but how the story engages David’s interest and provokes a response. Nathan casts his tale specifically in the wake of David’s misdeeds with Uriah and Bathsheba, and David—unsuspecting of the story’s intention—bites.

Aware of the context for Nathan’s visit, the audience can perceive the basic analogy that Nathan’s story makes. Just as the rich man takes the poor man’s ewe-lamb, David has taken Uriah’s wife. David obviously misses this comparison. Oblivious to the context of Nathan’s visit, he does not detect Nathan’s indictment. David’s initial reception of Nathan’s story exemplifies

A parable not heard as
a parable cannot
function as a parable.

how a parable without context can mean anything—or nothing at all. If David does grasp the analogical function of the story, he clearly analogizes differently than Nathan.¹² Conversely, it remains quite possible that David has not even an inkling that the story intends to draw a

comparison, in which case the story remains just that—a meaningless story. A parable not heard as a parable cannot function as a parable.

Perhaps like a listener in the pew who hears an isolated parable of Jesus and either misappropriates its meaning or dismisses its relevance, David “misreads” Nathan’s story. But herein lies a strange twist of events. Although David misconstrues the intended meaning of Nathan’s story, he nonetheless enters into dialogue with the story: he *responds* to the story. And by crossing that threshold between listener and participant, he leaves himself vulnerable to the story’s biting thrust.

[A parable] disarmingly
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attention away from
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A parable aims initially to engage the listener’s interest, and therein resides its power: it disarmingly draws the listener’s attention away from himself even as it lures him into the story.¹³ Whether or not David understands Nathan’s story as an analogy, he is hooked by its depiction of wrongdoing. Nathan leaves the tale of injustice



unresolved, like a door left wide open, and David cannot help but step in. But once he enters the story, he is swept into the story's currents. After David confidently declares judgment against the rich man, the narrator, Nathan, identifies David's character—"You are the man!"—thus capsizing David's understanding of the story and, more importantly, the reality to which it points. Hugh Pypers articulates

well how the story overturns David's perspective: "David leaps into the unresolved gap between the rich man and the poor man in the story, appointing himself to the role of the just judge who will redress this imbalance, only to be told that the role he really plays is that of the unscrupulous oppressor."¹⁴

Nathan's story reflects David's reality.¹⁵ Thus, stepping into Nathan's story world compels David to confront his own reality—and not just its past, but also its future. Like the rich man of Nathan's narrative, David has wrecked a family unit through his selfish actions.¹⁶ And just as David has angrily pronounced judgment against the rich man, so he will receive judgment. After Nathan startlingly reveals David's identity as the oppressor, he predicates all that shall befall David's house: the sword will never depart from it, and David's neighbor will lie with his wives (2 Sam 12:11-12). David's subsequent repentance does not lead Nathan to retract his pronouncement, but instead to add, almost as an afterthought, that David's child by Bathsheba will die. Pypers makes a compelling case that this last consequence results from the oath that David angrily proclaims against the rich man (or rather himself): "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this is a son of death" (2 Sam 12:5).¹⁷ In other words, David's utterance unintentionally draws a connection between son and death that he is helpless to revoke.

Regardless of any correlation between David's oath and his son's death, there lies an uncanny correspondence between Nathan's story and David's life. Nathan's story centers on a man who shatters a family. The story obviously echoes David's own actions toward Uriah's family. But beyond these echoes, it also prefigures the collapse of David's own family. As Nathan's words indicate, David's house will fall prey to perfidy and infighting. Across the fabric of David's life weaves a rough thread of family disjunction. Nathan's story serves as a window into this reality, both its history and its future.

David as Model and Warning: How (Not) To Read a Parable

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Whether Nathan's story satisfies one's definition of parable, it models excellently how a parable requires the context of its surrounding reality to function properly. At first, David receives Nathan's

. . . Nathan's story . . .
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reality to function properly.

story with no regard

for its context, and accordingly, his interpretation falls askew of Nathan's intended communication. But by responding to Nathan's story, he enters it. Once inside, he confronts the reality of the story translated to the reality of his life. The story points to the

truth that he wrecks families, both his own and others', in the future as well as in the past.

Perhaps the questions posed initially—Is it so wrong for a listener to fall into the world of a parable? Can a parable not bear fruit outside its intended context?—misunderstand the nature of a parable. A parable *is* to be fallen into. But once a listener has fallen into the world of the parable, context is paramount. Only when a parable is rooted properly in its intended context

. . . once a listener has
fallen into the world of
the parable, context is
paramount.

does it produce its intended comparison, and then only if the listener apprehends that context. Only after David learns that Nathan's story is also his story does he understand Nathan's message. And even then, it remains debatable whether Nathan's message bears any fruit: after David's initial repentance, he continues to live dangerously, and

his family does indeed crumble under selfishness and the struggle for power.

Commendable is David's willingness to respond to Nathan's story, to enter the story himself. Less laudable, and a caution to all who follow his proper first step, is what ensues. First misreading the story with a blind eye to the reality in which it is grounded, and then continuing to live within that bleak reality, David seemingly fails to digest Nathan's message. A man after God's own heart but also all-too-human, David serves in many ways as both model and warning for a person of faith.¹⁸ His reception of Nathan's "parable" is no exception.



¹ Some readers argue that the Gospel writers themselves have uprooted Jesus' parables and planted them into new contexts. Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 34, counters this claim, however, by indicating that the writers would have preserved the general context of Jesus' parables even as they tweaked and rearranged the parables to accord meaningfully with the

larger thematic context of the narrative: "At least for most of the parables . . . the context provided by the Evangelists is not a distortion but the necessary help needed to understand them."

² Hugh Pyper, *David as Reader: 2 Samuel 12:1-15 and the Poetics of Fatherhood* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 93, reminds us, "Linguistic communication always has the potential for . . . leakage": a "you" can address anyone within hearing distance.

³ Snodgrass, *Stories*, 9, summarizes the nature of a parable: "In most cases then a *parable* is an expanded analogy An analogy explicitly or implicitly draws one or more points of resemblance" (emphasis original).

⁴ Jeremy Schipper, *Parables and Conflict in the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 2.

⁵ Snodgrass, *Stories*, 10, does note that the Septuagint most often translates מָשַׁל (*mashal*) as παραβολή (*parabolē*). This correlation indicates that the writers of the Septuagint perceived a basic connection between the two words.

⁶ Snodgrass, *Stories*, 40-42, cites Claus Westermann, *The Parables of Jesus in Light of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1990), 2, 20-112, in remarking that the majority of comparisons and parables in the Old Testament occur in contexts of judgment and indictment. He further observes that Jesus' use of parables resembles prophetic usage in its manner of confronting the listener.

⁷ Snodgrass, *Stories*, 38, concludes: "If much of [Jesus'] thought and the evidence substantiating his preaching came from the OT, it should occasion no surprise that his method and way of thinking are influenced by it as well."

⁸ Schipper, *Parables*, 1-22, provides an excellent summary of modern scholarship's approach to the *mashal* and offers a helpful perspective on how to classify different variations of the *mashal*.

⁹ Schipper, *Parables*, 43, considers Nathan's story a fable: "The poetic quality, the third-person narration, and the personification of animals in Nathan's story resemble other fables that prophets turn into parables (*fable-mashal*), such as Isa 5:1-6 or Ezek 17:2-10." One should note here that the biblical text never refers to Nathan's story as a *mashal*. The absence of the label, however, does not negate its function. Like any *mashal*, it draws an analogy.

¹⁰ Literally, "what David had done was evil in the eyes of the Lord."

¹¹ Pyper, *David as Reader*, 89-103, summarizes many of the different interpretations of the nature of Nathan's story and how David perceives it.

¹² There abound a variety of interpretations on how David analogizes Nathan's story. Among some of the less conventional interpretations, Schipper, *Parables*, 46-49, persuasively entertains the possibility that David identifies Joab as the rich man, Uriah as the ewe-lamb, Bathsheba as the poor man, and himself as the traveler.

¹³ Snodgrass, *Parables*, 8, states: "The immediate aim of a parable is to be compellingly interesting, and in being interesting it diverts attention and disarms."

¹⁴ Pyper, *David as Reader*, 91.

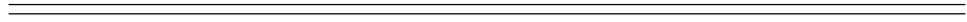
¹⁵ Susan Niditch, *Folklore and the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 86, comments concerning the analogical function of the *mashal*: "The *mashal* provides a model of or a model for reality and points to unresolved tensions and ambivalences in Israelite worldviews."

¹⁶ Schipper, *Parables*, 52, highlights how Nathan's story and David's reality both revolve around the handling, or rather mishandling, of familial dynamics.

¹⁷ Translation mine. Pyper, *David as Reader*, 150-54.

¹⁸ I must attribute the idea of David as a model for reading parables to Hugh Pyper's work, *David as Reader: 2 Samuel 12:1-15 and the Poetics of Fatherhood*, which introduces the idea of David in 2 Sam 12 as a model for reading the biblical text. As Pyper articulates in his introduction, "Readers Like David": "Ultimately, David as reader serves as a model for the complex dynamic interaction between text and reader, utterer and hearer, God and the human community." Convincing in its own scope, this kernel of an idea proves fruitful within the narrower context of parabolic communication and reception, for David indeed demonstrates both how and how not to read a parable.

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Matthew's Parable of the Wedding Feast (Matt 22:1-14)

By Marianne Blickenstaff*

Many readers of the parable of the Wedding Feast (Matt 22:1-14) admit that they are somewhat dismayed by the king's violent reactions that culminate in his expulsion of a guest with no wedding garment. In traditional

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allegorical interpretations, the wedding feast is the eschatological banquet (Isa 25:6-10; cf. Rev 19:7-9), and the king is God, who has a divine prerogative to punish anyone who is unworthy for the Kingdom of Heaven. Thus interpreted, the parable is a sober reminder that no one is guaranteed a place at the feast; anyone may be found wanting up to the very last minute.

This allegorical interpretation explains the king's actions, and yet it is still perplexing, because the king violates several of Jesus' teachings, such as his blessing the merciful and the peacemakers (Matt 5:7-9) and advising his followers to love their enemies (Matt 5:44). In this gospel, Jesus prohibits anger itself, because it is the precursor of murderous actions (Matt 5:21-22). In the context of this gospel's "higher righteousness," this parable portrays a king who does not subscribe to Jesus' program. When interpreted allegorically, God becomes a ruthless monarch who flies into a rage, kills his enemies and burns their city, then mercilessly throws out the unfortunate wedding guest who has worn improper clothing. Such a reading implies that God is no better than any of the violent earthly rulers Matthew's first-century audience knows, and that the Kingdom of Heaven merely replaces one tyranny with another.

Therefore, this essay will resist the allegorical interpretation that God is the retributive king of the parable.¹ To "resist" is not to claim that traditional

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interpretations are wrong, but to explore the possibilities of other layers of meaning within the parable and to offer an alternative reading that can be held in tension and read side by side with traditional interpretations. Because it is the nature of parables to shake up the reader, to cause the reader to see things differently, I propose to read this parable non-allegorically, but in a way that the

historical and literary context of the gospel of Matthew as a whole still supports.²

Sometimes a King is just a King

A compelling reason to resist allegorical interpretations that identify God as the “king” comes from the gospel of Matthew itself, which frequently depicts kings, rulers, and governors as weak, cruel, and self-serving. Herod murders the children of Bethlehem (Matt 2:16), and his successor is a threat (Matt 2:22). Herodias uses her daughter to manipulate Herod Antipas, who orders the beheading of John the Baptist (Matt 14:3-11). Pilate submits to popular opinion and executes an innocent man (Matt 27:15-26).

The original Matthean audience would have found none of this surprising. They were quite familiar with the punitive actions of despots and rulers. Throughout their history as a nation, Israel had been conquered by one tyrant after another. It is more than likely that Matthew’s audience knew that the Roman army had sacked and burned Jerusalem (in 70 CE), a scenario this parable echoes. Given this historical context, it is quite possible that some members of Matthew’s first-century audience heard a subversive message in this parable, a suggestion to resist rather than obey this despotic king.³ Matthew supports this possibility, because immediately following the parable of the wedding feast Matthew relates the controversy over paying taxes to the Roman emperor (Matt 22:15-17). Jesus’ response, to pay Caesar what he is due and the Kingdom of Heaven what it is due, sets the parable in the context of imperial oppression and suggests that hearers must be able to discern where to put their allegiance among earthly and heavenly realms.

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Matthew’s introduction to the parable, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like . . . ,” lends itself to allegorical interpretation, but this introduction also

could point to the circumstances in which the Kingdom currently exists, in a violent world ruled by human tyrants. We could infer, "The *situation* of the Kingdom of Heaven is like . . ." As Jesus explains: "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force" (Matt 11:12). Certainly, these words can be interpreted to mean

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I propose that the "king" does not represent the Kingdom of Heaven at all, but rather is aligned with the powers of this world who oppose the Kingdom of Heaven.

that the time is soon coming when the Kingdom will no longer suffer violence at the hands of worldly powers. But given the Matthean congregation's precarious location—living in the world but anticipating the Kingdom—I propose that the "king" does not represent the Kingdom of Heaven at all, but rather is aligned with the powers of this world who oppose the

Kingdom of Heaven. In this alternative reading the parable's action takes place in the evangelist's present social and theological context (or in ours), in which the Kingdom of Heaven is not yet fulfilled, and in which certain evils of earthly kingdoms must be resisted.

In the first century, many Jews hoped for the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God in a very literal sense: they expected God, or God's Messiah, to come soon to defeat the Roman occupiers and restore the land of Israel to the Jews as a peaceable and holy kingdom on earth. That Matthew depicts Jesus as the Messiah whose coming did not accomplish that literal defeat and restoration possibly indicates (as most interpreters

Jesus, as King of the Jews (Matt 2:2), does not follow the expected pattern of king or warrior-messiah

posit) that Matthew expects Jesus' victory to happen in the future.⁴ Another way of reading the parable is to posit that Matthew has taken Jesus' non-violent example to heart and has rejected the violent overthrow of Rome in favor of the establishment of a

spiritual kingdom that at present co-exists with earthly kingdoms. In that scenario, the parable of the wedding feast tells readers how to comport themselves in the precarious time before the spiritual kingdom is fully realized, while earthly powers hold sway. Jesus, as King of the Jews (Matt 2:2), does not follow the expected pattern of king or warrior-messiah, and thus it is possible we need not assume that the "king" or his "son" in the parable correspond to God or his Son.



The followers of Jesus know that showing allegiance to the Kingdom of Heaven sometimes requires that they resist the kingdoms of the world, and that they risk suffering the consequences. The community's choice to honor the King of the Jews means they might suffer violence and shame at the hands of worldly powers (Matt 10:16-23), just as Jesus did. Matthew

repeatedly alludes to such dangers and asserts that those who endure will be rewarded (5:10-12; 10:39; 11:28-30; 16:24-27; 19:29). Thus, a resisting reading de-emphasizes the parable's punitive focus and instead highlights the gospel's overall encouragement to endure in the face of struggle, suffering, and uncertainty.

Now we turn to examples of what this alternative interpretation implies, how the "wedding banquet" is not only an allegory for God's future, final judgment, but also describes an ongoing judgment of the powers that be in the present violence of the world.

The Call and Refusal

Matthew's name for the Jesus-community is the church. The Greek term is ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*), literally, the ones who are "called out" (Matt 16:18; 18:17). The parable begins with the king *calling* the guests to come to the feast, and it ends with the statement: "many are *called* (κλητοὶ [*klētoi*]) but few are chosen" (22.14). Readers who hear the call to the wedding feast need to be able to distinguish between the call of an earthly king and Jesus' own call. The response of those called to the feast suggests that such discernment is already taking place within the parable itself: Matthew states bluntly that the first group of invited guests does not *want* to come. They snub the king and kill the messengers. In retribution, the king destroys them and burns their city. An allegorical reading suggests that the refusal of the guests alludes to events in Israel's past: Israel refused God's invitation and killed the prophets sent to deliver the message. In retaliation, God "allowed" Jerusalem to be sacked and burned, and then went out in search of a new group of guests to replace Israel. This interpretation is unfortunate, because when taken out of the historical context, it is blatantly anti-Jewish. Matthew is writing some fifty years after Jesus' ministry took place and is describing how the nascent church, which still defines itself within Judaism (Matthew makes it clear that Jesus fulfills the Law and the prophets [5:17-19]), is in the process of separating from other Jews who do not accept Jesus as the Messiah.⁵ A resisting reading offers the possibility that the first group of invited guests is right

to resist the king. There is an expectation in this gospel that the audience *should* resist kings, as the magi resist honoring Herod's request (1:12), as

... the parable is no longer anti-Jewish but a subversive message that warns the reader *away* from this particular wedding feast, because this king is just a king, a typical tyrant, and his feast surely is not the Kingdom of Heaven.

Joseph took his family out of Herod's reach (1:13-14), and as John denounced

Herod Antipas' marriage (at the cost of his head; 14:3). In this context, the parable is no longer anti-Jewish but a subversive message that warns the reader *away* from this particular wedding feast, because this

king is just a king, a typical tyrant, and his feast surely is not the Kingdom of Heaven.

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The Guest without a Wedding Garment

Many interpreters note the seeming unfairness of the expectation that the second batch of guests must have a proper garment ready to wear, especially since such a festal robe was very expensive, and the parable indicates that they had short notice. Allegorical interpretations that assume the king is God treat the king's confrontation with the garmentless man as the final judgment, when those who are not "garbed" with good deeds are condemned to the outer darkness. Allegorically, the wedding garment is something one must attain beforehand by living righteously, not at the last minute (cf. oil for the lamps in Matt 25:1-13). That the "garment" is a metaphor for good deeds comports with Matthew's exhortations to strive for higher righteousness (e.g., Matt 5:17-7:12), so it seems reasonable that this man deserves his fate. If we read the parable in the context of Roman occupation

A first-century audience's first reaction to the parable probably would have been surprised that the king did not provide an appropriate garment for this guest.

in the first century, however, we must allow that some listeners would have understood that this second rounding up of guests was compulsion: they were forced to come, perhaps dragged in off the streets. Or, they came because they were too afraid not to come. Moreover, we modern readers frequently are unaware of a striking oddity in the king's behavior, which violates ancient customs of hospitality. In this time and place,

it was expected that a patron would protect and provide for those who were guests under his roof. A first-century audience's first reaction to the parable probably would have been surprised that the king did not provide an



appropriate garment for this guest. The king's reaction to the garmentless guest not only runs counter to cultural obligations to protect and provide, but it also reveals the typical attitude of the wealthy and powerful toward the poor.⁶ That the Gospel says not to worry about what to wear, and that God will provide (Matt 6:25-31), is a clue that this "king," who clearly *does* place significance

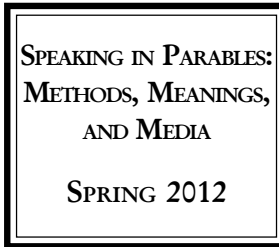
on the man's attire and who does *not* provide for him, may not be God, after all. It further indicates that the man without a proper garment, the one whom we usually identify as a "false" believer, is, in fact, the most faithful of all. He follows the advice given in the Sermon on the Mount not to be concerned with what to eat or what to wear, and he resists complying with the earthly king's expectations.

The parabolic king's question is posed like a taunt or a riddle: "How did you get in here without a wedding garment?" The guest has no answer; indeed, it seems that the question is rhetorical, and no answer is expected (Matt 22:12). "He was speechless," is the NRSV translation of the Greek ἐφίμωθη (*ephimōthē*); that this verb is in the passive voice (literally, "he was muzzled" or "he was silenced") may be an indication that his speechlessness was imposed on him by force or by denial of the privilege of speaking to the king. His inability to answer is perceived as guilt, just as Jesus' speechlessness is perceived as guilt when he stands before the high priest after his arrest (Matt 26:63). Jesus and the garmentless man are alike in their silence before their interrogators, and both suffer condemnation. If we grant that Jesus' silence indicates integrity, resistance, and innocence in the face of false testimony, perhaps we should afford the garmentless man's silence a similar interpretation. The man without a wedding garment is speechless because, like Jesus standing before his interrogators, he has been "dragged before governors and kings," and he is innocent (Matt 10:18).⁷

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Allegorical treatments of the parable's final statement, "Many are called but few are chosen" (Matt 22:14), suggest that one must be prepared for judgment; no one can assume that salvation is guaranteed. An alternative, subversive reading suggests that it is not those who manage to *stay* at the banquet who will remain part of the Kingdom of Heaven; rather, it is those who *resist* the earthly kingdom portrayed in the parable who are aligned with the Kingdom of Heaven. In a non-allegorical reading where the "king" represents not God but a human tyrant, among the few that are "chosen" is

the garmentless man, who is a model of Matthean discipleship. Though the king has him bound hand and foot and cast into the outer darkness (Matt 22:13), the subversive reader knows that this man has honored Jesus' teachings and demeanor of silent resistance, and thereby has demonstrated his allegiance to the Kingdom of Heaven. It is he, not the other wedding guests, who has persevered and who will receive reward (Matt 5:10-12; 10:39; 11:28-30; 16:24-27; 19:29). The



The man's silent witness challenges us to resist unjust and cruel earthly powers. . . .

interpretation of the parable remains the same—that at the last minute, when our allegiance is put to the test, not everyone will be found worthy of the Kingdom of Heaven. And yet the tables are turned. The last becomes first and the first last. The man's silent witness challenges us to resist unjust and cruel earthly powers, while we seek

to align ourselves with the values of the Kingdom of Heaven in the midst of a violent world.⁸

¹ Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 1-4.

² Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 44-47. Scott argues that parables may be posed as allegory in reflection of an evangelist's ideology, but the reader need not interpret the parable rigidly with the one-to-one correspondence of specific referents. The parable may have multiple levels of meaning.

³ See William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 53-73; and Barbara E. Reid, *Parables for Preachers: The Gospel of Matthew, Year A* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2001), 7-8. Brigitte Kahl describes a method of resisting reading called a "hermeneutic of conspiracy" in "Reading Luke against Luke: Non-Conformity of Text, Hermeneutics of Conspiracy, and the 'Scriptural Principle' in Luke 1," in *A Feminist Companion to Luke*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 70-88.

⁴ In the parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, also set in the context of a wedding feast, we learn that the "bridegroom" is "delayed" (Matt 25:1-3).



⁵Other parables in Matthew bear the same theme of God's replacing the present "tenants" with new ones (e.g., 21:33-41); these parables are addressed not to all Jews but to the chief priests and other Jewish leaders, and Matthew does not specify that it will be non-Jews who replace them. The call to all the nations does not occur until the very end of the gospel (Matt 28:18-19). A particularly helpful explanation of this complex situation can be found in Anthony J. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of

Chicago Press, 1994).

⁶ Paul Veyne, *A History of Private Life: From Pagan Rome to Byzantium*, trans. A. Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 117-37.

⁷ Or, perhaps the man is speechless because he is waiting for divine inspiration when the king questions him (10:19-20).

⁸ For fuller treatment of this parable in the context of Matthew's Gospel, see Marianne Blickenstaff, *While the Bridegroom is with Them: Marriage, Family, Gender and Violence in the Gospel of Matthew*, JSNTSupp 292 (London: T & T Clark, 2005).

Saving Like a Fool and Spending Like it Isn't Yours: Reading the Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-8a) in Light of the Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:16-20)

By R. Daniel Schumacher*

The fourth in a series of five parables spanning Luke 15-16, the parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-8a) has developed the reputation of being one of the most difficult parables in all of the Synoptic Gospels.¹ Particularly difficult is its conclusion, in which the master praises the steward for acting wisely (16:8a), even though the steward has obviously cheated his master (16:5-7) in order to save himself (16:4)! What exactly is the master praising, and what exactly about the steward's actions can be deemed as praiseworthy? Questions such as these have left many baffled, resulting not only in a proliferation of academic scholarship around this parable, but also a pattern of interpretation that lifts it from its Lukan context. Yet, it is imperative to

This reading . . . interprets this parable in conversation with the parable of the rich fool (12:16-20). . . .

remember that the author of Luke intended to say something with this parable, and to remove it from its context could result in the loss of that voice. This reading, then, is a limited attempt to put the parable of the Unjust Steward back in its place—to locate it once again in its Lukan context. More specifically, it interprets this parable in conversation with the parable of the

Rich Fool (12:16-20), based on several thematic and lexical similarities.

While these two parables share many specific similarities, on a broad scale, four shared movements bind the parables of the rich fool and the unjust steward together.

1. The primary characters in each are introduced at the very opening of the parable (12:16; 16:1).
2. An immediate event sets the story in motion and creates a moral dilemma (12:16; 16:1).

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3. The primary character responds to the moral dilemma in the form of a soliloquy or inner monologue to form a plan of action (12:17-19;16:3-7).
4. In each, the narrative of the parable ends with a surprising proclamation issued from an unexpected source (12:20; 16:8a).

Of course, the generic plotlines of these parables differ in a few ways, but overall these two parables have relatively parallel movement.

1. In Greek, both parables open with “a certain man” (ἀνθρώπου τινός [anthrōpou tinos], 12:16; ἀνθρώπος τις [anthrōpos tis], 16:1). To be sure, this is not an uncommon opening for parables in Luke’s gospel. In all, Jesus employs this phrase as the opening of eight parables throughout Luke.² In each of the three cases where Luke shares parable material with at least one other Synoptic Gospel, the parable begins with ἀνθρώπος τις (anthrōpos tis) in the Lukan version alone.³ This phrase has a way of grounding the parable in an all too human reality composed of highway bandits, fickle kings, hellion children, wealthy estate holders, overburdened debtors, and terrible tenants. In other words, introducing “a certain man” encourages interpretations that avoid allegorical readings. Rather, it calls for the audience to learn some moral lesson from the everyday reality of their own existence.

. . . introducing “a certain man” encourages interpretations that avoid allegorical readings.

The “certain man” in both of these parables has the added characteristic of being “rich” (πλούσιος [plousios], 12:16; 16:1). In the parable of the rich fool, this characteristic is reiterated by the fact that he is not only a landowner, but also the landowner of *very productive* land (12:16). A similar reiteration occurs in the parable of the unjust steward, as it announces that “a certain man was rich *who had a steward*” (16:1, emphasis added). While “steward” is an acceptable translation, the Greek word οἰκονόμος (oikonomos) carries with it the implication of one who is specifically a “manager of a household or estate.”⁴ In other words, this “certain man” was not only rich, but also rich enough to keep a steward on retainer in order to manage his business and personal affairs (16:1).

There is a noticeable distinction, however, between the openings of these two parables. In the parable of the Rich Fool, the subject of the first clause *is not* the rich man, but his abundantly productive land (12:16). In the parable of the Unjust Steward, the subject of the initial clause *is* the rich man “who

had a steward" (16:1). Despite this distinction, it is worth noting that in both parables the subject in the first clause does not serve as the primary character for the rest of the parable. Rather, the rich man (12:16) and the steward (16:1) become the protagonists in these parables.

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2. With the two primary characters introduced, each figure almost immediately faces a moment of moral crisis. In the first, the dilemma is initiated simply enough and by no fault of the rich man: his land produced an abundant crop (12:16). Though the text suggests that the man is in no way responsible for the crop ("*The land* produced abundantly," 12:16), he will be responsible for how he handles the fruit of the land. The image produced is one in which an already wealthy landholder is blessed with excess, and the crisis circles around what he will do with a crop that yields abundantly more than he needs.

In the parable of the Unjust Steward, the moral dilemma is initiated by an anonymous character (or characters) who brought charges to the rich man that his steward "was squandering his possessions" (16:1). This action of "squandering" (διασκορπίζω [*diaskorpizō*]) is precisely the same action the younger son is reported as doing with his inheritance in the parable of the prodigal son (15:13). However, unlike the younger son, it is not clear at the outset of this parable whether the steward is actually guilty of these charges or not. Still, the truth of a charge rarely alters its effect of bringing the accused—and his accomplices—into disrepute. In this way, the charges not only jeopardize the reliability of this professional steward, but also threaten the honor of a "master" (16:3) who would appear as though he were incapable of keeping the affairs of his estate in order. The charges, then, were made not only against the steward, but against the master as well. Because of this, the master was required to act quickly.

The master wasted no time in deliberation. He called the steward and said, "What is this I hear concerning you? Give an accounting of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward" (16:2). Supposedly, this "accounting" would come in the form of the steward's alleged "cooked books," but even before the master has the books in hand he has fired the steward and the dilemma of the parable is set. What will the steward do now that he has lost both his position and his reputation?

In both parables, the primary character turns to inner monologue or soliloquy at the moment of moral crisis.

3. In both parables, the primary character turns to inner monologue or soliloquy at the moment of moral crisis.⁵ This is an action unique



to characters in Luke's Gospel and is usually reserved for characters in parables.⁶ As a literary device, the soliloquy has the ability of making the audience privy to information not known by anyone else in the narrative itself. It depicts a character's thoughts; and in situations of crisis, it can illustrate how a character internalizes a dilemma and formulates a response.

In both the parables of the Rich Fool and the Unjust Steward, the primary figure opens the soliloquy with the question, "What shall I do?" (τί ποιήσω [poiēsō] 12:17, 16:3). Each then spells out the specifics of their respective predicament. The rich man points out that the abundant yield from his incoming crop is too great to store in his barns at present (12:17), while the steward reiterates the fact that he is losing his position as steward of the master's estate (16:3). For him, however, there is the additional predicament of his being too weak to dig and too ashamed to beg (16:3).

This would seem to be a laughable response to the loss of a job, but there is also present in this inner confession the deep (and, perhaps, embarrassing) reality that the steward could not make it in the "real" world. The steward may have been a hired hand, but his position in society was rather unique in that it existed somewhere between the elite and lower classes. The steward's ability to read and write (and thus to keep the books) had granted him this rare position, and it was one that came with benefits.

The steward's lifestyle would have been a cut above most others since he had unparalleled access to his master's resources. As a steward, he lived a cushy life. Still, this did not mean he was on equal footing with the master. He was still a hired hand and, therefore, susceptible to falling out of favor with his wealthy master. In the end, his lush lifestyle would have made him soft compared to the physical laborers that worked in the fields. He had a certain skill, but one that had a limited job market. To lose his position as steward would carry with it the very real threat of death because of his inability to provide for himself through labor or begging.

Both having asked, "What shall I do?" each then turns to answering precisely that question. The rich man said to himself, "I shall do this (τοῦτο ποιήσω [touto poiēsō]): I will tear down my barns and build greater ones and I will gather there all of my wheat and goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have many goods stored up (κείμενα [keimai]) for many years; take rest, eat drink, be merry'" (12:18-19).⁷ His plan is simple enough and seems to be a savvy business move: take the ample crops and store them up for the later. The land has produced abundantly so far, but who knows how it might produce in the future? His solution, then, is to create a "nest egg," so that the

otherwise unknown future may be far less threatening (and require far less work).

The steward begins his response to the question similarly: "I know what I shall do (ἐγνων τί ποιήσω [egnōn ti poiēsō]), so that when I am removed from the office of steward others might welcome me into their houses" (16:4). A significant difference occurs in the steward's soliloquy, in that he does not outline in detail the nature of his plan. The audience learns that the steward has hatched a plan and is even let in on his desired outcome, but the plan itself is left unrevealed. The audience must learn what he proposes to do only as he does (ποιέω [poiēō]) it.

The steward set his plan in motion by summoning "each one" (ἕνα ἕκαστον [hena ekaston]) of his master's debtors (16:5). He then employed his fleeting authority as keeper of the books to reduce the debts each owed, and while 16:5-7 details two of these transactions, the force of ἕνα ἕκαστον (hena ekaston) is that the steward repeated this action with most, if not all, of his master's debtors. In so doing, the steward was banking on the concept of reciprocity, in which "generous or benevolent acts brought with them an

If the steward was innocent of "squandering" his master's possession when the parable opened, there is no denying that he is now guilty of precisely that act.

expectation they would be repaid."⁸ In the two cases detailed, the steward reduced the debt of the first by fifty percent and the debt of the second by twenty percent, both of which were sizable reductions at the master's expense! If the steward was innocent of "squandering" his master's possession when the parable opened, there is no denying that

he is now guilty of precisely that act. As Schottroff has so clearly stated, "He is a cheat!"⁹

4. On one hand, the actions of the rich man in storing up his fortunate crop could easily be considered sensible, if not outright desirable. After all, one only has to recall the seven plenteous years and the seven years of famine

Logic . . . would recognize the rich man as having acted wisely and the steward as having acted foolishly, but this is the opposite of how both parables end.

in Genesis 41 to be reminded of the benefit of planning appropriately for the future. The steward's actions, on the other hand, appear to be quite foolish. It is difficult to imagine that he would not eventually be caught and punished for this crime. Logic, it seems, would recognize the rich man as having acted wisely and the steward as having acted foolishly, but this is the opposite of

how both parables end.

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In the first, the hook is set as God makes an appearance for the first and only time in any Lukan parable. God proclaims to the rich man who planned to store up his crop for himself, “You fool (ἄφρων [*aphrōn*])! This night your soul is being demanded from you” (12:20). In asking the man, “And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” God implicitly declares why the man is

a fool (12:20). He had accumulated great wealth and intended to hoard it for himself. In so doing, “the goods” were wasted, as not even he would get to enjoy the fruits of their provision. As Moxnes has noted, “There was nothing morally wrong in the way he got his fortune; it was through a good harvest. But his behavior shows that he is selfish, for his invitation to ‘eat, drink, and be merry’ (12:19) is directed solely to himself.”¹⁰ His failure is marked by his inability to properly share his wealth.

While the rich man receives the shocking condemnation of being called a fool by God, the steward is unexpectedly praised by the very master he cheated for “doing wisely” (φρονίμως ἐποίησεν [*phronimōs epoiēsen*], 16:8a).¹¹ On one level, one might conclude that the steward received praise for manipulating his fading position of authority with a great deal of shrewdness in order to ensure some safety for himself in the future. However, when set in contrast with parable of the rich fool, an alternative interpretation comes to light that speaks at another level altogether.

Tannehill pertinently notes, “In contrast to the ‘fool (ἄφρων [*aphrōn*])’ (12:20), [the steward] acts ‘wisely (φρονίμως [*phronimōs*])’ (16:8).”¹² It is important to recall that initially the “charges” brought against the steward were that he was squandering (διασκορπίζων [*diaskorpizōn*]) his master’s possessions (16:1). Typically, διασκορπίζω (*diaskorpizō*) is translated as “squander,” but Vinson notes that it most literally means “scatter like seed.”¹³ Whether or not the steward was guilty of “scattering” his master’s possessions at the parable’s open, this is precisely what he has done through the reduction of debts by its close. Unlike the rich fool, who stored up (συνάγω [*synagō*]) goods for himself (12:18), the nature of the steward’s action is that of “scattering” wealth. In fact, the only other occurrence of διασκορπίζω (*diaskorpizō*) in Luke is in the *Magnificat*, where it denotes an act of God, who “has scattered the proud in the imagination of their heart” (1:51) in close connection with “sen[ding] the rich (πλουτοῦντας [*ploutountas*]) away empty” (1:53). In some sense, the steward has mimicked a deed done by God. The result is his being praised for acting “wisely” (φρονίμως [*phronimōs*], 16:8) rather than being called a fool (ἄφρων [*aphrōn*]) by God for hoarding resources (12:20).

In laying these texts side-by-side, the results are significant because the steward has acted in a way that runs contrary to the tendencies of the rich fool. Rather than hoarding wealth, he has distributed it. Of course, the tension comes precisely because he accomplished this through unjust means, namely, the dispersion of his master's wealth and not his own. The distinction, however, that must be kept

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Rather than hoarding wealth, [the steward] has distributed it. intact in reading the praise in this way is that the *person* is characterized as unjust, while the *action* is characterized as wise. The steward, then, can be a less than commendable figure who has, in this instance, acted in a commendable way. The action to be admired and emulated, it seems, is that of scattering (as opposed to hoarding) wealth.

¹ These include the parables of the Lost Sheep (15:3-7), the Lost Coin (15:8-10), the Prodigal Son (15:11-32), and the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31).

² These include the parables of the Good Samaritan (10:30), the Rich Fool (12:16), the Great Dinner (14:16), the Prodigal Son (15:11), the Unjust Steward (16:1), the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19), the Ten Pounds (19:12), and the Wicked Tenants (20:9).

³ The parables of the Wedding Banquet/Great Dinner (Matt 22:1-14; Luke 14:15-24) and of the Talents/Ten Pounds (Matt 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-27) share enough similarities to suggest that they come from a shared source. Only the parable of the Wicked Tenants is shared by all three Synoptic Gospels. (Matt 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19).

⁴ F. W. Danker, W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 698.

⁵ Philip Sellew, "Interior Monologue as a Narrative Device in the Parables of Luke," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111 (1992): 239.

⁶ All told, six parables in Luke feature a soliloquy: The parables of the Rich Fool (12:16-20), the Unfaithful Servant (12:42-46), the Prodigal Son (15:11-32), the Unjust Steward (16:1-13), the Unjust Judge (18:2-5), and the Wicked Tenants (20:9-16). In fact, Luke's gospel only features one soliloquy outside of these parables: that carried out by Simon the Pharisee as a woman anoints Jesus' feet with ointment (7:39).



⁷ According to Danker, et al., eds., *Greek-English Lexicon*, 537, κείμαι (*keimai*) in this instance is best translated as “laid up” or “stored up.”

⁸ Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 406.

⁹ Louise Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 159.

¹⁰ Halvor Moxnes, “Patron-Client Relations and the New Community in Luke-Acts,” in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 255.

¹¹ The φρονίμως ἐποίησεν (*phronimōs epoiēsen*) phrase is often translated “acted shrewdly” or “acted prudently.” To be sure, the praise is in reference to the steward’s actions, but to translate it as such is to obscure the connection of ἐποίησεν (*epoiēsen*, 16:8a) with the two occurrences of ποιήσω (*poiēsō*) in the steward’s soliloquy (16:3,4).

¹² Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, vol. 1: *The Gospel According to Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 247.

¹³ Richard B. Vinson, *Luke*, Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary, vol. 21 (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2008), 522.

In Gold We Trust: The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)

By Karen M. Hatcher *

The Lukan narrative is laced with caveats against the lure of lucre. In his censure of greed (Luke 11:39-41; 12:15), his command to turn temporal treasure into eternal equities through almsgiving (12:33), and his call to relinquish riches as a prerequisite for discipleship (14:33; 18:18-24), Jesus depicts wealth as a potential stumbling block to participation in the in-breaking reign of God. Its profound effects on relationships are explored in a series of parables set in the household—an economy comprising not only household affairs and goods but also the family members living there (οἰκία [*oikia*]; οἰκεῖοι [*oikeioi*], respectively). The tale of a rich fool stripped of his hoarded wealth by his sudden demise (12:13-21) punctuates Jesus' refusal to arbitrate an inheritance squabble between two brothers. In the case of the prodigal son, a squandered inheritance creates the filial rift (15:11-32). In a third story, a far-sighted steward dismissed for his dubious business practices forestalls a shameful status as a *persona non grata* and insures himself a future welcome in respectable "homes" (οἴκουσ [*oikous*]) through the wise use of "unrighteous mammon" (16:1-8). These narratives set the stage for the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, which portrays the use of possessions as the litmus test of both righteous living and membership in the household of faith.

The parable is told in the context of a discussion regarding wealth and Torah. Having overheard Jesus' conversation with his disciples, some Pharisees—described by the narrator as "lovers of money"—ridicule his claim that devotion to riches sets one in idolatrous opposition to God (16:13). Jesus' detractors recognize the statement as a challenge to the prevailing

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understanding of prosperity and poverty in terms of divine reward or retribution. Jesus has no argument with the Law *per se* but rather with interpretations of it that perpetuate exploitative practices and fail to respond to the misery of the masses.

Indeed, there was no shortage of that in a stratified, limited-good society in which peasants lived continually on the brink of disaster at the mercy of forces they were powerless to control. Considering all commodities to be in short supply, they subscribed to a “subsistence ethic,” the belief that they were entitled to draw on the collective resources of the community. Survival often depended on “generalized reciprocity” —altruistic giving motivated by human need without expectation of a return, as among family members¹ or those of means who understood that *noblesse oblige*. Wealthy patrons provided a social safety net of sorts, but elites who took advantage of their power and ignored their moral obligations were complicit in creating a Hobbesian society in which the lives of the destitute were indeed “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” Moses and the Prophets repeatedly warned of impending judgment for those who failed to take responsibility for these marginalized folk.²

The opening tableau of the Lukan parable (16:19-21) powerfully depicts the stark contrast between the living conditions of haves and have-nots. An unnamed rich man (πλούσιος [*plousios*]; Latin *dives* = rich), dressed as usual (ἐνεδιδύσκετο [*enedidysketo*], imperfect tense) in imported linen and a robe dyed with the prohibitively expensive Phoenician purple, dines sumptuously at a daily banquet. Such conspicuous consumption might have evoked images of the hedonists denounced by Amos, who were not grieved in the least over the “ruin of Joseph” as they lay on ivory beds and feasted on lambs from the flock (Amos 6:4-7). Within the confines of his gated estate where he lives in self-indulgent luxury, it is just another day in Paradise.

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On the other side of that gate lies a poor man named Lazarus. He is no mere manual laborer (πένης [*penēs*]) but rather a beggar destitute of resources (πτωχός [*ptōchos*]),³ not only impoverished but also ill. The word ἐβέβλητο (*ebeblēto*, pluperfect passive), referring elsewhere to the bedridden or crippled,⁴ suggests that, lacking mobility, he *had been cast* by others on the doorstep of someone with the means to minister to his needs. Yet the only attention he receives comes from canines that lick the sores covering his purpuric body. He waits longingly for scraps of bread used as napkins and

Lazarus (“God helps”) is aptly named, for indeed, no assistance is forthcoming from any other quarter.

pitched from the rich man’s table,⁵ but those leftovers go to the dogs, not to him. Lazarus (“God helps”) is aptly named, for indeed, no assistance is forthcoming from any other

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quarter.

Whereas the first tableau juxtaposes the circumstances of these two characters in life, a second (vv. 22-23) contrasts them in their death. Following his burial, the rich man finds himself agonizing in Hades (ᾠδης [*hadēs*]). The term typically renders the Hebrew “Sheol” — the abode of the dead — which by the first century denoted a place where punishment is already in progress. The Hades in this parable, like the netherworld described in 1 Enoch 22, has a deep void and separate compartments for the souls of the wicked and the righteous.⁶ As they visualized the rich man parched and tormented in flames, listeners might have recalled the apocalyptic images of John the Baptizer — barren (unrepentant) trees axed and thrown along with worthless chaff into an unquenchable fire (Luke 3:9, 17).

Lazarus, on the other hand, having been translated heavenward by angels à la Enoch and Elijah (Gen 5:24; 2 Kgs 2:11), finds himself comfortably seated in the “bosom of Abraham.” In its parabolic context, the unique phrase captures the multiple meanings of κόλπος (*kolpos*) as a pocket-like fold in a garment, a reclining position at a meal, a bay or inlet, and a term denoting intimacy.⁷ Like a beloved child, Lazarus, gathered up by an affectionate parent and placed among the folds of his garment, discovers the “bosom of Abraham [to be] the enclosure within which are stored up the good things that await

Unlike Abraham, who entertained three unknown visitors under the oaks of Mamre (Gen 18:1-15), the rich man has invited only his friends.

the righteous, who after the storm have found the heavenly haven.”⁸ The one who never feasted in life enjoys an otherworldly banquet hosted by the model of hospitality himself. Unlike Abraham, who entertained three unknown visitors under the oaks of Mamre (Gen 18:1-15), the rich man has invited only his friends. Having refused “the poor, the

crippled, the lame, and the blind” a place at his table (Luke 14:13-14, 21), the rich man is refused an invitation to the patriarchs’ eschatological banquet at the resurrection of the righteous (cf. 13:26-30).

The scenario recalls the great reversal prophesied by Mary — a new, inverted economy initiated through the intervention of God and God’s



Messiah in which rulers would be dethroned, the humble exalted, the hungry filled and the rich sent away empty-handed (1:52-53). Serving as the voice of divine authority, Abraham reminds the rich man of the beatitudes and woes pronounced earlier by Jesus: “Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. . . . But woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full” (6:21, 24).

Vivid spatial imagery conveys the characters’ drastic shift in status. Lazarus, once down and out(side), has been moved up to the inner circle, while the rich man must cede his place of honor to one of more distinguished character (14:9-10). Still intact is the boundary separating the two, represented in life by a traversable gate and in death by an impassible chasm fixed by divine order (ἐσθηρίκται [*estēriktai*], divine passive [16:26]). In failing to *pass over* the threshold to offer life-saving aid to Lazarus, the rich man “chooses death,” consigning himself to the consequences of disobeying the commands of Torah (Deut 28-30). Like those guilty of perverting justice during legal proceedings “in the gate,” he too has afflicted the righteous and neglected the needy (Amos 5:12). Ultimately he gets what he wants—permanent separation between the lowlifes and the highbrows—although his assumptions about which is which prove tragically incorrect.

The final section (Luke 16: 24-31) is a dialogue between the rich man and the patriarch, whom he addresses as “Father.” Six familial references link covenant and kinship, grounding the rich man’s appeals in his elect status as a child of Abraham. Issuing orders as if he had some bargaining power, he ironically demands for himself the mercy he never showed and insists on Lazarus’ services as an entitlement. His concern for the five brothers living in his father’s house does not extend to Father Abraham’s wider covenantal family, which includes such “sons and daughters” as Zacchaeus (19:9), the bent woman (13:16) and Lazarus. His contempt for these kinfolk and the ethical code governing the Father’s household reveals him as no true son. Unrepentant, he is consequently disowned.

The parable asserts that an ethnic pedigree sealed in the blood of circumcision provides no assurances of a pass to the party of the ages. Rather, family is defined in terms of obedience to God’s will (8:21). Authentic children of Abraham are those who demonstrate it through Torah piety, who hold their money loosely and are not “hard-hearted or tight-fisted” toward the penurious (Deut 15:7-11). Prodigal

Authentic children of Abraham are those . . . who hold their money loosely and are not “hard-hearted or tight-fisted” toward the penurious (Deut 15:7-11).

gate-crashers, who “squander their property in dissolute living” (15:13) and waste their opportunities to promote community solidarity, will find the entrance to the eternal banquet hall barred (13:25-30; 16:1-9).

The rich man’s fate is a *fait accompli*, but the destiny of his brothers remains uncertain. Father Abraham’s refusal to dispatch a messenger from the underworld to stir them to repentance affirms the sufficiency of Scripture as a witness to God’s requirements. With the pathway clearly marked by the signposts of Torah, the problem is not ignorance but indifference. Whether willfully blind like the rich man or spiritually deaf like his brothers, avarice and attachment to worldly goods have made them unresponsive to the Law of God. The unspoken question that hangs in the air draws the audience into the story. Will the brothers renounce their idolatry before it is too late and adopt a proper attitude toward their wealth? Will the listeners, the “money-loving” Pharisees? Will modern-day readers?

The parable presents a disturbing critique of today’s global money economy, which creates an ever-widening chasm between the poor and the prosperous. With satellite television, the Internet, and news broadcasts incessantly streaming images of the indigent, the privileged can hardly claim ignorance. It is rather complacency that turns a blind eye to each Lazarus languishing on the back stoop of our gated communities or the 1.2 billion inhabitants of our global village living on less than one dollar a day.⁹ Conditioned by a consumerist culture, American Christians in particular are at risk of contracting “*affluenza*”¹⁰ and the attendant spiritual malaise that leaves them “wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked” (Rev 3:17).

Jesus’ stated mission to bring recovery of sight to the blind and release for the captives (Luke 4:18-19) is proclaimed as good news for the poor, but this parable portrays it as potentially good news for the privileged as well. As a source of *revelation*, a call to *repentance*, and an offer of *release*, the eye-opening drama draws aside the curtain to expose the grim consequences of callous impiety resulting from an idolatrous relationship with lord Mammon. In God’s household, we are brothers’-keepers as well as keepers of the purse on behalf of the true *Kyrios*. Unless the rich man’s twenty-first-century siblings change their attitudes, act on the revelation given through Scripture, and produce fruits of repentance while there is still time, they cannot expect a

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place at the Lord's eschatological table. Those who do act spring the trap of wealth that holds them captive, not only liberating themselves but also becoming agents of release for those caught in the trap of poverty.

Luke 16:19-31 challenges readers now as then to take an unblinking look at the *liaison dangereuse* they maintain with material goods and to evaluate

the extent to which they have allowed love of money (φιλαργυρία [*philargyria*]) to eclipse love of brothers and sisters (φιλαδελφία [*philadelphia*]). The parable provides a sobering reminder that the handling of possessions vis-à-vis the needy serves as a barometer of spiritual condition and an indicator of one's true affiliation—in the term's original sense of "sonship." By renouncing their money madness for the generalized reciprocity of kingdom economics, modern-day disciples embrace their responsibility for the least of Christ's kinfolk, thus proving themselves members of the *oikos* of God.

Luke 16:19-31 challenges readers now as then to take an unblinking look at the *liaison dangereuse* they maintain with material goods.

¹ David B. Gowler, "At His Gate Lay a Poor Man': A Dialogic Reading of Luke 16:19-31," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 32 (2005): 260-62.

² See, e.g., Jer 5:27c-29; Lev 19:9-10; Isa 58:6-7; Mal 3:5.

³ J.H. Neyrey, cited in Olubiyi Adeniyi Adewale, "An Afro-Sociological Application of the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)," *Black Theology* 4 (2006): 32.

⁴ Cf. Matt 8:6, 14; 9:2; Mark 7:30; Rev 2:22. Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 112.

⁵ Jeremias, cited by Greg W. Forbes, *The God of Old: The Role of the Lukan Parables in the Purpose of Luke's Gospel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 187.

⁶ Forbes, 189-90.

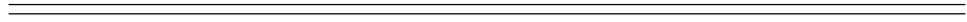
⁷ Martin O'Kane, "The Bosom of Abraham' (Luke 16:22): Father Abraham in the Visual Imagination," *Biblical Interpretation* 15 (2007): 490.

⁸ Archbishop Theophylact of Bulgaria (12th c.), cited by O'Kane, 490.

⁹ At the time of the United Nations 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg, South Africa, almost half of the world's population was living on less than the equivalent of \$2 USD per day, defined as the international poverty line. http://www.johannesburgsummit.org/html/media_info/pressreleases_factsheets/wssd3_poverty.pdf (accessed 28 April, 2011).

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¹⁰ "Affluenza" – a portmanteau word combining "affluence" and "influenza" – refers to the dis-ease caused by excessive consumption. <http://www.pbs.org/kcts/affluenza/> (accessed 28 April, 2011).



The Winds Will Blow: A Sermon on Matthew 7:24-27

By Peter Rhea Jones, Sr.*

Remember the story of “The Three Little Pigs”? Did anyone tell it to you when you were growing up? A sow with three little pigs sent them out in the world to make it on their own. The first little pig that went off met a man with a bundle of straw and she said to him, “Please, give me that straw so I can build me a house.” The man gave the straw and the little pig built a house of straw with it.

A big, bad wolf came along and knocked at the door and said, “Little pig, little pig, let me come in.”

The pig answered, “No, no, no, not by the hair of my chinny-chin-chin.”

The wolf then threatened, “Then I’ll huff and I’ll puff, and I’ll blow your house down.” So the big, bad wolf huffed and he puffed and he blew the house down. The first little pig had to run to her brother’s house and get in and lock the door.

The second little pig met a man with a bundle of sticks and said, “Please, man, give me those sticks to build a house.” The man did, and the second little pig built his house of sticks.

The big, bad wolf came along and knocked on the door. “Little pig, little pig, let me come in.”

The second little pig said, “No, no, no, not by the hair of my chinny-chin-chin.”

The big, bad wolf responded, “Then I’ll huff and I’ll puff, and I’ll blow your house down.” So he huffed and he puffed and he blew the house down.

I like the part about “my chinny-chin-chin,” and the huffing and puffing is pretty good, too. This folktale warns about building a house of straw or

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sticks because winds may blow.¹ Jesus also anticipated that winds will blow and beat upon *our* houses, our lives. He warned about building our lives on sand. Jesus told about a foolish person who built his house on a sandy foundation. Then the heavy rains of autumn came and the winds howled out of the north and then torrential floods poured off the mountains of the Galilee into the sandy

wadis. They struck against the house with great force, and it fell and the sound of the fall resounded with a loud clap. Let's say it fell with the force of a roller coaster after several cars reach the top, creep along for a few seconds and then the force of gravity suddenly catapults them downward on their breathtaking plunge.

Jesus issued this warning to those of us who are building our house on sand, those of us who do not plan for the winds that surely will blow. Any old shanty will stand in the sunshine, but when the wind blows . . . They are blowing now against some of our houses. The fury of foreclosures and lay-offs has taken our breath away. You can lose your job through no fault of your own. Some of us found our 401k can become a 201k! The wind of sorrow beats against some of our lives. You may lose someone you can't do without. You can go to work sometimes when it feels like there are crocodiles in the bathtub. The "c" words can come along—cancer and chemotherapy. People sometimes ridicule Christians on mission or block their efforts. The winds blow. Storms can invade your marriage and family like the one dramatized on TV in "The Good Wife." Life, Jesus knew, is not always just a hayride. Instead, life can be like rafting on "Thunder River" at Six Flags when your boat gets shoved and bumped from side to side.

Ever been in the teeth of a tornado? One day my wife came storming in the house shouting that a tornado is coming. I thought, "Yeah right," until I heard a sound like the rumble of a freight train. We ran to the basement and looked out the window and saw stuff flying in the air. A couple of minutes later after the wind subsided we walked outside. Our street looked like a war zone. The winds will blow.

You may be going through a stormy relationship. It may be stormy in your industry right now. Someone may put you down or leave you out. Storms of temptations may be pushing you around. An admiring look can become a lustful leer. You may feel the wind of caustic criticism because you are a Christian.

We build on the sand when we go around angry all the time, when we leave a trail of broken relationships behind us, when people can't trust what we say, when we are troublemakers instead of peacemakers, when you don't

bother to pray, when I center my life on storing up treasures on earth, when you or I make a vocation out of being judgmental of other people. We become proficient at spotting the speck in the other person's eye, become a big time expert on the flaws of others. We can go around in a constant state of pent up anger and wonder why we are miserable. You have seen that bumper sticker, "I don't get angry. I get even." Building on the sand.

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If you and I build our lives on the sand, our lives will fall down when furious winds blow. The winds do blow. Houses built on sand cannot stand up in a gale.

That reminds me of "The Three Little Pigs" again. Remember how it goes. The third little pig met a man with a load of bricks and said, "Please, man, give me those bricks to build a house." So the man gave her the bricks and she built a house with the bricks.

So the big, bad wolf came again and said, "Little pig, little pig, let me come in."

"No, no, no, not by the hair of my chinny-chin-chin."

Then said the dangerous wolf, "Then I will huff and I will puff and I will blow your house down."

Well, he huffed and he puffed, and he huffed and he puffed, and he puffed and he huffed and he huffed, but he could *not* blow the house down.

Jesus knew that winds blow, but he taught us how to build on the rock. As a skillful teller of parables Jesus would throw two contrasting alternatives out there in a kind of internal juxtaposition and leave it up to hearers to make a choice. In today's parable, he throws out the option of building on the sand, but he also holds out the possibility of being a wise person who anticipates the future and knows that winds blow. This is a parable of two possibilities, two different foundations.

A person chose to build a house upon a rock. Then those threatening winds came. The heavy rains fell in a deluge; the streams flowed in swelling force like the Hooch² on the day after a big rain when its muddy waters overflow its banks. The floods and the winds strike the new construction with a fierce fury that would shake you up if you were inside. This house does not fall. It stands even in a storm. Jesus by trade did carpentry and likely built houses, maybe over at nearby Sepphoris, and knew the critical importance of a good foundation. I asked a builder about foundations, and he said that footings and load bearing walls make a huge difference.

Jesus promised that if you build your life on the firm foundation of his words your life would stand even in a storm. Putting this parable at the very



end, Jesus singles out the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount as the way to live. He said “therefore,” surveying all he had been teaching. Quite a *discovery* for you and me to find stored in the Sermon on the Mount the building materials that can stand in a storm. Here’s where we make our move by glancing over the Sermon on the Mount to pluck a few directions to live by. Let’s limit ourselves to how

the Sermon on the Mount can transform our *relationships* in the next few days. The entire sermon is found fully in Matthew 5, 6, and 7 and a briefer version in Luke 6. You can Google it.

For openers, let’s not get into a *habit of judging* other people. Judging people can plain wear you out and them, too. Did you ever know someone who was so good she or he could hardly stand it? Being judgmental can turn you or me into a negative person. Being negative can make you hard to live with. If we are a constant criticism machine, we can damage our marriage; we can put distance between our friends. If you are a *speck inspector*, if you are all into seeing the speck in the other person’s eye and are oblivious to the log in your own eye (Jesus did have a sense of humor), you can really get angry yourself and be mystified why she is ticked off at you. This coming week, let’s let up on the criticism of someone in our lives. Jesus said, “Judge not.”

Show some *mercy* this coming week. Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be mercied.” In Luke it says, “Be merciful.” Be merciful today at lunch toward the frustrated waitress who has a sick husband, a daughter with an unwanted pregnancy, and a boss pressuring her for sexual favors.

We could *forgive* someone this week. We could pray the Lord’s Prayer on our own this coming week and linger on that part, “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” If you don’t know the Lord’s Prayer yet, you can pull it up online. A terrible accident almost took the life of a Christian. This man does marathons and was out jogging early one morning when a drunken driver crossed two lanes of traffic, came up on the sidewalk, and struck him a near fatal blow. His body went flying over the vehicle, leaving spatters of blood. He fell into a ditch where he lay unconscious. Dangerously wounded with three head traumas and spinal injuries, he and his wife have been through a dreadful time when he has suffered and could not even walk. Now he walks with assistance and speaks coherently. He sent a message to friends. He wanted them to know that he had forgiven the drunken driver. That stunned them. Then he added that he was praying for her recovery, her recovery from alcoholism. He requested prayer for her still in jail. Didn’t Jesus say something in the Sermon on the Mount about praying

for those who persecute you? Lewis Smedes put it, "You will know forgiveness has begun when you recall those who hurt you and feel the power to wish them well."³ While preparing this message I thought about someone who had hurt me, and I didn't want to pray for him, but I wound up praying that God would give me the power to wish him well.

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Not long ago in my seminary class, one of my students confided something very personal. He came by after class and handed me a card and walked away. I looked down at the card and saw the words, "I just formally forgave the man who used to abuse me and my brothers, who called me names, beat me, starved me." You could have blown me away. I asked him permission to share this with you. Is there someone we should formally forgive, somebody who has been mean to us, even abused us, and then let of go our crippling anger? Jesus said, "If you hear these words of mine and do them, you will be like a wise person who built a house on the rock."

I was down in Guatemala for a really cool wedding. A gifted operatic singer sang at the wedding. She looked me up after the ceremony because I had officiated at the service and was a minister of the gospel. She wanted to talk about Christian faith. She and her husband had found vital faith. She told me all about their church and how much good it was doing for their relationship as a couple. I asked her if she had introduced the Golden Rule into her marriage? She was a new Christian and perplexed and quite honestly asked, "What is the Golden Rule?" Her face beamed with immediate interest. She was eager to hear about it. I quoted her the words: "As you would that others would do to you, do to them." Be as considerate to the other person as you would want to be treated considerately. Her eyes lit up with excitement. We chatted about how the Golden Rule can transform our marriages. She walked away like she could not wait to start applying this rule in her marital relationship.

The Message puts the Golden Rule like this: "Ask yourself what you want people to do for you; then grab the initiative and do it for them." This is not just a rule of thumb but how to live in the age of salvation, a rule for life in the Kingdom of God.⁴ If you want to see your marriage happen, better bring the Golden Rule into play. So many people go into marriage just to get their own needs met. The Golden Rule can revolutionize a marriage. What if we bring the Golden Rule into one of our relationships, one of your friendships, perhaps for the brother-in-law you find hard to like. When you look over the whole Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, 6, and 7 you will find that the



Golden Rule stands at the climax of its central section, the very essence of the ethics.

We also find the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount about loving your enemy. "You have heard it said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemy and pray for them.'" If you want to build your house on the rock then make a start toward loving

personal enemies. On a Sunday in 1990, we found ourselves at war with Iraq, what came to be known as "Desert Storm." Iraqis had invaded Kuwait. People were anxious. We had a special service at church in the wake of this disturbing news. We had prayers for our troops going into harm's way. We had prayers for an early peace. One man was asked if he would give a prayer for our enemies. He didn't want to do it. He struggled with it in his heart. He was conflicted. When the time came he kneeled down and prayed words of prayer from his heart of hearts for his enemies. He grew a foot spiritually in sixty seconds. He was building a house on firm foundation where, when even the winds of war blew, his house stood.

If you and I want to build not only a home but also a life that will stand in the storm, then we need to construct it out of building materials warehoused in the Sermon on the Mount. Take the Sermon on the Mount into your personal world. Base your life upon it. Whatever storms . . . your life will stand, even in eternity. The winds will blow. On Christ the solid Rock, Stand! The house built on firm foundation did not fall. Neither will yours.

¹ There are as many as seventeen versions of this stock folk tale.

² Local vernacular for the Chattahoochee River in Georgia.

³ Lewis Smedes, *Forgive and Forget* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 29.

⁴ See Robert Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Waco: Word, 1982), 380-81.

You Are the One Whom Jesus Loves: A Sermon on Luke 15:1-10; Ezekiel 34:11-16

By Julie R. Perry*

The novel *Les Misérables*, set at the time of the French Revolution (late 1700's/ early 1800's), tells the story of Jean Val Jean, a convicted felon who has served twenty years in prison for theft, and who is now released, wandering the streets of a French village trying to find food and shelter. Because of his status as an ex-con, he is required to carry a "yellow passport" which identifies him as such, and because of it no one will give him anything. He is considered a dangerous man, a violent criminal whom all shy away from in fear; and so he ends up sleeping in the streets and begging for food. By chance, he knocks upon the door of an elderly priest living at the local rectory. This priest unexpectedly invites him in, has a hot meal prepared and served to him, and then allows him to spend the night there, in a warm bed, on clean sheets. During the meal, however, Jean Val Jean cannot help but notice the fine silver utensils laid before him; and later that evening, when everyone else in the household is sleeping, he gets up, stashes all the silver spoons and forks into a sack, and takes off into the night.

Sometime the next day Jean Val Jean is accosted by the local police, and they drag him back to the priest to verify his crime and his identity. "This man was found with stolen goods on him," they tell the priest, "but he claims that they were given *by you*, which of course is ridiculous, unbelievable. We just need you to identify him. Was he in your home last evening?"

The priest looks intently at the thief turned thief yet again, and says, "Why are you back so soon? And why did you not do as I told you, and take the knives and candlesticks as well?" Then turning to the authorities he relates that of course this man's story is true and insists that they please

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release him at once! After the surprised police officers have unshackled Val Jean and left the premises, the priest turns to the ex-con, looks straight into his eyes with both firmness and compassion, and says, “Jean Val Jean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil. With this silver I have bought your soul. I have ransomed you from fear and hatred, and now I give you back to God. You

are His now.” And Jean Val Jean weeps.

Jesus tells us the parable of the Lost Sheep, about one who loves each sheep so much that he will take off into the wilds to find that little one that has gone astray, that has wandered off and gotten into danger. This shepherd loves his sheep with such a relentless, compelling love that he will even put himself in danger, even leave the others in order to find that one and bring it back safely. Each one of his sheep is that precious to him.

When Jesus told this parable he may have been thinking of Ezek 34: 11-16, a passage about God the Good Shepherd who seeks after the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Jesus surely was familiar with this text. In fact, it probably informed his understanding of his own ministry and mission, as he identifies *himself* (in John’s gospel) as the Good Shepherd. And Jesus’ ministry clearly demonstrates this Shepherd’s love, as he associates with and calls *all* persons to himself, even those considered undesirable or unclean in his society. He is saying, through his own life and through this parable, that *each person* is important to God, that the Holy One does not want to lose a single one! And his love is *so strong* that he will put himself at risk, will take off into wild and dangerous places to rescue that one who has strayed. And *you* are that one sheep whom God loves! In fact, *all* of us are that sheep that God loves—because after all, there really are no sheep in *this Kingdom* who find or rescue themselves! The ninety-nine sheep that need no “finding” don’t really exist.

Jesus goes on to tell another parable, a twin parable, if you will, that directly parallels the story of the lost sheep. This story is about a lost coin. And just like the shepherd, the woman of the house does everything she can: lights a lamp, sweeps the house, searches *diligently, carefully* for that coin until she finds it. What a lot of fuss for one small coin, you may say! Yes, but that one small coin is of *extreme* value to her, and she will do whatever it takes to find it. *You* are that coin—seemingly small and insignificant, but not in the eyes of our loving God!

Isn’t it interesting that Jesus uses twin images of God here: one of a man and one of a woman! We are perhaps more accustomed to thinking of God as a shepherd—a strong, masculine, fatherly figure. But can we also grasp

the image of God as a woman? As a matron of the house, one who loves us like a *mother*? Jesus seems to be giving us the opportunity here to see both the masculine *and* feminine sides of God—to see, perhaps, that God is beyond gender, or gender-inclusive. This is a more expansive view of God than we normally have, stretching us and our understanding.

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These parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin are usually thought of as parables of repentance. Jesus actually used the language of repentance—*metanoia* in the Greek—in both of them. “There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine persons who need no repentance (*metanoia*).” But look closely at the two parables. *Neither the sheep nor the coin repents in any way*—at least not in the way we think about repentance. In fact, neither of them do one blessed thing to help themselves get found!

The people of Jesus’ day would have been very familiar with shepherding and the behavior of sheep. And the truth is that when sheep become lost and afraid, they *don’t* cry out. They lie down in the wild brush and try to hide from predators. And we all know that *a coin* can’t cry out—can’t say, “Here I am. Look in this direction!” And of course, neither one was able to say, in any form or fashion, “Gee, I sure am sorry I wandered off and got lost. I won’t do it again. Please just take me back.” No—all the *responsibility*, all the *effort* is on the part of the shepherd and the woman. What does that say to us about repentance, and about what God requires of us? Is repentance, perhaps, really just about being *willing* to be found, about *allowing* it to happen rather than resisting it? Is it, after all, simply being willing to accept what God and *only* God can do for us?

Look at Jean Val Jean again for a moment—the ex-con caught in the act of committing yet another crime. Did he do anything to deserve or earn the gift of mercy that was given to him? No! He was found right in the middle of his crime, his lostness. He wasn’t repentant or sorry for what he had done, at least not in the beginning (although he may have been *extremely* sorry that he got caught!) He didn’t have to repent *first* in order to receive mercy from the priest. It was an extravagant and free gift, totally unearned! *The love of God*

There’s another parable in Luke, which immediately follows these two about the lost sheep and lost coin, one which I’m sure many of you are familiar with: the parable of the Prodigal Son. This is the story of a wayward son who took all of his father’s inheritance and blew it in wasteful and extravagant living. And this young man *did* have a change of heart, *did* return home,



ready to beg for forgiveness. “Aha!” you may say, “See, you really *do* have to repent first to earn this forgiveness, this love!” But look a little closer. The text tells us, “But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.” The young man didn’t even get to say his confession, didn’t even have a chance to get the words out of

his mouth! The father’s love and forgiveness had been there for him all along, just waiting. He only had to be open and ready to receive it.

So perhaps this puts a new twist on what repentance really means for us. Is it about listing our sins and saying, “Never again, Lord,” and promising to do better next time? Or is true repentance, instead, about *being willing to be found*? Is it about *not resisting* the love of this Holy Shepherd, this Holy Woman? Not depending on our own righteousness? And are *all* of these parables—the lost sheep, lost coin, lost son—really more about *God’s* character and actions, more about what *God* does than what *we* do?

Part of the problem for many of us may be our own feelings of unworthiness and inadequacy. Do we perhaps not feel *valuable enough* to be sought after by this Shepherd? Searched for diligently by this Woman? Perhaps our own shortcomings, our crimes, our low self-esteem and dysfunctional relationships all make us feel so low, so *unworthy*. “How could God possibly love the likes of me?” we may ask. We can’t imagine it, because after all, we don’t really *deserve* it.

But God’s message to us, through these parables, is this: “You are mine. You have always been mine. You were created in my image and are therefore connected to me. And because you are mine, I will seek you out wherever you are and try to bring you back home—because I love you so much!” Can we be open to that kind of amazing love? Can we let down our defenses and self-doubts long enough simply *to receive* it, to be engulfed and swept away by this love?

Jean Val Jean allowed it to happen. He, the hardened criminal, melted in the presence of such an overwhelming extravagant love. He let it in—and *he became a changed man because of it*, one totally unrecognizable to those who had known him before. He became known as the kindest, most generous man in the community, where he carved out a new life for himself. But he didn’t change his life *first*, in order to gain God’s mercy. He changed *afterward*, after he received the gift! And just as this mercy had been extended to him, so he extended mercy and love to everyone he encountered, passing on this transformative gift of God.

Teresa Lewis has allowed this to happen to her, has allowed God's love and mercy to sweep over her life.¹ Those of you who know her know that seven years of incarceration and isolation in seg.² has *not* made her bitter or angry, as it logically should. Instead, her sweet spirit reaches out to everyone she meets—to comfort, to encourage, to love. She has opened herself up to God's transforming love and mercy, and his presence in her life is overwhelming, *unmistakable*. She has been singing to her Lord, and to us, for these last seven years. She is singing to us still! (I can personally testify to this.)

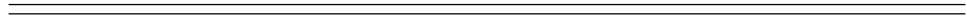
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So here, then, is a secret of God's mercy: what has been received is also meant to be shared. In fact, once we receive it, we feel *compelled* to share it. Many of you can attest to this. We *cannot* keep this gift to ourselves. But the changed life, the sharing with others, *the singing* only comes *after* God finds us. It is a natural *consequence* in our lives of receiving this amazing love.

An overriding theme of these parables is one of *joy and celebration*. Both the shepherd and the woman *rejoice* when they find that lost sheep, that lost coin. And even beyond that, they call everyone together—friends and neighbors—to *share* in this rejoicing. It is a community celebration! But that joy, that rejoicing is not over one who finally got his/her act together, who finally started living right and doing the right thing. No, that joy was simply over *finding* the lost one, simply that the lost one was in the end brought home. Can we allow ourselves to be found like that, to let that overwhelming love of God enter our lives? Can we believe that God and all the heavens will rejoice over one such as you? Such as me? Our Good Shepherd *longs* to find us—*every one of us*—even in the desert of death and our own destructive deeds and impulses. And this Holy One yearns to put us on his (*or her!*) broad loving shoulders, rejoicing, and bring us home! Hallelujah!

¹ A longtime inmate of Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women, Teresa Lewis died by lethal injection on Sept 23, 2010, the first woman executed in the state of Virginia for over a century. This sermon was preached at the Sunday worship service at this prison on Sept 19, 2010.

² "Seg." stands for "segregation" or the isolation wing of the prison where inmates receive the most difficult and restrictive level of incarceration.



God as an Unjust Judge?: A Sermon on Luke 18:1-8

By Julie R. Perry*

Is our God a “just” God? And if so, then why so much *injustice* in the world, and how are we to deal with it, both in our society and in our own lives? And when we pray and pray about something, and God doesn’t seem to answer—in fact seems not to even *hear* our prayers—what then? This little parable may cause us to wrestle with all these questions—and perhaps the biggest one of all: *Who is this God anyway?* If Jesus told parables to reveal to us the Kingdom of God, then what does this one have to teach us, both about the Kingdom and about the One whose Kingdom it is, the One who supposedly runs the show?

Jesus paints a picture of two very interesting but *opposite* characters in this parable: a *judge* and a *widow*. The judge appears in a very unfavorable light. We do not like him. Jesus says he is “unjust,” meaning unfair, not dispensing justice fairly. This judge identifies himself as having “no fear of God and no respect for anyone.” He sounds like a despicable, arrogant, unfeeling man, and we shudder that such a person is in a position of authority, making decisions about people’s lives! And we may feel angry that for a while at least (we don’t know how long) he ignored or refused the widow’s pleas. Even though she begged for justice, for her concerns to be heard, he refused to listen—until he got tired of her complaining, that is! He finally granted her justice, not because of the rightness of her case, but simply because of her persistence! She wore him out! Verse 5 says, “I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually complaining.” Another and perhaps more accurate translation of the Greek would be: “so that she may not finally come and slap me in the face”! So we may ask ourselves, what kind of judge is this anyway?

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And then there is the widow – in Jewish society one of the most powerless of persons, with no male to provide for her in this male-dominated culture. Jewish religious law consistently commanded that “widows and orphans” were to be cared for because they had no means of their own, no protection from disaster. Widows lived on the fringe, the very edges of society, and were extremely vulnerable, to a much

greater degree than within our own society. So Jesus paints a picture for us of this woman, this widow, who was so vulnerable and powerless, yet she wisely used the only tool she had – her *persistence*! She may have earned that unpleasant title that women often seem to get, of being a “nag,” but we have to admire her tenacity and fearlessness! Here is a woman whose society expected to be a passive victim, but she clearly is *not*! And she doesn’t respond to her situation emotionally, with hysterical screaming, but rationally, with persistent pleading, making her case time after time. She refrains from attacking the judge, but instead is wise and relentless, presenting the facts and truth of her case.

One of the ironies of this parable is that in Jesus’ day women were not even *allowed* to testify in court, because a woman’s word could supposedly not be trusted as true. So this story would have shocked Jesus’ listeners in that sense, presenting a woman who clearly was stepping out of her conventional role, crossing boundaries that would perhaps have made her seem as shameless a character as the unjust judge! What a pair we have here!

So what is Jesus doing with this little story? What is he trying to teach us?

Well, for one thing, he surely seems to be encouraging us to be persistent in our prayers, not to give up but to keep on asking. If the unjust judge finally answered the pleas of this woman, *how much more* will our God respond to our prayers! And not that we have to wear God out with our asking! In v. 8 Jesus says that God will “quickly” grant justice to those who ask. But this parable seems to answer to an age-old question that many of us have, and which I hear repeatedly from the women here¹: Will God be *displeased* if I keep asking for the same thing over and over? Does that show a lack of faith on my part? The answer that this parable gives is clearly *no*! And this is not the only place in Luke’s gospel that encourages persistence in prayer. Listen to this story that Jesus tells in Luke 11:5-8:

And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set

before him.' And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs."

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So we are to be persistent in asking. But how do we respond when, despite our persistence, our prayers seem not to be heard, or answered? How are we to pray faithfully in the face of such discouragement? This is a question we all struggle with at times, but no more than the people of Jesus' day. Look at how Jesus closes this parable, in v. 8: "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Jesus knew how hard it was for those folks, just as it is for us, to keep faith, to keep praying faithfully even when the answers were not apparent.

It may be instructive for us to look at the experience of the early church. When Christianity was in its infancy, during the time of the Roman Empire, Christians were severely persecuted and often killed for their beliefs. It was difficult to be a Christian then in ways we can barely imagine! And those early Christians often did *not* get the answers to their prayers that they hoped for, such as safety and protection from persecution. They *did, however*, get what they most needed most: God's loving presence and the strength and resilience to deal with the extreme difficulties of their lives.

I am reminded, once again, of Teresa Lewis,² and how God definitely did answer *her* prayers, though not how she had expected and hoped. Are God's answers often not about giving us the *outward* things we wish for, but the *inward* changes we need? (Hear that again!) "My ways are not your ways," says the Lord—comforting but sometimes difficult words. So this parable is about persistence in prayer, about not giving up but asking over and over again, and about being faithful in prayer even when answers are not apparent or different than what we expect. But it's also about an *unjust judge*, one who acts not out of kindness and love, but out of weariness, just to get someone off his back! And we struggle that this judge seems to represent God! How can a just and loving God be compared to someone as callous and cold as this judge?

Perhaps this begs the question: *Is our God really just?* Does God grant us what we really deserve? And the answer, of course, is no. The Lord God *is an unjust judge*, though not in the same sense as the judge in this parable. God is an unjust judge because He is a God of *grace*, a God who says to us, "I know



you haven't earned the Kingdom; in fact, you can't possibly earn it. But I'm giving it to you anyway, simply because I love you so much. All you need to do is be willing to receive it." I am reminded of the parable we considered a few weeks ago, about the lost sheep and lost coin, which were simply *found*, through no merit of their own. No, God doesn't give us what we deserve—thank God! A very *different*

kind of unjust judge—one who does *not* need to be pestered or worn out, but rather one who answers quickly, giving us much *more* than we deserve.

Jesus' parables are like little gems, perfectly cut jewels that reflect light off their different faces. And if we take this jewel and turn it just slightly, perhaps we can see it from a different angle, another perspective. Perhaps a surprise is waiting for us. What if God is *not* to be compared to the unjust judge after all? What if God is *the widow*? What if God is the one who is persistently asking for justice, beating on the doors of the world and the unjust systems of the world? How would that reading of the parable change our perspective and what God may be calling us to do?

Seeing God as the widow challenges us on a couple of fronts. For one thing, it challenges us to see God as a Woman! But this was not an entirely new perspective for the Jewish people. In fact, there is a rich tradition in Hebrew culture, evidenced in the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament), of God as Woman Wisdom or Sophia in Hebrew. Listen to Prov 8:1-4, 19-20, just one of many texts about Woman Wisdom:

Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?
On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand;
beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she
cries out: "To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live. . . . My
fruit is better than gold, even fine gold, and my yield than choice silver.
I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice. . . ."

Doesn't this remind you of the widow who is earnestly seeking and crying out for justice? Can we stretch ourselves to see God as this Woman, this persistent seeker of justice who is relentless and does not give up?

Perhaps the *greater* stretch for us is not so much seeing God as a Woman, but seeing God as *powerless*, as a widow who must beg and grovel at the feet of the powers that be! Our predominant image of God is probably one of *power*, of the Almighty King, the One who can separate the waters of the ocean by waving his hand and touch the earth and move mountains with his awesome power. And in truth, Jesus *does* speak of this mountain-moving ability of our God, and of all those who trust in Him. But there's *another* kind of Power—*Power that was humbled and born in a lowly animal trough, Power that*

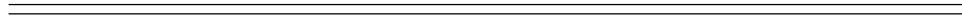
was made evident in a shameful death on a cross, Power that the Apostle Paul speaks of as being made perfect in weakness. This is the Power of God that does *not* take the world by storm, does not say, “Hey, I’m going to set the world straight and put everyone in their place and fix this crazy mess!” (God did that once with the Great Flood, regretted it and promised never to do it again!) No, this is the Power that infiltrates the world by stealth, that creeps into human hearts and changes the world subtly, from the inside out. Can we believe in a God who has this kind of Power, who works this way in the world? Can we trust in One whose power is made evident *through powerlessness*, like this persistent widow pleading her case in court?

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And if we do, if we say *yes* to this God, then how does this one call to us? What does He/She require of us? Perhaps to be like that persistent widow, joining hands with God and hammering on the doors of justice in this world— but also to be persistent in our own prayers to God, even when answers don’t come the way we expect; to trust in the love and care of the Holy One, which is sometimes evidenced through this *subtle Power*, this Power made evident under the radar, through weakness— *the Mystery of God!* Let us keep the faith! Amen.

¹ At Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women, where this sermon was preached, Oct 17, 2010.

² A longtime inmate of Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women, Teresa Lewis died by lethal injection on Sept 23, 2010, the first woman executed in the state of Virginia for over a century.



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I. Biblical Studies

New Testament Text and Translation Commentary, by Philip W. Comfort. Carol Stream: Tyndale House, 2008. vii + 899 pp. \$39.99. ISBN 978-1-4143-1034-3.

The different wordings between English translations of the New Testament are often puzzling, if not disconcerting, for those who read the New Testament closely. Philip W. Comfort, professor of New Testament at Coastal Carolina University, provides a helpful textual commentary that allows a person to explore, with great delight and profit, how and why the major English translations of the New Testament differ based on significant textual variants in the Greek manuscripts.

When one considers (1) the variety of major translations today, (2) the multitude of ancient manuscripts, (3) the thousands of different variants, and (4) the options for translating, the task of preparing a textual commentary seems overwhelming. Comfort, however, carefully and thoughtfully organized this work into a systematic and logical format. He begins with a brief introduction that presents an

overview of textual criticism and manuscripts, the background of major translations, a list of abbreviations (which are key for following his commentary), and his suggestions for using the commentary. The bulk of the book (pp. 1-872) is comprised of the commentary on individual variant-units that influence translation. At the end are four brief appendices along with a bibliography.

Comfort's commentary method is very straightforward. Biblical verses that contain significant textual variants, that is, those "that affect meaning, particularly those that have impacted English translation" (p. xxxvii), are presented with the textual variant-units as found in the Nestle-Aland 27th edition. These units are followed by an English translation, the manuscript evidence, and English versions that use the variant. A short paragraph of commentary on the variant follows. Occasionally the commentary is extensive when related to major variants, such as, the longer ending of Mark (6:9-20) or the Pericope of the Adulteress in John (7:53-8:11). For most entries, however, only a paragraph or two are used. For

those variants without significant influence on translation, but which have exegetical significance, no extensive manuscript evidence is listed but only short paragraphs of explanation.



which gives more authority to external evidence, particularly Alexandrian manuscripts such as p75 (late 2nd century) and B (Codex Vaticanus-4th century).

Comfort does not cover all variants listed in the Nestle-Aland text. One might quibble about some of the variants included and/or omitted; yet understandably not all variants could, or should, be included. Nevertheless, his commentary is more extensive than other textual guides. For example, in Bruce Metzger's *The Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (United Bible Society, editions 1975, 1994), to which Comfort acknowledges indebtedness, 150 variant-units are examined for Mark's Gospel. Roger L. Omanson's excellent work, which strangely Comfort never cites, *A Textual Guide to the Greek New Testament* (United Bible Society, 2006), covers 155 variant-units and segmentation questions in Mark. Comfort includes commentary on 208 variant-units for Mark.

As noted earlier, the author includes four appendices. While they appear at the end of the book, they are helpful to read along with the introduction. They outline the author's presuppositions for some of his text critical explanations. In contrast to the local-genealogical ("reasoned eclecticism") method championed by Kurt Aland, Comfort follows a documentary approach

This textual commentary has much to offer, and while facility in the Greek language is not necessary, my fear is that few individuals will stumble into it because of the Greek. Sadly, Greek is rarely a requirement for those who teach and preach from the New Testament. Even when Greek is offered in seminaries and divinity schools, few students take the opportunity to learn the language in which New Testament was written and transmitted. Even those who learn Greek are often not exposed to how manuscripts weave together to form the New Testament. Perhaps Comfort's textual commentary will not only help interested individuals understand better the reasons behind the differences between English versions but also inspire them to learn Koine Greek.

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Jesus among Friends and Enemies: A Historical and Literary Introduction to Jesus in the Gospels, ed. by Chris Keith and Larry W. Hurtado. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011. xxiv + 328 pp. \$26.99. ISBN 978-0-8010-3895-2.



In *Jesus among Friends and Enemies*, editors Chris Keith and Larry Hurtado have compiled a primer that attempts to harmonize historical and literary criticism of the character of Jesus by observing depictions of the peripheral cast of characters that accompany him in the Gospels and elsewhere. The book is sandwiched by an introduction and conclusion written by Keith and Hurtado, has ten chapters by various authors, and is divided into two parts: “Friends of Jesus” and “Enemies of Jesus.” Each chapter is further subdivided into two sections. The first section examines the historical context of its subject, considering the political and social milieu from which it arises, as well as a brief discussion of extracanonical sources from the first and second centuries. The second section explores the literary context of the subject within the scope of the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John. In the introduction, the editors lay the groundwork for a study of Jesus’s friends and enemies by briefly sketching prevalent literary and historical opinions that attempted to answer the question, “Who was Jesus?” This discussion includes

consideration not only of each Gospel writer’s interpretation of Jesus, but also a consideration of early non-Christian sources, such as Flavius Josephus and the so-called “Alexamenos graffito.”

Of particular note among the character analyses presented in this book is Michael F. Bird’s fascinating profile of John the Baptizer, Loren T. Stuckenbruck’s thoroughly researched chapter on first-century perceptions of Satan and the evolution of New Testament demonology, and Anthony Le Donne’s beautifully approachable examination of the anathematized Jewish leaders. For a textbook with a title as polarizing as *Jesus among Friends and Enemies*, the contributors are extremely careful to recognize that the depictions of the friends and enemies of Jesus most readily available to us are predisposed to theological bias—every story needs a protagonist and an antagonist. However, what the literary and historical critic discovers is that upon closer inspection, the lines between comrade and adversary are not as clearly drawn as one might assume. Should the family of Jesus be included among his friends or among those who rejected him? Is Nicodemus a secret disciple of Jesus or a pious member of the Sanhedrin? Are the Pharisees really the bane of Jesus’s ministry, or does Jesus consider them part of the Kingdom of God (Luke 17:20-21)? These

questions arise naturally out of the close analysis that *Jesus among Friends and Enemies* affords its readers.



The book concludes with a brief overview of standards in modern Jesus Quest research, with particular attention to the Criterion of Multiple Attestation and the Criterion of Dissimilarity. Keith and Hurtado highlight dissatisfactions with and modifications to these Criteria of Authenticity and argue that the exclusive use of either historical or literary criticism is inadequate for creating a satisfying and plausible portrait of Jesus of Nazareth. Instead, this outstanding textbook presents the Gospels not merely as literature to be deconstructed or history to be eyed with suspicion, but as complex “Jesus Memory” from Christianity’s earliest adherents, urging the reader to consider the question, “Who was (or is) Jesus?,” by examining how New Testament storytellers posed answers to that very question.

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The Gospel and the Letters of John, 3 vols., by Urban C. von Wahlde. Eerdmans Critical Commentary. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, Co., 2010. vii + 2,075 pp. \$180.00. ISBN 9780802866387.

In his three-volume commentary on the Gospel and the Letters of John, Urban C. von Wahlde undertakes the enormous tasks of translating and commenting on the Johannine texts. His greatest contribution, however, is his detailed theory of composition for these works. Reacting to the growth in literary and narrative-critical studies on the Fourth Gospel, von Wahlde criticizes many of these scholars for glossing over or explaining away seams present in the text in favor of analyzing the Gospel in its final form. In contrast, he offers a thorough reconstruction in hopes of illustrating that one can follow a more nuanced path: one that traces the theological and literary development of the Johannine community even as it acknowledges the theological priority of the final edition of the Gospel.

Von Wahlde argues that there are three discernible editions in the Gospel of John. Building on the work of previous scholars, such as Robert Fortna, Raymond Brown, and J. Louis Martyn, von Wahlde suggests that we can trace the theological development of the Johannine community as it adjusted its

understanding of Jesus and the ramifications of his ministry in the face of various sources of opposition. The first edition is the most historical layer, reflecting a time before the community's separation from synagogues with a "low" Christology consistent with Jewish messianic expectations. The second edition blends the horizon of Jesus' time with that of the Johannine believers who are now being forced from the synagogue and persecuted by its original Jewish community, resulting in a higher Christology. The third, and final, edition revises the theology of the second in the wake of an internal schism reflected in the Johannine epistles. This third edition enshrines the Elder's interpretation of Jesus by introducing apocalyptic interpretations and ritualistic practices, clarifying the community's relationship with Synoptic traditions, and expressing the highest Christology in the Gospel particularly with its addition of the Prologue.

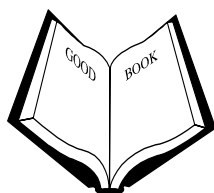
Von Wahlde faces at least two challenges in his work: the first is that his suggested first and second "editions" no longer exist for separate analysis; and the second is the setting of the editions within the context of the conflict within the synagogue, an issue now open to some debate among Johannine scholars. Moreover, the very nature of the method focuses on the seams



of the Gospel, while playing down the coherence of the final form of the text. Without external evidence to reinforce the identification of these layers, the stratification of editions remains hypothetical and being aware of the possible and various layers of the Gospel does not replace the coherence and the literary artistry that does exist in the final form. Indeed, although not the focus of his work, von Wahlde's examination actually underlines some of the consistency that does exist as a result of the thorough redacting of the third edition.

Overall, the work is carefully constructed, thoroughly stated, and thoughtfully articulated. The book is directed at those who have a solid grasp of Johannine scholarship and may be overwhelming for a reader new to the field. However, von Wahlde renders an intelligible history of composition without being dogmatic about his conclusions. His approach opens a number of interesting interpretive avenues and encourages us not to separate our interpretation of the Gospel completely from its related epistles. This commentary will be a mainstay of Johannine scholarship for the foreseeable future thanks to von Wahlde's careful research and thorough presentation.

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The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary, by Bruce K. Waltke and James M. Houston, with Erika Moore. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010. xii + 626 pp. \$30.00. ISBN: 978-0-8028-6374-4.

What first interested me when I looked at this book is that it addresses two concerns that are important in my own life and work: the Psalms and Christian worship. As a student of the Hebrew Bible and a pastor concerned about the practices of personal piety and the leadership of corporate worship, the Psalms continue to hold a favored place in my life. Furthermore, a commentary that reflects on the rich usage of the Psalms in the worshipping community appealed to me because it seemed that it would be both inspiring and practical.

With the genre of Bible commentary producing ever thicker tomes, the working pastor needs to be frugal about selecting books that offer accessible guidance to the personal appreciation and public application of the biblical text. From this perspective, it appears that this offering by Bruce Waltke and James Houston would be a welcome addition to any pastor's shelf. One

caveat should be pointed out, though, and that is that this commentary only addresses thirteen psalms, so it is really a supplement to a collection of resources that would no doubt include more complete commentaries by figures such as Hans-Joachim Kraus or James Mays.

The book opens with a useful introduction to the purpose of this particular commentary, which the authors describe as enriching the "daily life of the contemporary Christian" and "deepening the church's community worship." For each of the psalms that have been chosen for comment, the writers survey what they have termed examples of "accredited exegesis," which set forth for the reader a picture of how the selected psalms have been interpreted by believing communities from as far back as Second Temple Judaism and down to and beyond the rise of the historical critical method.

Having enlisted the help of Erika Moore, the authors begin their commentary with a survey of the history of the interpretation of the Psalter as a whole. Following this introduction, thirteen psalms are explored in depth (Psalms 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 15, 16, 19, 22, 23, 51, 110 and 139). The authors report that they made their selection based on four goals. First, they wanted to address psalms that "have played a basic and pivotal role in the life of the worshipping church." Second, they chose psalms

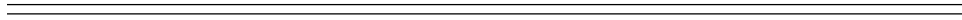
that “laid a solid foundation for Christian apologetics.” Third, they selected psalms that illustrated various genres and perspectives. Fourth, they chose psalms that seemed to them to “highlight historical perspectives” in the interpretation of the Psalter.

In the latter section of the book, where the main body of the commentary is found, readers are offered comments on each psalm that are arranged in at least three sections. The first is a history of the interpretation of the psalm titled “Voice of the Church.” The second is a translation of the psalm termed “Voice of the Psalmist.” The third is a verse-by-verse commentary. The approach employed by Waltke and



Houston seems reminiscent of the approach of the Ancient Christian Commentary, edited by Thomas Oden, although it appears that there is a more critical evaluation of past interpretation in this particular commentary than there is in the ACC, and this issue may be what determines for the reader whether or not to purchase this useful volume. Those who are comfortable with the “evangelical” perspective of Waltke and Houston will enjoy the book, but those who are not will prefer other choices.

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II. Historical-Theological Studies

What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith, by Thomas G. Long. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011. 172 pp. \$25.00. ISBN 978-0-8028-6514-4.

Without doubt, the most intractable and glaring challenge to the intellectual integrity of the Christian faith is the problem of pain and suffering. Why do bad things happen to good people . . . or to anyone for that matter? If God is all powerful and wills only what is good, why allow murder, child-abuse, cancer, diabetes, earthquakes, hailstorms, and the rest? For Tom Long, the Bandy Professor of Preaching at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Christian scholars and ministers no longer have the luxury of dodging this question. It must be faced head on.

Christians today feel themselves torn between two worlds: the world of science and the world of religion. At the same time that we thank God for sending the gentle rain, we watch the atmospheric pressure patterns on

the Weather Channel. We straddle two worlds: the world of enchantment and the world of disenchantment, religion and science, faith and medicine, God's providence and human politics. And we might live this way indefinitely, but then tragedy strikes and we are forced to wonder why God keeps silent. Can God stop evil? Is there a God who cares?

There are no easy answers to these tough questions, of course. This is the first thing to say, but not the last. There is a conversation to be had, and yet too many well-meaning theologians and pastors excuse themselves from the question altogether. Tom Long concedes that some of this hesitancy springs from two prudent cautions. First, Christians should beware of spouting answers too quickly lest they fall into disastrous theological pitfalls. Long suggests that we clearly define the terms of the discussion before stepping into it. Second, Long cautions there is an appropriate time to observe "a ministry of presence," a quiet ministry of silent suffering

alongside the other who is in the midst of pain. Sometimes even the right answer is the wrong one and any word of consolation sounds cheap and glib. Noting these two cautions, Long is convinced that there is also a time to speak, and to do so robustly.



there is a good, even if mysterious, reason for that. God's power is persuasive, subtle, and patient more often than coercive, explosive, and instantaneous.

Long's book, *What Shall We Say?*, helps us know how to say what must be said. He recommends that we give special attention to the very words we use. When we talk of God in the context of theodicy, Long suspects that too often we are conceiving God as "a large source of willful energy outside of nature" who could exert that energy "from the outside into the natural system to change the course of events" (p. 88). This might represent what we would like of God, but it is not how the Bible presents God. To find a corrective, Long appeals to Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds from Matthew 13. In the parable, field-workers discover that an enemy has sown weeds in with the wheat. If we were God, we would use our power to rip out the weeds and destroy the enemy, but in the parable the owner of the field commands the workers not to do this. God does not use divine power the way we would, and

God's power is expressed most clearly on the cross of Christ. It is the power of weakness, foolishness, and suffering, to be sure, but Long wants us to see that it is also the power of victory over the evil one. Christ's death does violence to the law of sin and death. The Prince of Peace is also the Warrior strong in battle (p. 145). "In Christ, the God of eternity, the God who transcends past, present, and future, enters all time and redeems it" (p. 150). Ultimately, the victory over evil is more than a misty hope for the future; it impacts the present and even extends into the pain of the past. "Everything about evil – its vain and false claims of final victory, its pain caused in the present, its grip on our memory and our history – everything is thrown into the fire to be burned. Evil can claim no victories" (p. 151). The love of God in Christ is quietly at work among the wheat and the weeds of the world – today, tomorrow, and even yesterday.

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III. Ministerial Studies

A Liturgy of Grief: A Pastoral Commentary on Lamentations, by Leslie C. Allen. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011. 208 pp. \$21.99. ISBN 978-0-8010-3960-7.

Leslie C. Allen, senior professor of Old Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, writes this commentary specifically for hospital chaplains. His *Liturgy of Grief* explores the five melancholy poems of a Mediterranean people interacting with God. Through his triad of “tears, talk, time,” Allen shares the important stages and experiences of pain for individuals that are utilized in Lamentations. Tears give the human experience new understanding of worldly experience and empathy. Talk acknowledges haunting pasts and articulates emotions into words of expression. Naming grief through talking helps identify the anguish within the soul. Although Lamentations does not reach a joyful resolution, the process of time continues the journey of grief into healing when tended properly. Through these three pastoral care

perspectives, Allen reads and interprets the biblical example of vocalized grief in poetic form.

Lamentations, written for the starving survivors of Judah, uses woeful language that is typically banned from funerals and life celebration services in the present day church. Rather than embracing the grief of loss and the life cycle, current congregations jettison emotional responses to death. Allen argues for the use of Lamentations as a liturgy for crying out to God. Placed on the lips of Zion, the poems exemplify the communal response to tragedy.

Allen separates the five poems of Lamentations into the subsequent chapters of his book. Each chapter compares the poetic grievances with other biblical passages much like an exegetical commentary. In contrast, however, Allen aims to create a pastoral element through interpretation. Throughout each chapter he relates other classic grief-stricken writings, from Nicholas Wolterstorff to Elie Wiesel, to assist pastors and chaplains in counseling

people through loss. Allen stresses the importance of movement through grief, guilt and grievance (or complaint), as expressed in Lamentations, for natural progression of emotion.



The first four chapters tackle complicated emotions of pain and guilt associated with grief. In his conclusion, using the final chapter and consequently the final prayer of Lamentations, Allen turns from cries of pain and guilt to a movement of repentance. The people of God lift up hearts as a cry for help. Comparing the feeling of God's people to that of a new convert to Alcoholics Anonymous, the steps of emotional repentance lead to hopefulness on the other side of mourning. Although the biblical passage ends in outcry, its primary expression reveals hope in the future with God. For believing individuals, faith leads the way to hope through the tunnel of grief. As a hospital chaplain, with only a few moments to plant the seeds of grace for those downtrodden and ridden with sorrow, the theology of Lamentations as summarized by Allen in tears, talk, and time leads to transformation for the individual long after a hospital stay. Even when God appears to be apathetic to grief, the author reiterates how the

perspective of time illuminates God's presence in the face of trouble.

Although Allen's book is not a deeply academic commentary, his analysis of a difficult subject will assist those in grief recovery counseling. The book is highly recommended to chaplains, pastors, and lay leaders seeking healthy methods of pastoral care for grieving individuals. The five chapters of Allen's book outline the five chapters of Lamentations, creating a helpful method for preaching and sermon preparation. In addition, the bibliography suggests several complimentary readings for believers wrestling with despair. Overall, the book provides a comprehensive approach to grief and the grieving person's response to God, using Lamentations as an outline. The subject is applicable to all forms of pastoral care, and Leslie Allen reassuringly equips pastors with practical knowledge for carefully leading people through darkness and out the other side to light.

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Books Received

I & II Samuel, by A. Graeme Auld. Old Testament Library. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011. 712 pp. \$75.00. ISBN 978-0-664-22105-8.

The Intolerance of Tolerance, by D.A. Carson. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012. 196 pp. \$24.00. ISBN 978-0-8028-3170-5.

Intercultural Theology: Approach and Themes, ed. by Mark Cartledge and David Cheetham. London: SCM Press, 2011. 193 pp. \$55.00. ISBN 978-0-334-04351-5.

Beyond the Pale: Reading Theology from the Margins, ed. by Miguel A. De La Torre and Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011. 249 pp. \$40.00. ISBN 978-0-664-23679-3.

Beyond the Pale: Reading Ethics from the Margins, ed. by Stacy M. Floyd-Thomas and Miguel A. De La Torre. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011. 244 pp. \$40.00. ISBN 978-0-664-23680-9.

The Beauty of Holiness: The Caroline Divines and Their Writings, ed. by Benjamin Guyer. Norwich, Eng.: Canterbury Press, 2012. 220 pp. \$29.99. ISBN 978-1-84825-0987.

The Kingdom of God as Liturgical Empire: A Theological Commentary on 1-2 Chronicles, by Scott W. Hahn. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012. 272 pp. \$24.99. ISBN 978-0-8010-3947-8.

Henri Nouwen and Spiritual Polarities: A Life of Tension, by Wil Hernandez. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2012. 176 pp. \$16.95. ISBN 978-0-8091-4741-0.

The Desert Movement: Fresh Perspectives on the Spirituality of the Desert, by Alexander Ryrie. Norwich, Eng.: Canterbury Press, 2011. 246 pp. \$22.99. ISBN 978-1-84825-094-9.

Life After Death: A New Approach to the Last Things, by Anthony C. Thiselton. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012. 268 pp. \$24.00. ISBN 978-0-8028-6665-3.

Psalms as Torah: Reading Biblical Song Ethically, by Gordon J. Wenham. Studies in Theological Interpretation. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012. 256 pp. \$22.99. ISBN 978-0-8010-3168-7.

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