

## Jesus, the Sage

Jesus as a sage is mostly a wisdom category for approaching His teaching. Ben Witherington underscores that the wisdom side to Jesus as presented in the synoptics is rather dominant.

Those who collected, edited, and passed on the Jesus tradition also seem to have gone out of their way to emphasize the Wisdom element in Jesus' teaching, for no other literary type receives anywhere near the representation in the teaching material in the Synoptics. By even a conservative estimate, at least 70% of the Jesus tradition is in the form of some sort of Wisdom utterance such as an aphorism, riddle, or parable.<sup>1</sup>

Josephus describes Jesus as:

A wise man...who performed surprising feats and was a teacher of the sort of people who accept the truth gladly. Teaching outside where the Jewish people were [assembled] was a common mode for Jewish sages (e.g., Mt. 13).<sup>2</sup> With this accessibility, He won over many Jews.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus' teaching met people where they are, in thought forms to which they could relate.

Jesus as sage could be subsumed as within "the Law teacher" or the "prophet," especially since the wisdom Psalms and the second Temple literature fuse the categories of Law and wisdom together. However, second Temple Judaism expected a Messianic sage, Who had gained understanding from God.<sup>4</sup> Some second Temple Jewish sources even anticipated a pre-existent wisdom being,<sup>5</sup> but the Biblical text better handles this on the level of a literary metaphor "lady wisdom" in contrast to "the adulterous woman," rather than describing Christ's pre-existence as a female gendered Goddess (Prov. 8:1–9:12).<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the idea of Messianic sage emerges from the idea of the son of David, Solomon who was a wise teacher as well (1 Kgs. 3:12; Proverbs; Qoheleth). In such a wisdom program, wisdom or sapiential speech is vindicated in showing a consistency to the narrow way of the wise, in contrast to the broad way of the fool (Mt. 11:19; Lk. 7:35). For example, Harvey McArthur and Robert Johnson claim that the Hebrew word for

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Witherington, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), pp. 155–156; R. Riesner, (*Jesus als Lehrer* [Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1984]) counts some 247 parables in the synoptics.

<sup>2</sup> A. Büchler, "Learning and Teaching in the Open Air in Palestine," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 4(1913–14): 485–491; e.g., *J. Avodah Zarah* 43b.3.13, Rabban Johanan ben Zakai sat and taught in the shade of the Temple; *tos. Berachot* 4.16; *Tosefta Kefshuto*; *m. Yebamot* 12.6; *b. Erubin* 54b.

<sup>3</sup> Josephus, *Ant.* 18.63; some of this *Testimonium Flavianum* likely has Christian interpolations, the portion cited is widely accepted by Jewish and Christian scholars.

<sup>4</sup> *4Q381* frag. 15.7 says, "and I your anointed one have gained understanding."

<sup>5</sup> *Sir.* 24.3ff; *1 En.* 42.1–3; *Eth. Enoch* 93.8; 94.5; 98.3; *4 Esr.* 5.9; *S. Bar.* 48.33–36; cf. Leo Perdue, *Wisdom & Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), pp. 84–98.

<sup>6</sup> Thus the Christian tradition of Christ's divine wisdom pre-existence (e.g., Justin, *Apol.* 1.21.1; *Dial.* 61.1f; 128.4; Tatian, *Or.* 5.1 and 7.1) from allegorical understanding of lady wisdom are not reflective of the Biblical text.

parable (*mashal*) beneath Matthew 7:29, *ke-moshel*, could be taken either “as a ruler” or “as a parabler.”<sup>7</sup> In light of this, Solomon as King was an exemplar of wisdom. Thus, the sage ministry of Jesus could also be thought of as an expression of His kingly ministry as well. However, Jesus identified that His presence was greater than the wisdom of Solomon (Mt. 12:42; Lk. 11:31). Furthermore, the people were amazed at Jesus’ wisdom and His healing authority (Mt. 13:54; Mk. 6:2).

However, in traditional wisdom, C. R. Fontaine develops that the saying normally support norms, rituals, beliefs, and institutions of existing society observable in creation and coded in authoritative language.<sup>8</sup> Such ancient Near Eastern wisdom tended to be primarily oriented for preparing the wealthy and royalty for their life and rule (e.g., Pr. 1:1, 8–10)<sup>9</sup>, rather than Jesus’ emphasis on the poor. It is regularly apparent that Jesus’ parables reflect plebian concerns, vocations and perspective. Craig Blomberg points to five features which Jesus’ parables share with second Temple Jewish parables: similar introductory formulae, similar structure, similar length, similar topics, varied interpretations.<sup>10</sup> He then contrasts their differences as: rabbinic parables support conventional wisdom, there are frequent added interpretations in the rabbinic material, and the future Kingdom focus in Jesus’ parables is an unusual emphasis. Furthermore, the parabolic teaching (narrative *meshalim*) is not common among such sages, but is instanced among a prophetic modification of wisdom form (e.g., 2 Sam. 12:1–4; Isa. 5:1–6; Ezek. 17:3–10). For example, the song of the vineyard of Isaiah 5:1–7 is a close parallel to Jesus’ parable of the wicked tenants in that both spell out judgment on Israel for their rebelliousness (Mt. 21:33–44; Mk. 12:1–11; Lk. 20:9–18). As Ben Witherington says, “the narrative *meshalim* reflect a prophetic adaptation and expansion of a Wisdom and poetic form of speech, the simile, to serve prophetic narrative concerns.”<sup>11</sup> Additionally, the closest approximation from Jesus to the prophetic formula “thus says the Lord” is the statement in Luke 11:49, “the wisdom of God says.”

Witherington summarizes new developments in *Ben Sirah* over these wisdom sages and prophets.

In the study of Ben Sira, important new developments were noted including: (1) a sage’s claim to be inspired like the prophets and so offer some new revelation from God in sapietial form: “I will again pour out teaching like prophecy” (*Sir.* 24:33); and (2) the sage is said to study and draw on prophetic material (*Sir.* 39:1). In *Wis.* 7:27 one hears that when the spirit of Wisdom passes into

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<sup>7</sup> Harvey McArthur and Robert Johnston, *They also Taught in Parables: Rabbinic Parables from the first Centuries of the Christian Era* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), p. 107.

<sup>8</sup> C. R. Fontaine, *Traditional Sayings in the Old Testament. A Contextual Study* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1982), pp. 150–151.

<sup>9</sup> E.g., Sumerian: *Instruction of Suruppak*; Babylonian: *Counsels of Wisdom*; Ugaritic: *Counsels of Shubeawilum*; Egyptian: *Instruction of Merikare*; *Instruction of Any*; *Instruction of Amenope* which provides close parallels that Proverbs 22:17–24:22 probably copied. Later under second Temple Judaism a school of wisdom may have developed as an official training facility but there is no evidence earlier of this (cf. *Sir.* 51:23).

<sup>10</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), pp. 58–68; Harvey McArthur and Robert Johnston, *They also Taught in Parables* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), the whole book is a rich resource for Jewish parables and their parallels in the N.T. but especially pp. 109–118, 181–196.

<sup>11</sup> Ben Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, p. 158.

someone's soul she makes them "friends of God, *and prophets*" (*Wis.* 7:27). Here the sage is seen as the one who delivers the prophetic word. Consider also the later saying from the *Talmud* (*B. TB. Batra* 12a) that God took prophecy from the prophets and gave it to the sages.<sup>12</sup>

A Hellenistic rival model, that of Jesus as Cynic Sage, has been championed by John Dominic Crossan.<sup>13</sup> Jesus as cynic is seen as following the pattern of the cynic movement founder, Diogenes of Sinope (400–325 B.C.). Diogenes' teaching stressed self-sufficiency and simple living, presented boldly with blunt speech. In this, Diogenes' showed little respect for authority, even being called "the dog" for his shameless behavior. Diogenes urged his followers to be true to this chosen lifestyle even if it required crucifixion. However, Crossan qualifies that Jesus doesn't fit the Greco-Roman pattern of city dwelling market emphasis within cynicism because he admits that Jesus is more a rural peasant figure. One might wonder whether the category of cynic fits Jesus at all beyond merely being a bold speaker for simple living. Additionally, the motivation in Jesus is not the cynic's self-sufficiency but rather a dependence upon God. Furthermore, Jesus has none of the asceticism and shameless behavior so common among the cynics. As developed before, Jesus has a prophetic thrust of the impending cataclysm and Kingdom, which Diogenes lacked. So the focus of Jesus teaching is elsewhere than that of a cynic.

It is from this prophetic perspective, that Witherington presents Jesus as a Jewish prophetic sage.

I submit that the vast majority of the Gospel sayings tradition can be explained on the hypothesis that Jesus presented himself as a Jewish prophetic sage, one who drew on all the riches of earlier Jewish sacred traditions, especially the prophetic, apocalyptic, and sapiential material though occasionally even the legal traditions. His teaching, like Ben Sira's and Pseudo-Solomon's before him, bears witness to the cross-fertilization of the several streams of sacred Jewish traditions. However, what makes sage the most appropriate and comprehensive term for describing Jesus, is that he either casts his teaching in a recognizably sapiential form (e.g., an aphorism, or beatitude, or riddle), or uses the prophetic adaptation of sapiential speech—the narrative *marshal*. In either case he speaks by various means of figurative language, thus choosing means of address required concentration and rumination to be understood.<sup>14</sup>

This means that the wisdom side of Jesus teaching is less about a collective generalization from experience of the creation order (the ancient Near East wisdom

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<sup>12</sup> Ben Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, p. 158.

<sup>13</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991); *In Fragments: The Aphorisms of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983); *The Cross that Spoke: The Origins of the Passion Narrative* (1988); *Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus* (1995); this view is nicely critiqued in Ben Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, pp. 117–145.

<sup>14</sup> Ben Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, pp. 155–208; B. B. Scott, "Jesus as Sage: an Innovating Voice in Common Wisdom," in *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary of the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), pp. 399–415; L. G. Perdue, "The Wisdom Sayings of Jesus," *Forum* 2(1986): 3–35.

tradition) and more casting a vivid vision for the future Kingdom of God, and how we ought to be in light of the inbreaking of this Kingdom (the prophetic use of wisdom). So, Jesus does not call His followers to resignation about how creation is. He rather calls His followers to work for how the new creation or Kingdom will become. Thus, Jesus has very little purely proverbial material, such as: “no one can serve two masters” (Mt. 6:24; Lk. 6:43), or “life does not consist in the abundance of one’s possessions” (Lk. 12:15), or “a city set on a hill cannot be hid” (Mt. 5:14). However, the aphorisms are a bit more common, such as “many that are first will be last and the last first” (e.g., Mk. 10:31), or “whoever would save his life, will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake...will save it” (e.g., Mk. 8:35), or “you cannot serve God and mammon” (e.g., Mt. 6:24). Instead, Jesus asserts a counter order to the *status quo* to urge a better Kingdom order, while not fully realized, it will come to pass. This counter order thrust to wisdom fits better into the prophetic approach to wisdom.

Jesus is a sage throughout his ministry; He does not use wisdom as a response later. That is, parables and other figurative language permeate Jesus’ teaching ministry from even the earliest days, before the Jewish leadership rejected Christ (Lk. 4:14–30; 5:27–39). For example, when Jesus immediately announced his ministry in Nazareth, he used a parable (παραβολήν) in the announcement. Furthermore, in response to Jesus calling Levi, Levi funded a meal for tax collectors and sinners. At this occasion, some wondered about Jesus’ tactics of feasts in contrast to John the Baptist’s fasts, so Jesus addressed these issues by parables. Since Jesus identifies Himself as the bridegroom, it would be inappropriate for his disciples to fast while He was with them. Jesus use of parables (παραβολήν; Lk. 4:23; 5:36)<sup>15</sup> to communicate this: “a new patch is not sown onto an old garment and new wine is not put into old wineskins, but in new ones.” Often in Jewish contexts parables are simply introduced by designating that a parable will follow.<sup>16</sup> Both parables indicate that Jesus is doing a new thing, so he will use new methods.

### Interpreting Parables

A parable is a comparison or similitude, often in a small story form. Jesus drew upon concrete imagery familiar in daily life (like planting, reaping, shepherding and cleaning imageries) to communicate more abstract teaching like the Kingdom. Jesus parables are usually comparisons that have a contextual character, rather than timeless metaphors.<sup>17</sup> This contextuality is continued by the introduction formula of a comparison (“To what shall I compare,” e.g., Mt. 11:16; Lk. 7:31–32)<sup>18</sup> or he begins with a contextually connected question (e.g., Lk. 11:5; 14:28; 17:7).<sup>19</sup> In such parables the

<sup>15</sup> Similar to the mixture of old and new wisdom in *Sir.* 33.16–17.

<sup>16</sup> *P. Taanith* 3.4; *B. Berakoth* 11a; 61b; *ARNa* 16.3; 31.3; *ARNb* 30; *Semachoth* 8.10; *Mek. Beshallach* 2.107–18, 142–55; cf. Mc Arthur and Johnston, *They also Taught in Parables*, p. 115.

<sup>17</sup> C. Westermann, *The Parables of Jesus in the Light of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), pp. 182–183; B. Gerhardsson, “The Narrative Meshalim,” 339–363; “If we Do not Cut the Parables out of their Frames,” pp. 321–335.

<sup>18</sup> Such comparisons also begin extra Biblical second Temple Jewish parables (*B.T. Šabb.* 153a; *B.T. Rosh Hashananh* 17b; *Mish. Aboth* 3.18; 4.20; *Tos. Suk.* 2.6; *B.T. Pes.* 87b).

<sup>19</sup> Such questions also begin extra Biblical second temple Jewish parables (e.g. *B.T. Rosh Hashananh* 17b; *Mish. Aboth* 3.18; 4.20; *Tos. Suk.* 2.6; *B.T. Pes.* 87b; *Mek. Pischa* 16.62, 67; *Mek. Beshallach* 2.107).

focus of the comparison is often delineated in one word which quickly follows: for example, “it is like a king.”<sup>20</sup> So I advocate that parables are to be interpreted, reflecting the near textual contextual emphasis. I also value the second Temple Jewish context as providing possibilities of interpretation that can banish traditions from later ages, but should not be used to over-rule the near textual emphasis. This approach is a balance between the extremes of taking parables as allegory or as simple messages.

Some approach parables virtually as allegories with all the features in the parable standing for something in a person’s life. In our tradition the parables most likely to be taken this way are: 1) the parable of the sower (Mt. 13:1–23; Mk. 4:3–20; Lk. 8:5–15), because Jesus identified so many items within it or its usefulness in laying out a framework,<sup>21</sup> and 2) the parable of the prodigal son (Lk. 15:11–32) because of its usefulness for conveying either the gospel<sup>22</sup> or Israel’s captivity and regathering<sup>23</sup> with issues like the unproductivity of sinning and the loving father who some wish to see as a picture of God. We need to remember that parables like this circulated and were told in second Temple Judaism without reference to these themes we are prone to impose upon them.<sup>24</sup> In such an allegorical approach the parable takes on a life of its own, de-contextualizing itself as a separate literary text. When this is done the parable gets framed under the rubric of the theological beliefs of the interpreter. For example, in the parable of the soils, the seed which pictures “the word of the Kingdom” (Mt. 13:19) becomes understood as a contemporary statement of the gospel. An Augustinian-Dispensational Christian approach to this parable sees Satan preventing some (beside the road) from coming to Christ, others to be saved with the joy of salvation even if they go into longstanding carnality (caused by persecution or the world), and still others who realize fruitfulness as an evangelist and through the Holy Spirit’s fruitfulness.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, a Reform approach to this parable sees: Satan, persecution and the world as major causes for people’s rejection of Christ, and only one soil becoming saved as evidenced by the believer’s abundant fruitfulness.<sup>26</sup> Notice, one tradition takes three soils as saved, while the other takes only one to be assured of salvation. Such approaches may rip the parable out of its textual and historical context. For example, is “the word of the Kingdom” really an evangelical gospel (of trust in the death and resurrection of Christ)? Likewise is this parable trying to present a Christian life guide for reformation

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<sup>20</sup> E.g., *Tos. Berakoth* 7.18; *Tos. Baba Kamma* 7.4; *B. Berakoth* 11a, 61b; cf. Mc Arthur and Johnston, *They also Taught in Parables*, pp. 115–116.

<sup>21</sup> N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Mineapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), pp. 230–239 argues that this parable provides an apocalyptic structure like Daniel 2, in which a core Kingdom group brings forth abundant fruit.

<sup>22</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *The Waiting Father. Sermons on the Parables of Jesus*. translated by John Doberstein (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959).

<sup>23</sup> N. T. Wright, *Jesus*, pp. 125–131 argues for this approach.

<sup>24</sup> A similar parable to the prodigal son of Luke 15: 11–32 was told by: rabbi Absalom the Elder *Mek. Beshallah* 4.35–41 and rabbi Meir in *Deut. R.* 2.24; *Pesikta Rab.* 44.9; *Ex. Rab.* 46.4. Likewise, similar parables to the lost coin were told by rabbi Phineas ben Jair in *Song Rab.* 1.1.9; rabbi Nehemiah in *Gen. Rab.* 39.10; and *Ruth Rab.* 8.1. Furthermore, the lost sheep parable was also told in Mt. 18:12–14; *Ex. Rab.* 2.2; and *Gen. Rab.* 86.4.

<sup>25</sup> E.g., John Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), pp. 97–99.

<sup>26</sup> E.g., David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew. NCBC* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 228–230 is better connected to the context that more popular works.

soteriologies? It seems to me that it would be better to read these parables in their own literary and second Temple context.

A second approach tends to emphasize a simple message for cognitive or volitional action.<sup>27</sup> In this, the parables of mustard seed and leaven are often taken to be virtually an identical cognitive message of: the Kingdom starts small and grows to be large (Mt. 13:31–33; Mk. 4:31–32; Lk. 13:19–21).<sup>28</sup> At times there is little acknowledgement that the imageries work in different ways, namely the mustard seed, proverbial for its small size,<sup>29</sup> grows to be a twenty foot tree; emphasizing size.<sup>30</sup> While, the leaven emphasizes a permeation adding the additional comment that all of it gets leavened. As in the previous paragraph, there is also the danger in emphasizing an image by a broader orientation or system, rather than by the immediate context. For example, sometimes the dispensational approach to the parable of leaven will see that elsewhere leaven is a metaphor for evil and that the tares are an expression of growing evil, and conclude that there is the predisposition of evil at the end of the age that.<sup>31</sup> However, we need to remember that this parable is describing the Kingdom as leaven (Mt. 13:33; Lk. 13:20–21).<sup>32</sup> Which means that the Kingdom is already there (not just a millennial thing) and that the Kingdom *is* the leaven analogy (not that the leaven is an evil within it). If Jesus had meant the leaven to be a growing evil then He would have said the Kingdom is like bread, in which leaven was placed, but He identified that the Kingdom *is* the leaven. Perhaps the close parallel with the mustard seed should contextually remind us that these parables are both positive growing metaphors of the Kingdom: growing in size and permeation of reality.

Additionally, the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price (Mt. 13:44–46) have been taken as: 1) a cognitive message of the Kingdom is taken from Israel and bought by Gentiles,<sup>33</sup> or 2) a volitional message which is rooted in its rationale: the Kingdom is of inestimable worth, so there is some urgency in obtaining this Kingdom at whatever the cost.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps the treasure in this parable is similar to *The Copper Scroll (3Q15)* in a cave at Qumran that gave directions to caches of gold and silver.<sup>35</sup> In light of this, the interpretation of the loss of Israel seems imposed on the text by the first view for there is no development of this Gentile theme in the near textual context. However, in Jewish parallels the cultivated field as a treasure is seen as Israel let go by Egypt in the

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<sup>27</sup> Adolf Jülicher reacted against this allegorical approach; cf. *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* in two volumes (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1886, 1889, reprinted, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963).

<sup>28</sup> *Gos. Thom.* 20.2 (mustard seed) and 96.1 (leaven) both are Kingdom parables; E.g., David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew. NCBC* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 233–234.

<sup>29</sup> The mustard seed is the smallest seed in the region, not the world; Mt. 13:32; 17:20; Mk. 4:31; Lk. 13:19; 17:6; *m. Nid.* 5.2; *m. Tohar.* 8.8; *b. Ber.* 31a; *Lev. Rab.* on Lev. 24:2.

<sup>30</sup> This is likewise the emphasis in *Gos. Thom.* 20.2 emphasizing the growing size of the Kingdom.

<sup>31</sup> E.g., Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew*, pp. 182–183.

<sup>32</sup> This interpretation is slightly corroborated by *Gospel of Thomas* 96, which emphasizes that the leaven growing in size is the emphasis of the parable in that author, which by comparison would draw these two Matthew parables together to say the same thing: Kingdom starts small and grows large. Likewise the *Gospel of Thomas* 20.2 develops the parable of the mustard seed as about the Kingdom of God.

<sup>33</sup> E.g., Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1980), pp. 183–184.

<sup>34</sup> E.g., David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew. NCBC* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 237–238.

<sup>35</sup> Also, Virgil, *Aen.* 1.358–9.

exodus.<sup>36</sup> If these parallels inform Jesus' parable, then Jesus' teaching of the treasure of the Kingdom in the parable is in Israel but about to be bought again by another group. Only this time when the Kingdom moves to those who will purchase it, those who rule in Israel will likewise lose their governance as Egypt had over Israel during the exodus. If these parallel parables inform Jesus, then a judgment will occur on either Israel or Jewish leadership. In Matthew, Jesus does not develop who is the loser of the field, so no interpreter should be insistent about that. However, it seems that N. T. Wright reads this parable against the macroscopic historical stage that Gentiles largely replaced Israel in the Kingdom plan. Another reading could read it more closely to Matthew's perspective and that of his Jewish-Christian community. Perhaps the true Kingdom Judaism exits from the control of the rejected Jewish leaders and becomes the Jewish-Christian community which Matthew addresses (e.g., Mt. 21:28–22:14; 23:13–39). Remember that these parables follow fairly quickly Jesus instruction for His disciples to go only to Israel (Mt. 10:6) and Jesus while generous to a few believing Gentiles, focuses on the Jews (e.g., Mt. 15:21–29). If we allow Jewish parallels to inform the pearl parable, the pearl would be more closely aligned as the Law.<sup>37</sup> So that if we read these by the Jewish parallels, then a continuing Jewish Law embracing Kingdom community would be more likely. However, the complexity and slant of these Jewish parables does not seem to be developed by Jesus or Matthew specifically in the Matthew 13 context. Nor is the *Gospel of Thomas* 76 statement of the parable of the pearl and the *Gospel of Thomas* 109 statement of the parable of the treasure developing Law as it joins Matthew's Kingdom emphasis. So that while the fact of second Temple expression renders these views possible, the near textual context takes the meaning of these parables in another direction, that of Kingdom, which is corroborated by the *Gospel of Thomas*. The audience is the disciples (Mt. 13:36), so these parables need to make sense for them at this juncture of growing commitment. Perhaps it is better to see the parables as a call to the commitment to Kingdom in light of judgment mentioned immediately before and after the telling of these parables (Mt. 13:42–43, 48–50). To reinforce this impression it is helpful to see that this theme of judgment (through wheat and tares, and drag net) is really the same point. Which implies that the previous two brief parallel parables (of mustard seed and leaven) structurally connect together these two parables (of treasure and pearl). That is, the parables of treasure and pearl function in the same way: to urge the disciples to embrace the Kingdom. However, if we embrace a volitional unity of these two parables we may also neglect some of Jesus' words. That is, in one parable the man who joyfully found a treasure and re-hides it, so that he might legally buy it with the field, rather than stealing. Are the aspects of joy and legal possession important? The next parable about the pearl leaves these out as the volitional message is focused: obtain Kingdom at any cost.

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<sup>36</sup> Several Jewish parables work the theme of seller's regret once a field is sold cheaply but found to have treasure within it (*Mek. Beshallach* 2.142–55; *Pesikta de Rab Kahana* 11.7; *Song Rab.* 4.12.1; *Ex. Rab.* 20.2, 5; *Mechilta Derabbi Ishmael* on Ex. 14:6).

<sup>37</sup> Rabbi Simon tells of a similar parable in the teaching on Psalm 28:6 in which the king's son begs his father for a pearl the king owns and finally gives it to his son. In this parable the pearl is explained to be torah and the son is indicated to be Israel.

A third approach, which I advocate, tries to recognize the details of a parable in its textual context.<sup>38</sup> Such study fleshes out the details of the worldview while recognizing the literary distinct context emphasizes aspects of the message. I also appreciate the broader context of second Temple Judaism for its helpful confirming some of the possibilities for textually meaning, and excluding other meaning claims as driven by more recent traditions. This approach recognizes that the parables are imbedded within contexts and are often pliable to that context. For example, the parable of the lost sheep has a significantly different meaning in its two Biblical contexts, two Jewish rabbinical instances, and the *Gospel of Thomas*. For example, Luke 15:1–32, three parables address grumbling Pharisees and scribes urging them to rejoice when sinners are found by Jesus as the shepherd, while in Matthew 18:1–20 Jesus urges his disciples as shepherds to humbly look out for the everlasting welfare of all the church including children.<sup>39</sup> In two other Jewish instances of the same parable the meaning changes further: 1) the *Exodus Rabbah* 2.2 identifies Moses as the appropriate leader of Israel because he went after a straying sheep, and 2) in *Genesis Rabbah* 86.4 a straying cow wanders into a Gentile area showing Jews the need to recover their own from Gentile ways. In each of these four instances the parable is the same lost sheep (or one had a cow) but the contexts significantly re-identified the characters and the volitional urge. The *Gospel of Thomas* 107 tells the parable about the largest and thus the most loved sheep as strayed and then rescued. The volitional point for each parable shifted: Luke 15 was about joy, Matthew 18 about: take responsibility for fellow travelers toward Kingdom, *Exodus Rabbah* 2.2 was about Israel recognizing God had chosen Moses as evidenced by his demonstrated character, *Genesis Rabbah* 86.4 called Israel to recover Jews from Gentile ways, and *Gospel of Thomas* 107 was about devaluing the rest for the most valuable. So it is important to interpret a parable sensitive to the context with in which it is found. Each of these parables meaning is changed by the context. So parables must be interpreted in light of their immediate textual context.

### Kingdom Parables

When Jesus began to proclaim the Kingdom of God, He did so by teaching parables, such as the parable of the sower, which could be better known as the parable of the soils, since that is the issue on which it focuses (Mt. 13:1–9, 18–23; Mk. 4:3–20; Lk. 8:5–15).<sup>40</sup> Jesus addressed the multitude with this parable from a boat and then interpreted the parable later to His disciples, who asked what it meant. This approach of

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<sup>38</sup> This approach is also advocated by others such as: John Dominic Crossan, “Parable and Example in the Teaching of Jesus” *Semeia* 14(1974): 63–104; Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting Parables* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990); Mc Arthur and Johnston, *They also Taught in Parables*; Ben Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*; cf. C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Glasgow: William Collins Sons and Co., 1935, 1961); A. T. Cadoux *The Parables of Jesus* (London: Clark, 1931); Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1947, 1981).

<sup>39</sup> This meaning is especially the case if Matthew 18:11 is not seen as within the Biblical text, since it is not represented by the earliest or best manuscripts.

<sup>40</sup> Similar parables are told in: *M. Aboth* 5.10–15 [especially verse 12 which describes four kinds of hearers: 1) slow to hear and swift to lose, 2) slow to hear and slow to lose, 3) swift to hear and swift to lose, and 4) swift to hear and slow to lose]; *Pesikta Rab.* 11.2; *ARNa* 40.9; *Gos. Thom.* 9 statement of the parable is in W. D. Davies and Dale Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 2:386, but the gospel does not add an interpretation like the Biblical texts.

public discourse followed by private explanation is a common Jewish method enabling the disciples to go further.<sup>41</sup> In the parable, the sower is unidentified. The seed is the message of the Kingdom, which should be understood as largely defined by Jesus' previous Kingdom teaching such as in the Sermons on the Mount and Plain.<sup>42</sup> Matthew and Luke get right to the significance of the soils as those who decide (Mt. 13:19; Lk. 8:11 compared to Mk. 4:14). There are some who hear the word of the Kingdom but they do not understand it, and the evil one takes the word away.<sup>43</sup> Even though these may contemplate the Kingdom message ("in his heart"), the Kingdom message is no longer accessible to them. There are others who hear the word and receive it with joy but because it gained no root in its rocky environment, when persecution came the outcome was stumbling (σκανδαλίζεται), which in Matthew's terminology is damnation in everlasting hell (Mt. 11:6; 13:41–42; 18:7–9). There are others caught up in the worry of the world and the deceitfulness or pleasures of riches. The message of the Kingdom is not received but gets choked out by these cares so that the message remains unfruitful (ἄκαρπος). This imagery of unfruitfulness remains ambiguous in not defining where the person is between those of a clearer life of good or bad fruit, who can clearly be delineated as included or excluded from Jesus' Kingdom (Mt. 7:17–18). Luke may imply further ambiguity by the description that the fruit does not bring about maturity (τελεσφοροῦσιν; Lk. 8:14). This ambiguity raises a lack of clarity about whether these will make it to the Kingdom or not. The final soil is good in that this man hears the word of the Kingdom, understands it and the person himself epitomizes this message so that he (not merely the word) brings forth the abundant fruitfulness,<sup>44</sup> which clearly identifies these people with the Kingdom. Jesus concludes the parable with the exhortation for his audience to understand, and thus to join the last group of Kingdom-responsive people.

The Lukan and Markan context spins the parable of the soils into the parable of the lamp (Mk. 4:21–25; Lk. 8:16–18). Oil lamps that are lit are used to shine light to their whole environment, not to be under a basket (Mt. 5:14–15; Mk. 4:21; Lk. 8:16; 11:33).<sup>45</sup> This parable is used by Jesus in at least two different situations. Matthew records it as an exhortation to do good works, thereby glorifying God (Mt. 5:14–16). That is, the disciple is to let this light quality of his life be visible to others by doing good works reflective of the beatitudes narrow way (Mt. 5:16). Luke used the parable more as a warning that anything secret will become known. This Lukan use presses further the exhortation of the parable of the soils to a careful to *listen and apply* the Kingdom message because whoever possesses the Kingdom benefits will have more given to them. In contrast to the one who does not have, even what he thinks he has will be taken away from him.<sup>46</sup> For example, Jesus' mother and brothers came to try and reach Jesus surrounded by the crowd (Lk. 8:19–21). In this situation Jesus belongs to the crowd

<sup>41</sup> This is a similar pattern to that of first century teacher Johanan ben Zacchai; cf. D. Daube, "Public Pronouncement and Private explanation in the Gospels," *ET* 57(1945–46): 175–77.

<sup>42</sup> These are developed in the chapters on Jesus as a Jew.

<sup>43</sup> Jesus' identification of the birds with Satan (Mt. 13:19) comports with Jewish tradition that reflects Azazel manifesting himself as an unclean bird (*Apoc. Abr.* 13; *Jub.* 11.11).

<sup>44</sup> Varro, *R.R.* 1.42.2 claims that seed in Syria could yield a hundredfold; cf. *Sib. Or.* 3.263–264; Theophrastus, *Hist. Plant.* 8.7.4; Strabo 15.3.11; Pliny, *N.H.* 18.21.94–95.

<sup>45</sup> The same point is made in *Gos. Thom.* 33b.

<sup>46</sup> The same point is made in *4 Ezra* 7.25; *Gos. Thom.* 41; *b.B. Qam.* 92a.

because it is they who hear and obey the word of God. Thus the crowd becomes Jesus' intimate family. Jesus' mother and brothers thought that they had Jesus, but he is taken from them and the intimate relationship with Jesus is given instead to those who hear and obey the word of God. The same historical incident appears immediately before Matthew's and Mark's description of the parable of soils, giving the impression that Jesus' immediate family and the multitude are being weighed in the balance as to which soil they are (Mt. 12:46–50; Mk. 3:31–35). His family is in a precarious place of losing Him. Whereas, for the multitude the judgment may still be open, until the next paragraph. They are wondering if Jesus is the Davidic Messiah (Mt. 12:23). Will the multitude hear the word of God and do it? Also in the Matthew and Mark context are the scribes and Pharisees, who reject Jesus as empowered by Satan to cast out demons (Mt. 12:14–45; Mk. 3:22–30). Jesus excoriates these religious leaders as evil in their blaspheming the Holy Spirit. They condemn themselves because what they say shows the evil they are within. These rejecting religious leaders sound rather similar to the soil by the road.

While Jesus teaches the multitude by the sea, the disciples asked why He taught the multitude in parables (παραβολαῖς; Mt. 13:10–17, 34–35). Jesus' sage ministry reveals hidden things and fulfills prophecy by teaching in parables. However, Jesus indicated that His students, the disciples who ask these questions, are those who have been granted the mysteries of the Kingdom, but the multitude has not been granted this privilege. He explained Himself by the same kind of statement He made about the parable of the lamp: whoever has, more will be given, up to an abundance; but whoever does not have, what he has shall be taken away from him. This shows the multitude to be precariously at risk because while hearing the parables, they do not understand. It is as though Isaiah's prophecy of hardening the people so that they could go into captivity is revisiting the multitude yet again. In the Hebrew text of Isaiah six, the prophet's ministry performs an active hardening role, whereas, the LXX which Matthew uses permits the multitude to harden themselves. Everything the multitude hears from Jesus hardens them more into an ignorant blindness if they do not respond with obedience unto Kingdom. Davies and Allison summarize this.

The course of salvation-history is not predetermined, for while God may extend his love towards his people, he does not force them to respond. Hence if Jesus' ministry has not brought about what one might have anticipated [coming Kingdom], the fault lies neither with him nor with God but with human sin and hardened hearts. In this way, then, the parable of the sower comes to function as an apologetic, even a sort of theodicy, explaining the evil that has befallen Israel.<sup>47</sup>

There is the need to be careful at this point not to make this description of the effect of Jesus' parabolic ministry a universal principle, such as, Jesus' teaching in parables hides the Kingdom from the rejecting religious leaders and multitude. I have already pointed out that Jesus' earliest teaching incorporates parables (Lk. 5:27–39; Mt. 5:13–16). Jesus elsewhere uses parables to clearly communicate to these religious

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<sup>47</sup> W.D. Davies and Dale Allison, *Matthew*, 2:375.

leaders who reject Him. For example, Simon the self-righteous Pharisee is addressed by Jesus through a parable of the two debtors who are forgiven and love proportionate to the amount forgiven (Lk. 7:41–50).<sup>48</sup> Jesus then blatantly applies the parable to issues of love and hospitality as evident in acts of: washing feet, giving a greeting kiss, and anointing with oil. Furthermore, in response to a lawyer’s question, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25–37).<sup>49</sup> Jesus blatantly answers the question indicating that the one who helps is acting as a neighbor and anyone in need is our neighbor that we should love in a practical way. After the pattern of the Good Samaritan is described Jesus tells the lawyer to go and do the same.

Additionally, when the Pharisees and scribes grumble about sinners coming to Jesus, Jesus told these grumblers three parables (the lost sheep, the lost coin, and prodigal son; Lk. 15:4–32) to urge them to rejoice when sinners are found instead of their grumbling. In our tradition we often preach the parable of the prodigal son to sinners and believers so as to communicate the gospel<sup>50</sup> but that is not what it means in this context. In the Jewish second Temple parallels to these parables the emphasis is in each of the following: 1) to seek the Law, which is truly valuable, 2) to show Moses’ character, and 3) to allow sinners to repent and be found by God without judging them.<sup>51</sup> The last meaning from second Temple Jewish parables of prodigal and lost coin have the same point that Luke emphasizes in this context. In Luke’s textual context, the three parables are all the same and should be preached to self-righteous grumblers who need to rejoice when sinners are recovered for the Kingdom. The repetition of the message to rejoice when the lost are found (Lk. 15:6–7, 9–10, 32) makes Jesus’ teaching blatantly clear; the grumblers should rejoice when sinners are recovered for the kingdom.

The parables of the two sons and the rented vineyard clearly communicate to the religious leaders as they reject John the Baptist’s and Jesus’ authority (Mt. 21:28–46; Mk. 12:1–11; Lk. 20:9–19).<sup>52</sup> The parable of the two sons sets up a question as to who really obeys: those who promise, or those who do the work asked by their father. The chief priests and elders recognize that *the truly obedient are those who do the father’s will*. Jesus responded with, “Truly I say to you that the tax-gatherers and harlots will get into the Kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him; but the tax-gatherers and harlots did believe him; and you seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him” (Mt. 21:31–32). In light of the Jewish parallel accounts the judgment is even harsher on those who are well informed and do not comply than those who may be more ignorant in their sin.<sup>53</sup> Jesus now follows with a parable about renting out a vineyard (Mt. 21:33–44; Mk. 12:1–11; Lk.

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<sup>48</sup> This was discussed previously in, “Kingdom Miracle Worker,” and “Mosaic Teacher of the Law,” section on “Love.”

<sup>49</sup> This was discussed previously under “Mosaic Teacher of the Law,” section on “Love.”

<sup>50</sup> E.g., Helmut Thielicke, *The Waiting Father. Sermons on the Parables of Jesus*. translated by John Doberstein (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959).

<sup>51</sup> A similar parable to the prodigal son of Luke 15:11–32 was told by: rabbi Absalom the Elder *Mek. Beshallah* 4.35–41 and rabbi Meir in *Deut. Rab.* 2.24; *Pesikta Rab.* 44.9; *Ex. Rab.* 46.4. Likewise, similar parables to the lost coin were told by rabbi Phineas ben Jair in *Song Rab.* 1.1.9; rabbi Nehemiah in *Gen. Rab.* 39.10; and *Ruth Rab.* 8.1. Furthermore the lost sheep parable was also told in Mt. 18:12–14; *Ex. Rab.* 2.2; and *Gen. Rab.* 86.4.

<sup>52</sup> Some similarities are in Isaiah 5:1–7; *Deut. Rab.* 7.4; and *Ex. Rab.* 27.9; *Gos. Thom.* 65–66.

<sup>53</sup> *Deut. Rab.* 7.4 and *Ex. Rab.* 27.9

20:9–18). At harvest time slaves were sent to collect the owner’s share of the produce. However, the renters beat and killed these slaves. Then the son was sent, but they killed the son supposing that they would then inherit the vineyard. Jesus asks them, “What will he do to the vine growers?” The religious leaders know and answered, that the owner “will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine growers, who will pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons” (Mt. 21:41). Jesus applied this parable to the religious leaders as the tenants; those who reject the Son, reject the chosen cornerstone to their own destruction. This was reminiscent of a parable of the condition of Judaism before the Babylonian conquest and captivity (Isa. 5:1–7). This means upon comparison, that the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans (in 70 and 135 A.D.) and their removing the religious leaders from power is predicted by Jesus. The chief priests and Pharisees realized Jesus had spoken this parable against them. They tried to lay hands on Him that very hour because they knew He spoke this parable against them (Mt. 21:45; Mk. 12:12; Lk. 20:19). The parable was blatant and it communicated, even though they were still prone to rebel. So Jesus’ parabolic ministry communicates; His intent is not concealment.

However, the nature of Jesus’ use of parables concerning the Kingdom in the sermon on the seashore is one of separating his audience into different response groups as the parable of the soils indicated. In this context, the multitude is precariously at risk of being hardened into ignorant blindness. In contrast, the disciples are blessed because they have the privilege of hearing these parables and understanding Jesus’ explanation of the parables’ meaning (Mt. 13:16–17). Prophets and righteous men desired this privilege but the disciples realize the benefit of understanding the message of the Kingdom. This clearly identifies the disciples with the fruitful soil in the parable of the soils. In this Robert Gundry reminds us that, “the typically Matthean οὐν ...helps turn Mark’s question into an authoritative command based on the forgoing beatitude, as though to say, ‘Since you are so blessed to hear, hear!’”<sup>54</sup>

Jesus describes a series of parables which communicate that the Kingdom grows. Jesus’ describes seeds which grow and produce crops automatically (αὐτομάτη; Mk. 4:26–29). Following this automatic growth and maturity, comes harvest time. Mark follows this with the parable of the mustard seed which highlights that the Kingdom starts small in Jesus’ present context and grows to be large (Mt. 13:31–32; Mk. 4:31–32; Lk. 13:19).<sup>55</sup> Matthew also has the mustard seed parable surrounded by a parable about growth of plants unto harvest (Mt. 13:24–43). Whereas, Luke leads off this discussion of the Kingdom with this parable (in contrast to judging Jesus’ healing on Sabbath). Matthew and Luke follow this parable with the parable of the leaven, which starts small in Jesus’ present context but then permeates everything with its Kingdom effect in time (Mt. 13:33; Lk. 13:21). This growth has already begun with many pressing their way into the Kingdom (Mt. 11:12; Lk. 16:16).<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Robert Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 258.

<sup>55</sup> B. Taanith 4a contains a simile of “a young scholar may be likened to seeds under a hard clod; once he has sprouted, he soon shoots forth.” However, the individual nature of this Jewish parable on growth leads in a different direction from the macro Kingdom growth in these Biblical mustard seed parables.

<sup>56</sup> Justin, *Dial.* 51.3.

Matthew surrounds these small parables by the description and interpretation of Jesus' parable of wheat and tares (Mt. 13:24–30, 36–43). For this parable, the land-owning sower is identified as the Son of Man (unlike the parable of the soils where the sower is ambiguous). The field is the world. The good seed are the sons of the Kingdom sown and growing to maturity in the world; the people of the Kingdom are the present expression of the growing Kingdom.<sup>57</sup> There is also an enemy, the devil, who sows his evil sons into the same world to grow up to maturity co-terminously in the world. No meaning is given to the “men sleeping” so none should be conjectured.<sup>58</sup> The Son of Man does not judge the devil's evil sons prematurely out of risk to harm those who are the sons of the Kingdom. So the opposition remains as the Kingdom grows, because Jesus is compassionate for the welfare of His sons of the Kingdom. When the end of the age comes, the Son of Man sends His angels to gather the devil's evil sons (stumbling blocks and those identified as Law violators) out of His Kingdom. This has the implication that the Son of Man's Kingdom is present from at least the Son of Man's ministry in the world and identified with the sons of the King in our present day. In the apocalyptic “end of the age,”<sup>59</sup> angels are used to gather the judged (Mt. 13:41; 16:27; 24:31; 25:31; Mk. 13:26; Lk. 21:27–28; Rev. 14:15–19).<sup>60</sup> The devil's sons are gathered out of (ἐκ) this Kingdom and are judged into the furnace of fire with its weeping and gnashing of teeth. The Jewish parallels to this parable identify that the focus is on separating of two peoples (parable of intertwined tree separates Jews from Ishmaelites; grain and ryegrass separates Jews from idolaters; and grain and stubble separates the grain as that which is truly valuable).<sup>61</sup> The Jewish pattern is that good and evil must stand together side by side until the eschatological judgment.<sup>62</sup> Likewise in this parable and its near textual parallel (Mt. 13:47–50), the separation of the damned from the Kingdom bound is critical. That is, the damned are the devil's evil sons and the parable of the soils has identified some of their characteristics. When this removal into judgment is done then the expression of Christ's Kingdom, which has been here since Jesus' ministry, moves into another phase when the righteous will shine brilliantly in God's Kingdom. This has implication that Christ's Kingdom and God's Kingdom is the same Kingdom; here there is no distinction between the Davidic and sovereign Kingdom. Those who make up the Kingdom are characteristically righteous in their lives. In that later stage of Kingdom, the virtuous character of the righteous Kingdom occupants brings their righteous character into dominating that new era. The interpretation of this parable ends with an exhortation to understand and apply the parable.

Matthew adds two unique parables about treasure and pearls, which we have already discussed (Mt. 13:44–46). The Kingdom is like a treasure found by chance,

<sup>57</sup> Such a present expression of Kingdom is corroborated by second Temple sources that identify the present expression of God's Kingdom as where God's people are (e.g., *Paris Ms* 110; *Sifre* on Deut. 32:10).

<sup>58</sup> Contrary to patristic interpreters that allegorize this (e.g., Jerome, *Comm. on Mt.*), and *Gos. Thom.* 57 don't even mention this in its version of the parable.

<sup>59</sup> *I En.* 16.1; *T. Levi* 10.2; *T. Benj.* 11.3; *As. Mos.* 12.4; *4 Ezra* 7.113; *2 Bar.* 13.3; 19.5; 21.8; 27.15.

<sup>60</sup> Angels often accompany a theophany (Deut. 33:2; Isa. 6:2–7; Ps. 68:17). Angels aid in the gathering of damned and elect (*Jer.* 51:53; *I En.* 54.6; 62.11; 63.1 *Apoc. Elijah* 3.4; *I En.* 1.6–9; *Asc. Isa.* 4.14; *4 Ezra* 4.26–37; 9.17; *2 Bar.* 70.1–2; *b. B. Mes.* 83b; *Midr. Ps.* on 8:1). Additionally, Gabriel blows the *šophar* for gathering into Kingdom (*Quest. Ezra B* 11; *Gk. Apoc. Ezra* 4.36).

<sup>61</sup> Similar parables are in *Gen. Rab.* 61.6 and 83.5; *Num. Rab.* 4.1; 11.2.

<sup>62</sup> *T. Abr.* A 10.

which a man joyously sells all to buy the field and the treasure. Likewise, the Kingdom is like a sought-for pearl of great value that costs everything. Each parable has the cognitive message that the Kingdom costs all that one has but it is well worth it. When both of these parables quickly follow the exhortation to understand and apply the previous parable, the message has the volitional import of obtain the Kingdom regardless of the cost.

Matthew adds a unique parable of the Kingdom being like a drag net, which in message and many of the particular phrases parallels that of the wheat and the tares (Mt. 13:47–50). Both parables bring this message: the present Kingdom grows until judgment when the wicked will be removed leaving the righteous in the Kingdom. It is possible that the Jewish disciples and readers would have thought of good versus bad fish through a kosher lens of clean and unclean fish (Lev. 11:9–12), rather than inedible. However, both these parables (wheat & tares, and drag net) and their Jewish parallels emphasize in this separation that of the damned from the righteous, as developed above.<sup>63</sup> The issue of damnation is probably more acutely mentioned here, since bad fish tended not to be burned but used as fertilizer,<sup>64</sup> while these bad fish are damned in tormenting fire. The *Gospel of Thomas* 8 includes a fish sorting parable in which the sorting takes place on the basis of size: large and beautiful, as opposed to too puny to eat. There the issue of damnation was not so acute. Additionally, another Jewish fish sorting parallel parable underscores the quality of disciple, as though the drag net parable and that of the soils were merged, which further underscores the separation of the damned from the righteous.<sup>65</sup> These two parables in this context (wheat & tares and drag net) also structure the sermon at the seashore in Matthew as follows: this message (wheat and tares), two parables on Kingdom growth (mustard seed and leaven), this message (wheat and tares interpreted), two parables on Kingdom cost (treasure and pearl), and this message (drag net). This structure tends to emphasize that present Kingdom life is lived righteously with the specter of judgment. Make sure you have bought into Kingdom!

With the closure of the sermon on the seashore, Jesus asks the disciples if they understand these things, which connects with the exhortations to understand and apply the message of the Kingdom (Mt. 13:51–52). The disciples said they understood these things. Jesus then turned the disciples' role into a scribal role of bringing forth new things of the Kingdom amid the old. The scribal role to which Jesus calls the disciples is somewhat a self portrait, which Jesus' emulated. The disciples' understanding the Kingdom now brings with it responsibility to communicate and apply the Kingdom into life.

Matthew 18 raises two parables associated with the Kingdom, thus fleshing out community virtues such as humility and forgiveness. These parables come in a context where Jesus' disciples were debating the issue of who is the greatest in the Kingdom and so they ask Jesus who that might be (Mt. 18:1–6; Mk. 9:33–37). Jesus called a child to Himself and set him before them saying that unless you turn from this concern for greatness and become humble like children, you shall not enter the Kingdom. The virtue

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<sup>63</sup> As a parallel parable to that of the wheat and tares (Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43) these Jewish parables are likewise parallel: *Gen. Rab.* 61.6 and 83.5; *Num. Rab.* 4.1; 11.2.

<sup>64</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:442.

<sup>65</sup> *ARNa* 40.9 has Rabban Gamaliel the Elder (ca. 40 A.D.) tell of four types of disciples: “unclean fish, clean fish, Jordon fish and the Great Sea fish.” Only the last is fully praised.

Jesus highlights is not childlike faith, but rather childlike humility. “Whoever humbles himself as this child is the greatest in the Kingdom. Such humility is a corporate virtue that thinks of others and compassionately protects them. Whoever compassionately includes a child in one’s life in Jesus’ name identifies with Jesus and includes Him in one’s life as well. But whoever causes one of these little ones to stumble or be damned, it would be better for all that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depths of the sea. Remember, the concept of stumbling (σκανδαλίση) is damning to everlasting fire in hell (Mt. 18:6–9; Jn. 6:61; 1 Cor. 8:9; Rom. 9:32–33).<sup>66</sup> It is an inevitable unfortunate feature of the world to have people that compel to damnation, but that man who would compel another to damnation is severely warned. It would have been better that a death occur to remove the person through whom the damnation comes. Death is better than damnation. Likewise, maiming oneself by cutting off the offending member is better than being damned through such a body part. Jesus is not exploring the relative merits of overcoming temptation by severing body parts, rather He is graphically portraying the extremity of what is at stake. It is well worth losing any body parts necessary in order to gain Kingdom life. Such compassionate severity looks for the overall welfare of a person in light of greater Kingdom issues. Which means that we are to be humbly compassionate toward others, including children. Such children even have angels caring for their well-being before the Father, so one would certainly want to work in harmony and not at cross purposes with this angelic care (Mt. 18:10).

In this context, the first parable is that of the straying sheep discussed before. Jesus urged his disciples as shepherds to humbly look out for the everlasting welfare of all the church including children (Mt. 18:12–14).<sup>67</sup> Though a different meaning than the other instance where Jesus tells this parable (Lk. 15:1–32) the meaning is the same here as the parallel Jewish parable in *Genesis Rabbah* 86.4. The disciple as a member of the Father’s family is responsible for the rest of the family, as would be a shepherd. The shepherd presumably would leave the flock in another’s charge as he goes to look for the straying sheep. As humble compassionate family members we are to rescue anyone straying toward damnation. If we rescue them from such a precarious place there is cause to rejoice. God’s family is to be inter-dependent and accountable to each other because it is not the will of our Father that any of these little ones perish. Which means that, this parable pictorially sets up church discipline as a humble compassionate means for recovering Kingdom family members so that they make it to the Kingdom. Church discipline fills out the details of the parable for how one goes about seeking for the lost among our Father’s family (Mt. 18:15–20). First, if your brother sins, go humbly and reprove him in private. Such reproof has parallels in the tradition of a sage (Pr. 3:12; 25:9–10; 27:5–6).<sup>68</sup> If he listens to you, you have won your brother. If he does not listen to you<sup>69</sup> then take one or two more who can humbly tell him that what he is doing is wrong and needs to be changed. There is the recognition in quoting Deuteronomy 19:15, that more witnesses might increase the leverage with the brother so that he might turn from his ways. If he refuses to listen to these witnesses, then tell it to the church

<sup>66</sup> *Sir.* 9.5; 25.21; 34.7; 15; 39.24; *IQS* 2.12; 3.24; *IQpHab* 11.7–8; *Jub.* 1.9; *Test. Reub.* 4.7.

<sup>67</sup> This meaning is especially the case if Matthew 18:11 is not seen as within the Biblical text, which is reasonable since it is not represented by the earliest or best manuscripts.

<sup>68</sup> *Ecclus.* 20.2.

<sup>69</sup> *b.* ‘*Arak.* 16b also indicates that the sinner may not repent.

(assembly of believers which at this time constituted the disciples; ἐκκλησίας).<sup>70</sup> If he refuses to listen to the church (ἐκκλησίας) then you let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer. This imagery of being treated like a Gentile or tax-gatherer is the same description as from the parallel Jewish parable.<sup>71</sup> In both contexts, Gentiles and tax-gatherers were considered sinners not heading toward the Kingdom, but broadly wandering toward damnation. The Jewish character shows through, Jesus' Kingdom ministry and Matthew's readers consider that Gentiles are at risk among those who habituated an alternative lifestyle to that of being Kingdom bound. These sinning brothers, like Gentiles and tax-gatherers have a habitual quality about themselves that would keep them going the wrong way.

Such church discipline is not without promised enablement, for the scribal role earlier given to Peter (Mt. 16:19) is now available for the whole assembly. That is, decisions on including or excluding practices and people are binding also in heaven which has great implications for one wishing to be involved with the Kingdom of heaven. Whoever and whatever is "bound" by the assembly as out of bounds are people and practices excluded from the Kingdom. Whoever and whatever is "loosed" by the assembly are people and practices included for the Kingdom. In this context of compassionate recovery to Kingdom, prayer becomes extremely valuable. These issues are not merely dealt with on a horizontal level. Two agreeing in prayer for the recovery of a straying brother are significant in eliciting the Father's aid in the recovery process. The promise is: the Father will do what His family members ask for Him to do in the process of recovering such a Kingdom family member. Furthermore, Jesus promises His enabling presence when two or three are gathered together, as when two or three witness to the straying brother, or when the church is trying to decide these issues and recover a brother. So Kingdom living is to be humble, compassionate, inter-dependent, mutually accountable and divinely enabled living.

In this context, Peter asks about the extent to which it is necessary for him to forgive (Mt. 18:21–22).<sup>72</sup> Peter realizes that church discipline requires forgiving his brother (whether it is Andrew or another Kingdom family member). Peter thought maybe a magnanimous seven times of forgiving was sufficient, but Jesus virtually says to continue to forgive an indefinite number of times without counting (which is the meaning of seventy times seven). Then Jesus tells the second Kingdom parable in this chapter; the one about forgiveness (Mt. 18:23–35). The Kingdom may be compared to a certain king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. One slave owed ten thousand talents<sup>73</sup> or

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<sup>70</sup> The disciples are already the church because the Matthew church discipline comments make sense and are meaningful within the historical context of the discussion. Additionally, Peter addresses the concern as relevant by his question in Mt. 18:21–22 playing off this preceding context.

<sup>71</sup> *Gen. Rab.* 86.4.

<sup>72</sup> Corroborated by *The Gospel of the Nazareans* 10 as reported by Jerome, *Against the Pelagians* 3.2.

<sup>73</sup> 10,000 is the largest single number Greek could express and talent is the largest unit of currency (Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], p. 458). Josephus, *Ant.* 12. 175–76 describes a tax farmer as offering to collect for Ptolemy up to 16,000 talents. Jerome gives the revenue from Egypt to Ptolemy to be 14,800 talents. Darius tried to purchase peace from Alexander the Great for ten thousand talents (Plutarch *Mor.* 180B; *Alex.* 29). So this servant is probably a highly placed political appointment or an outrageous amount to make an exaggerated point (like the cutting off of hands or eyes; Mt. 18:8–9). cf. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:798. The combined annual tribute of Galilee and Perea just after the death of Herod the Great was 200 talents (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.318).

virtually the national debt (since a talent is about 58-80 pounds of precious metal, such as gold). This slave did not have the means to repay so the lord commanded that he, his wife, his children and all that he had be sold to recoup a slight part of the loss. The slave fell down, prostrating himself before his lord saying, “Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything.” The lord of the slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt.<sup>74</sup> The slave went out and found a fellow slave who owed him a hundred denarii, or roughly a hundred days wages for a day laborer, and seized him. Putting a choke hold<sup>75</sup> on him, he said, “Pay back what you owe.” So his fellow slave fell down and began to entreat him saying, “Have patience with me and I will repay you.” The first slave was unwilling, however, and instead had him thrown in prison until he should pay back what was owed. Such a debtor’s prison does not pay the debt; it merely removes the person from being able to earn money so that family and friends might step forward to pay his debt. His fellow slaves were deeply grieved over what had happened so that they reported it to their lord. The lord summoned the slave saying, “You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you entreated me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you? His lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers<sup>76</sup> until he should repay all that was owed him. Which of course, is an everlasting torment in debtor’s prison, since there is no way possible that he could pay the equivalent of the national debt. We sometimes think how inappropriate the lord is in forgiving and re-obligating a slave for this debt, but in the ancient Near East such a master has the right to do this. The really shocking thing about this parable is not what the individuals do in the parable, but what Jesus says in the next verse. “So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.” Jesus develops that *everlasting destiny of being relationally forgiven by the Father* is contingent upon being forgiving people. We evangelicals, who tend to see things from such a positional justification standpoint tend to doubt that Jesus is committed to the everlasting forgiveness of God being patterned on our having the virtue of forgiving others. However, Jesus elsewhere teaches the same pattern of divine forgiveness as based on human forgiveness. For example, in the Lord’s Prayer the petition is “forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors (Mt. 6:12). The “as” is ὡς meaning “in the same manner” or “to the same extent.” This parable and prayer for forgiveness reflects the Jewish pattern,<sup>77</sup> as *Ben Sirah* 28.2–5 enumerates,

Forgive your neighbor the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray. Does a man harbor anger against another, and yet seek healing from the Lord? Does he have no mercy toward a man like himself, and yet pray for his own sins? If he himself, being flesh, maintains wrath, who will make expiation for his sins?

<sup>74</sup> The parable in *Ex. Rab.* 31.1 also recounts a lender who forgave a large debt.

<sup>75</sup> Same action described in *B. Bat.* 10.8 and *b. ‘Abod. Zar.* 4a.

<sup>76</sup> Herod the Great employed torture (e.g., Josephus, *Bell.* 1.548). Such torture was a practice cruel rulers used to extort money from tarty officials (Josephus, *War* 2.448; Livy 3.13.8; 25.4.8–10; 39.41.7; 43.16.5; Appian, *R.H.* 2.8.2; Aul. Gel. 16.10.8).

<sup>77</sup> Other parallels include: *b. Šabb.* 151b; *T. Zeb.* 5.3; 8.1–2; *T. Jos.* 18.2; *T. Gad* 6.3–7; *m. Yoma* 8.9; *t. B. Qam.* 9.29; *b. Meg.* 28a; *Polyc.* 6.2; cf. “Discipler” chapter. In contrast, the prayer for forgiveness in the *Eighteen Benedictions* does not have a condition.

So that in both Jesus' teaching and second Temple Judaism divine forgiveness is patterned after and to the same extent of our human forgiving of others. Jesus goes on to further teach this divine forgiveness is after the human pattern (Mt. 6:14–15). Jesus says, "For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions." Such forgiveness involves everlasting destiny as the parable made clear, therefore it is necessary that we be forgiving people.

Jesus' sermon ends with the threat of eschatological judgment and impending persecution judgments against disciples (Lk. 12). In this context, some disciples reported that Pilate had mingled Galileans blood with their sacrifices (Lk. 13:1).<sup>78</sup> Perhaps the issue was raised to Jesus to see whether He would come to the defense of His countrymen. Instead, Jesus turned it into a lesson for repentance or they will likewise perish (Lk. 13:3, 5). In making this point, Jesus expands the theodicy to include the eighteen on whom the tower of Siloam fell.<sup>79</sup> Both events become examples of judgment, and this latter one has no human to blame, so it stands as a judgment warning to all. At this point, Jesus tells a parable about a fig tree to underscore the precariousness of judgment (Lk. 13:6–9). The owner of the vineyard where the fig tree was growing arrived to see how the fig tree was faring and commanded his steward to cut it down because it had been fruitless for three years. The steward urged him to give the tree another year and that he would personally care and apply fertilizer to it. The same command is made for the destruction of a vineyard (symbolizing Israel) in *Exodus Rabbah* 43.9. Granted the extra time the grapes of Israel turned from sour to sweet in the establishment of Israel in the wake of exodus from Egypt. However, in Luke the parable is left unresolved, with only another year in order to tell whether the fig tree will fruit or be cut down. The multitude is left in a precarious condition, needing to bear fruit or destruction will likewise await them. The book of Acts tells the mixed story of salvation and judgment impending to overtake them.

Later, Jesus tells a Kingdom parable in response to Peter and the disciples claim that they have left everything to follow Him (Mt. 19:27). Jesus reassures them that they will be truly rewarded with responsibilities and benefits. When the regeneration phase of Kingdom has the Son of Man sitting on His throne, then the disciples will also sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel, which seems to be an extreme privilege for them (Mt. 19:24, 28). The Kingdom is described as of heaven and of God and salvation and where Christ reigns (Mt. 19:23–25, 28); when Jesus is involved there is no distinction between sovereign and Davidic Kingdom. Within this Kingdom, the disciples also have the benefits of everlasting life and many times more reward than the cost of those things and family, which they left to follow Him. Jesus then says a phrase which He says again in reverse order after the parable, "the first will be last; and the last first" (Mt. 19:30; 20:16). Obviously the disciples are one or the other of these groups. One needs to resist importing Jew and Gentile issues into this parable and phrase, since everything in the near context is presented without any Gentile allusion. There is no

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<sup>78</sup> We have no specific extra-Biblical text to this event but it is consistent with the kind of abuse and murder that was repeatedly carried out by the Romans; Josephus, *Ant.* 13.13.5; 17.9.3; 18.3.1–2; 18.4.1; *War* 2.1.3; 2.9.2–4.

<sup>79</sup> Darrel Bock (*Luke* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996], vol. 2, p. 1207) points out that we have no specific extra-Biblical text to this event, so he conjectures that this might be merely scaffolding falling.

extended Kingdom ministry of the prophets in the context so that this phrase might grow out of the preceding issue and events, meaning: that the wealthy (first) will be last place in the Kingdom and those who have given up everything (last) will be first place in the Kingdom with responsibilities and benefits; which further encourages the disciples. However, there is no evidence that the rich young man enters Kingdom, for he does not follow Jesus but instead leaves grieving (Mt. 19:22). Jesus responds that it is hard for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of heaven, illustrating it by the idea of a camel going through the eye of a needle as being easier than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom. The disciples recognize the impossibility of this.<sup>80</sup> Jesus corrects them by saying that with man it is impossible, but with God all things are possible. So that the impression the context brings is not that the rich will necessarily be in a low position in the Kingdom, but that they tend to not even make it into the Kingdom in the first place. Mark 10:29 and Luke 13:30 do not have a subsequent parable and reiteration of the idea of the last being first, so they tend to reinforce that this text is emphasizing that the disciples shall gain great place and the rich will be last. The word “last” (ἔσχατοι) in Luke 13:30 is best seen in that context as those Jesus casts away as evildoers who weep and gnash their teeth (Lk. 13:23–30). Only those who enter by the narrow door gain entrance into the Kingdom, though others may try and be damned.

In this context, Jesus tells a parable likening the Kingdom to be like a land owner who hired laborers for his vineyard at the wage of a denarius<sup>81</sup> for the day (Mt. 20:1–16). He then hired laborers at noon, three and five p.m. for “whatever is right.” They trust the integrity of the landowner. The pay time fits within the Jewish pattern of eschatological judgment in which what one does in life matters.<sup>82</sup> The last group chronologically hired, got paid first, on to the first hired. They all received the same wage regardless of when they commenced their work. When the first group hired (which might stand for those such as the disciples) noticed that the wage was the same, they protested about the excessive burden they bore. The landowner clarifies that he has done no wrong and that they have the contracted amount, and the landowner is within his rights to pay others as generous as he desires. Other parallel Jewish parables also make the point that a landowner may be as generous with his pay as he desires.<sup>83</sup> Presumably, Jesus is telling the disciples this parable to keep them from envy over His generosity.<sup>84</sup> Blomberg claims that this parable with more than two groups involved develops three points to be obtained as follows:

- (1) From the earlier groups of workers, one learns that none of God’s people will be treated unfairly...
- (2) From the last group of workers comes the principle that many seemingly less deserving people will be treated generously, due to the

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<sup>80</sup> Exegetes who reduce the extravagance of Jesus’ simile fail to appreciate the authenticity of Jesus’ idioms within rabbinic parallels: *b. Ber.* 55b and *b. B. Mes.* 38b which portray the impossible by describing an elephant going through a needle, and *b. Yebam.* 45a which describes a camel dancing in a tiny area.

<sup>81</sup> The common price for a day laborer; *Tob.* 5.14; Pliny, *N.H.* 33.3; Tacitus, *Ann.* 1.17; cf. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3:72.

<sup>82</sup> *4 Ezra* 8.33; *T. Abr.* A 12–13; Gk. *Apoc. Ezra* 1.14; *m. ‘Abot* 3.15; *t. Qidd.* 1.14; *b. Qidd.* 39b.

<sup>83</sup> E.g., *Sifra* on Lev. 26.9 and *Eccl. R.* 5.11.5 tell of a generous employer who paid an exceptional amount in response to an exceptionally able laborer.

<sup>84</sup> Such envy was understood in Israel as having an evil eye (Pr. 23:1–6; 28:22; Mt. 20:15).

sovereign, free choice of God. (3) From the unifying role of the master stems the precious truth that all true disciples are equal in God's eyes.<sup>85</sup>

Here the last (ἔσχατοι; Mt. 20:12, 14, 16) are chronologically the last group into the labor force who gain a generous payment and may be paid first. Whereas, the first labored earlier and are paid chronologically last. This group (perhaps the disciples) need to watch out and excise envy. In their envying the last (ἔσχατοι) position they might be at risk of damnation, keeping all statements of “the first will be last and the last will be first” with the same meaning (Mt. 19:30; 20:16; Mk. 10:31; Lk. 13:23–30). At any rate, it is a warning to the disciples not to envy.

Jesus repeatedly tells the religious leaders a parable likening the Messianic Kingdom to a wedding feast (Mt. 22:1–14; Lk. 14:16–24).<sup>86</sup> Luke's version and the *Gospel of Thomas* 64 presented this parable earlier in Jesus' ministry, while Matthew's version is told by Jesus in the last week of Jesus' life. The *Gospel of Thomas* 64 is the simplest of the parables and banquets, with only three friends expected to arrive. When a fourth shows up, a warning against involvement in worldly business is made: “tradesmen and merchants shall not enter the place of my Father.”<sup>87</sup> Luke has a man throw a great banquet.<sup>88</sup> Whereas, Matthew has a king host a wedding feast for his son.<sup>89</sup> Matthew probably reflects the growing resistance to Jesus' ministry; Matthew's version has more violence, severity, complex detail than Luke or *Thomas*. The Kingdom may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. The king sent out two invitations borne by slaves to all his guests. The guests refuse, and in Matthew turn to violence and murder, much as Jews did in response to the multiple comings of the prophets (Mt. 23:29–33; Lk. 11:47–51).<sup>90</sup> A servant declares that those who were invited were not worthy. The master purposes that none of the invited will taste his dinner. The banquet is then enjoyed by any people from the highways and streets that they can find, which then excludes those originally invited to the feast. Whereas Matthew also has the king enraged so that his armies destroy the murderers and set their city on fire. God's anger has burned against Israel repeatedly with this kind of fire judgment (Isa. 5:24–25)<sup>91</sup> and thus this text was seen as predictive of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.<sup>92</sup> The Pharisees recognized that the harm predicted in the parable was against them (Mt. 22:15). This destruction of Jerusalem does not terminate Israel's role in God's story any more than the Babylonian captivity brought an end to Israel, therefore the issue of Israel's

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<sup>85</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Parables*, p. 224.

<sup>86</sup> A Messianic banquet for the righteous is a metaphor for Kingdom (Isa. 25:6–9; Lk. 14:15; 22:16–18; *IQSa* or *IQ28a* 2.11–12, 19–21; Rev. 19:9; 'Abot 3.16–17; 4.16; *b. Ber.* 34b; *Sanh.* 98b; *Gen. Rab.* 62.2; *Ex. Rab.* 45.6; 50.5; *Lev. Rab.* 13.3; *Num. Rab.* 13.2; *Ruth Rab.* 5.6; *Cant. Rab.* 1, 3.3, on Song of Songs 1:3; *Pesiq. Rab.* 41.5; 48.3; *B. Bab. Bath.* 74b–75a; *Yalqut Shim'oni*, *Songs*, no. 988; *Sefer Eliahu*, *BhM* 3.67; *Nistarot R. Shim'on ben Yohai*, *BhM* 3.80; *Pirqe Mashiah*, *BhM* 3.76–77; *S'udat Livyatan*, *BhM* 6.150–51; *Mid. Alpha Beta diR. Akiba*, *BhM* 3.33–34; *Mid. haN'elam*, *Zohar* 1.135b, 136a.

<sup>87</sup> *Gos. Thom.* 64 and the juxtaposition with the parables in 63 and 65.

<sup>88</sup> Luke has “a man” who threw a great banquet with one invitation by one servant.

<sup>89</sup> The same language is used to describe a householder who made a wedding feast for a son in *Sipre* on Num. 15:17–21.

<sup>90</sup> For similar mistreatment of a king's messengers see: 2 Sam. 10:4; Josephus, *Ant.* 9.263–6.

<sup>91</sup> Also, *Judith* 1.7ff; *Ex. Rab.* on Ex. 12:19.

<sup>92</sup> Josephus, *Bell.* 6.353–5, 363, 406–8; 2 *Bar.* 7.1; 80.3; *Sib. Or.* 4.125–7.

future must be decided upon other grounds (e.g., Rom. 11:24–27).<sup>93</sup> In Matthew’s parable, there is even a man who is in the banquet hall without the proper wedding clothes, which assumes that the guests would wear their best even though they came in a hurry (Mt. 22:10–12). This one without the proper clothes was thus culpable for his clothes dishonoring the king though present.<sup>94</sup> This is similar to the parable Ben Zacchai told of a feast conducted by a king who rewarded the wise who dressed for the occasion with the banquet food, while the foolish in work clothes were made to stand and watch them eat.<sup>95</sup> In Matthew, the inappropriately dressed man was bound hand and foot to be cast out of the fellowship and benefit, into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.<sup>96</sup> In Matthew, Jesus summarizes the parable with “many are called but few are chosen.” This cuts into the religious leaders with a warning. In their arrogance and rejection of Jesus’ Kingdom message, the religious leaders are being passed by in order to find more appreciative and worthy Kingdom participants, chosen and prepared by God. Whereas, in Luke the parable is followed by the cost of discipleship and the need to count this cost so that the multitudes would not become salt that loses its saltiness and is rejected as worthless and destructive (Lk. 14:25–35).

As Jesus was passing through Jericho He called the wealthy overseeing tax collector, Zaccheus, down from the tree which he had climbed to glimpse Jesus passing by (Lk. 19:1–10). The crowd grumbled about Jesus staying with such a sinner. Zaccheus said, “half of my possessions I give to the poor and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much.” Jesus responded, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.” To Zaccheus, such salvation is greatly affirming as he identifies with Christ and begins to reflect the Kingdom virtues, thus marking him off as one to receive fellowship within Israel. Zaccheus had been lost and Jesus sought to save this kind of lost one by having him identify with Jesus in a life of Kingdom virtue. Emerging from this context, Jesus told the multitude a parable because they supposed the Kingdom was going to appear immediately (Lk. 19:11).

The parable of the nobleman receiving his kingdom attempts to slow down their expectations for the appearance of the Kingdom (Lk. 19:11–27). The parable also emphasizes the responsibility to be faithful until the Kingdom is received. The parable is loosely parallel to the private parable of the talents told to Jesus’ disciples about a week later on the Mount of Olives (Mt. 25:14–30), but Luke emphasizes the Kingdom more than does Matthew.<sup>97</sup> Matthew emphasizes the disciple’s personal responsibility about being prepared when Jesus comes, whereas Luke presents exhortations for the people as

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<sup>93</sup> *4 Ezra* and *2 Bar.* describe the destruction of Jerusalem but have a continuing future for Israel.

<sup>94</sup> This is similar to *1 Enoch* 10.4–5 where God instructed the angel Raphael to bind Azazel “hand and foot and throw him into the outer darkness.” According to *Apocalypse of Abraham* 13.14 the fallen Azazel lost his heavenly garment, which was given to Abraham.

<sup>95</sup> A similar parable of Ben Zacchai occurs in *B.T. Šabb.* 153a; *Eccl. Rab.* 9.8.1.

<sup>96</sup> The bondage of hand and foot is taken as eschatological judgment (*1 En.* 14.4) and eschatological judgment entails a bondage to be thrown into judgment (*Rev.* 20:2–3; *Jub.* 5.10; *1 En.* 10.4–5; 54.3–6; 56.1–3; 67.4; 69.28; 88.1; 90.23–4; *2 Bar.* 56.13). The eschatological judgment is seen as outer darkness (*1 En.* 9–10; cf. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3:206, note. 63 shows Biblical authors were aware of the imagery from *1 En.* 9–10).

<sup>97</sup> Several recognize these parables are told in different settings. Darrel Bock, *Luke*, 2:1527–29 lists some along with him who agree with this view.

well. For example, the fact that in Luke 19:13, the king calls ten servants to put in charge of his stewardship plays toward broader Jewish expectations (where the number ten was quite common),<sup>98</sup> rather than emphasizing the twelve disciples. The parable is also loosely parallel to three second Temple Jewish parables which highlight aspects in which this parable also partakes.<sup>99</sup> However, the parable is most reminiscent of repeated regime change in Israel. For example, it is parallel to the journey undertaken by Herod the Great in 40 B. C. to receive his kingship from Mark Anthony.<sup>100</sup> Caesar and the Senate's whim was to make Herod king prompted by Herod's monetary gift, political connections and demonstrated loyalty in battle in Egypt and the Parthian war. The parable also is parallel to the journey to Rome undertaken by Herod's son Archelaus to receive the kingdom of Judea and Samaria in 4 B.C. upon the death of his father.<sup>101</sup> The Jews hated Archelaus because he massacred 3000 Jews on Passover and protested his reign by sending a delegation to protest the king's coming rule.<sup>102</sup> Rome aided Archelaus in putting down opposition to his kingship by force. Jesus' parable reflects similar events to these Herodian situations. In the parable, a certain nobleman went to a distant country to receive a kingdom for himself and return. He gave ten slaves each a mina, or 100 days of wages, for business purposes until he returned. But his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him saying, "We do not want this man to reign over us." When he returned, after receiving the kingdom he ordered his slaves to report on how the business had fared during his absence. The first slave had made ten minas more, so he received from his master: 1) an affirmation of faithfulness in little things, 2) responsibility over ten cities and 3) kept the money. Following the Jewish pattern, promotion (number 2 response above) is a reward for faithfulness; "The reward of duty done is a duty to be done."<sup>103</sup> The second slave had made five minas more so he received from his master this affirmation of faithfulness, money and responsibility over five cities. Another slave had hid the mina because he was afraid of the master, and did not want to take on this liability.<sup>104</sup> The slave claimed that the master exploited others by taking what he did not lay down, and reaping what he did not sow. In the parable, the master judges the slave by his own standard, which at least would have urged investment in the bank with interest. The fact that the slave did not even do this minimum showed him to be a rebel and just making excuses. His money was stripped from him and given to the one who has ten minas. This action is explained to further emphasize the benefit of responsible living; everyone who has, shall more be given, but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away (Mt. 13:12; 25:29; Lk. 12:48; 19:26).<sup>105</sup> Then the focus

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<sup>98</sup> E.g., *m. 'Abot* 5.1–6; cf. J. Ernst, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas Regensburger Neues Testament 3* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1977), p. 519.

<sup>99</sup> *Song Rab.* 7.14.1 recounts a parable about a frugal wife left for a time by her husband, who reports that she had saved her husband's trust. *ARNa* 14.6 reports of the anxiety of a man who had the king leave a deposit with him. *Mek. Bachodesh* 5.81–92 tells of a king who set up different responsibilities of two administrators based on their faithfulness and faithlessness.

<sup>100</sup> Josephus, *Ant.* 14.14.1–6.

<sup>101</sup> Josephus, *Ant.* 17.196–341; *Bell.* 2.80–100.

<sup>102</sup> Josephus, *Ant.* 17.9.3; 17.11.1; *War* 2.1.3–13

<sup>103</sup> *m. 'Abot* 4.2; *b. Ber.* 11b.

<sup>104</sup> *b. Bab. Mes.* 42a says "Anyone who buried a pledge or a deposit immediately upon receipt of it, was free from liability."

<sup>105</sup> *Gos. Thom.* 41; *Apoc. Pet.* 83.26–84.6; which is somewhat of an extension of God giving further wisdom to the wise (*Pr.* 9:9; *b. Ber.* 55a).

turns toward the citizens who had become his enemies by not wanting him to reign over them. These enemies were slain in his presence. By comparing this parable with what is common in Matthew's private parable of the talents, one can see that the development of the servants is primarily for those who are like the disciples. The disciples need to be faithful in responsibilities that Jesus gives them, such as Kingdom virtues or preparing a donkey (Lk. 19:28–35). Whereas, the addition of the multitude as listeners also draws the citizens who resist the king's reign into the parable. The multitude must not resist Jesus being made king, for if they do, they will be severely judged. Admirably, the multitude welcome Jesus as the King, as He enters into Jerusalem while the religious leaders do not (Lk. 19:36–40). As the last week progressed, however, the religious leaders rally a multitude who reject Jesus and demand that Pilate have Jesus crucified (Lk. 23:13–25). These citizens are in a desperately precarious place. N. T. Wright sums this up as following the historical parallel of Roman judgment.

Jesus implies an analogy between those who rejected Archelaus a generation earlier and those who, in his own day, prefer their own dreams of national independence to the coming of the true king. Just as the king came from Rome to execute vengeance on those who rejected his rule, so 'the son of man' will come—using the Roman armies—to crush rebel Jerusalem.<sup>106</sup>

The destructions of Jerusalem in 70 and 135 A.D. are seen as an outgrowth of the Jews rebellion against Jesus' Kingship, and this prophetic parable predicts the Jews judgment.

#### Echoes in the Arts

The Peachtree Christian Church in Atlanta, Georgia has ten stained glass windows illustrating the parables of Christ. Each is told in three pictures. The clearest is the "good Samaritan" which shows: 1) the beating, 2) the Samaritan's compassionate care as others pass by, and 3) his bringing him to the inn to continue this care.



<sup>106</sup> N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 638.

Another compelling window is the parable of “the prodigal son,” showing: 1) the frustrated prodigal, 2) welcoming father embracing him, and 3) the same father trying to convince his faithful son to rejoice.

The echoes in literature section which works for most chapters is difficult for this chapter and may not be so helpful. That is, it may not be so helpful because I have tried to show literary connectedness of the parables throughout this chapter already by interacting with Jewish second Temple parabolic literature. Furthermore, if a person moves out of the Jewish-Christian tradition to parables or fables from a wisdom perspective (like Aesop or Uncle Rhemus or tribal perspectives provide) the context and meaning shift. That is, Jesus is prophetically using parables about the coming Kingdom, whereas these other parables tend to be placed within a wisdom creation based context indebted to the world view of the advocate. That orientation is rather different than the prophetic Kingdom orientation of Jesus. So instead of distracting from the thrust of this chapter, let me instead summarize Jesus emphasis of Kingdom parables.

### Conclusion

Jesus as Sage identifies Jesus as the wise One the Jews expected to prophetically teach them about the Kingdom. It also identifies Him as having the appropriate traits to be King.

If parables are rightly interpreted by keeping them connected to their context, they reveal deep insights concerning the Kingdom. Which is why some of Jesus’ parables are discussed elsewhere in their contexts of Jesus’ Jewishness, Law commitment and role as prophet.

The composite message of the Kingdom which these parables supply may be summarized as follows: the Kingdom has begun with Jesus incarnational Kingship, and His disciple’s loyalty to His Kingdom purpose, but will come to the greatest expression as He reigns and transforms the world. Or briefly, the Kingdom is already and not yet. The Kingdom of God and of heaven, of the Father, and Christ’s Kingdom is all the same Kingdom. There is no development of a separate Davidic kingdom or sovereign Kingdom than this Kingdom. The Kingdom is really present where Jesus, the King is present, and where the people identify with the Kingdom. This Kingdom is not merely a spiritual presence because Jesus and the sons of the Kingdom are more than spiritually identified with the Kingdom. They are bodily, relationally, ethically, by deed and benefit identified with the Kingdom. Jesus and the sons of the Kingdom are present as a small expression of the Kingdom. The sons of the Kingdom are relationally connected to Jesus, their King, and to each other as family. The sons of the Kingdom are identified as the virtuous (humble, forgiving, good, and faithful) participating in virtues identified with the Kingdom. These Kingdom virtues show themselves through Kingdom deeds. As people appropriate this kingdom message into their lives the Kingdom grows in size and permeates the world. Rejection of Jesus as King makes for judgment in this life, as Jesus condemned Israel during the Jewish wars (66–72 A.D.) and Bar-Kochba rebellion (135 A.D.). Such judgment extends to excruciating pain, emotional anguish, relational loss, and final judgment when Jesus as King returns. Full expression of the Kingdom occurs when Jesus as King returns to judge the people, which have not happened yet. Those who continue in the Kingdom have much already with their Kingdom relationship and

virtues, but much more will be given them in: 1) affirmation of faithfulness, 2) abundant benefits, and 3) increased responsibilities in the full expression of the Kingdom. Their understanding of the Kingdom brings the responsibility to communicate and apply Kingdom into life by relation, virtue and deed. However, these disciples long for the blessings and responsibilities of the greater expression of Jesus' Kingdom.