TO PUT A NEW FACE ON THE MATTER
The Parables of Jesus in their Gospel Contexts

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ABSTRACT

The application of form criticism to the study of the NT Gospels in the twentieth century led to parable scholarship generally giving little interpretive weight to the parables' immediate narrative contexts and Gospel framing. Despite recent critique of form criticism, this lack of attention to the NT Gospels' literary arrangement of the parables has yet to be adequately rectified, leaving a gap in parable scholarship that this thesis seeks to partially fill. What follows is an exercise in literary criticism, as informed by socio-historical research, that reads the parables in interpretive dialogue with the material placed in immediate literary proximity to them within the NT Gospels.

In dialogue with Irenaeus and several modern parable scholars, I provide a possible theoretical rationale for the importance of the Gospel framing of the parables of Jesus. I observe that scholarship reading the parables in isolation from their Gospel frames tends - of interpretive necessity - to adapt the parables to general hypotheses. These hypotheses tend to dominate in the interpretive process, so that the parables typically function primarily to illustrate, reinforce or commend what is already known from elsewhere in the Gospels (and the NT) or from historical inquiry concerning Jesus. My proposal is that the NT Gospels' arrangement of the parables, situational and contextual in nature, anticipates an alternative approach to reading the parables, involving an interpretive dialogue between parable and frame that is generative of meaning, so that the parables may make their own unique contribution to their Gospels.

I propose a methodology for reading the NT parables that brings individual parables, the narrative circumstances of their telling, and the direct speech elements that accompany them, into an interpretive relationship. This methodology recognises an interpretive dependency (at a literary level) between the parables and their Gospel frames, that creates the conditions for a genuine and collaborative dialogue between them, in which both may mutually inform, and in doing so provide an audience with new ways of seeing the situation at hand. In this way the (situational) meaning and significance of a parable is established in a dialogical manner, and without the parable being dominated by a hypothesis. This interpretive process is shown to be generative of meaning, with associated interpretive outcomes going beyond what is explicit in either parable or frame, even while being thoroughly informed and shaped by them. Applying this methodology to six Synoptic parables results in an emphasis on contextual concerns given insufficient attention in other scholarship, so that new insights emerge concerning the meaning and function of these parables in the ministry of the Synoptic Jesus. I argue that the resulting interpretive outcomes are more varied and specific than when the parables are adapted to a general hypothesis. Further, I show how this contextual approach to interpretation then allows a parable (as first interpreted contextually) to make its own distinct contribution to developing and enriching a Gospel’s wider narrative and
theology (even while being given further depth and perspective through reference to that narrative and theology).

Included within my methodology is a model designed to illuminate the communicative dynamics that give the parables their persuasive power in relation to their Gospel narrative audiences and circumstances. This model is proposed as a new contribution to parable scholarship, and when applied to the six Synoptic parables brings new insights concerning each parable’s rhetorical function and the rhetorical strategies by which they each achieve their didactic and/or prophetic aims. In general I find that these parables are skilful rhetorical pieces, designed to subvert the way an audience understands the circumstances to which each parable speaks, providing a new perspective on those circumstances that has the potential to liberate and empower an audience to participate (or further participate) in the kingdom of God in new ways. I also argue that the detailed and parable-specific contextual data that the Synoptics provide for these parables allows us to define their individual rhetorical strategies with greater specificity than is otherwise possible.

A preliminary assessment of whether my methodology may be applied to all the main Synoptic parables suggests that the NT Gospels’ literary arrangement of the parables of Jesus consistently anticipates a contextual reading. In particular, I argue that the parables are thoroughly integrated into their immediate literary contexts as components of carefully structured literary units, and that sufficient parable-specific data is provided to allow us to assess each parable’s significance for the narrative circumstances associated with its telling.

I discuss possible objections to a contextual reading of the parables of Jesus. I argue that the parables’ (polyvalent) nature must be not be confused with their actual use and reception in particular circumstances (which may be univalent). I also argue that my approach need not confine the parables’ significance to history; rather the parables may alter the perceptions of a contemporary audience in the same way as I have suggested they altered the perceptions of the parables' Gospel narrative audiences, where the circumstances of the two audiences are similar or analogous. Further, I observe that recent Gospel origins scholarship, together with literary arguments in this thesis, suggest it may be important to re-evaluate the conclusions of Form and Redaction Criticism concerning the historicity of the Gospel arrangement of the parables. Finally I propose that the NT Gospels' literary arrangement of the parables of Jesus, far from being a-historical, may have been carefully designed to replicate for the reader the opportunity the parables provided for the first disciples of the historical Jesus to learn the discipline of active, inquiring and responsive listening (to Jesus) which is necessary to receive the mystery of the kingdom of God.
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Ancient Literature
Citations of ancient literature provide full details of author and title, or author/title in sufficient detail so as to clearly identify the literature concerned.

Secondary Literature
Citations of secondary literature identify the author (surname) followed by the first or first significant word of the title. Full details of all secondary literature are provided in the Bibliography.¹

Reference Works
Abbreviations for standard reference works are as shown alongside those works in the Bibliography.

¹ The decision not to include full biographical details for secondary literature in footnotes reflects the need to keep footnotes to a manageable size.
Chapter I
INTRODUCTION

If We Do Not Cut the Parables Out of their Frames - Gerhardsson\(^1\)

\(^1\) Gerhardsson, "Frames", 321.
Introduction

The impetus for this thesis was my perception that the NT Gospels' literary arrangement of the parables of Jesus possessed a significance not yet fully explored. Despite an intense fascination with the parables over the past 100 years, NT scholarship has been consistently restrained in the interpretive significance given to their Gospel contexts. The parables have come to us as embedded texts, set within the NT Gospels, where they are arranged in literary proximity to associated narrative elements, dialogue, discourse, questions and sayings. The literary proximity of the parables and these textual elements, and their literary "connectedness", argues for them to carry an interpretive significance for each other in a literary-critical approach to the parables. This thesis seeks to understand the precise nature of the NT Gospels' literary arrangement of the parables, and how it might best inform parable interpretation. To use Gerhardsson’s language, I intend not to cut the parables out of their Gospel frames, but to explore the interpretive possibilities and potential of their literary arrangement.

To situate my thesis in relation to wider scholarship, and to further clarify its aims, I begin by examining the different approaches to reading the parables taken by Irenaeus and six modern NT scholars (Chapter II). I identify limitations within this scholarship, noting particularly the dominant role that general hypotheses play in the interpretive process. This survey of scholarship highlights the potential for an alternative approach to parable interpretation, which I argue the parable-specific contextual data provided by the NT Gospels is uniquely designed to inform.

I then examine four ancient parables from outside the NT, variously arranged within different literary genres (Chapter III). This analysis is a preliminary exploration into reading a parable as an embedded component of a larger literary piece, with a view to developing a conceptual understanding of the associated interpretive task, from which to consider methodological questions. Drawing on this analysis, and on scholarship concerning ancient parables and ancient fables, I then discuss methodological questions related to reading parables contextually (Chapter IV). My proposed methodology includes a model designed to illuminate the rhetorical strategies that give the parables their persuasive force when used in specific contexts, and toward particular prophetic or didactic aims. In Chapter IV I also provide a definition of the genre, and of some major concepts that inform my thesis.

Applying this methodology, I then provide detailed contextual readings of six NT parables - the Sower, the Two Sons, the Hidden Talent, the Rich Fool, the Barren Fig Tree, and the Judge and the Widow (Chapters V and VI). In these case studies I am seeking to establish whether the NT Gospels' arrangement of the parables anticipates the kind of contextual reading my methodology anticipates, and also whether this literary arrangement provides the necessary data that my model
requires to allow the rhetorical function and strategies of the parables to be determined. Further I will evaluate, for each of the six parables, whether my methodology results in new and helpful insights concerning these parables' meaning and function within the ministry of the Synoptic Jesus. The results of this analysis are summarised and evaluated in Chapter VII. In assessing my findings I further delineate the distinction between my methodology and that of other scholars. I also make a preliminary assessment of whether my contextual approach to reading the parables is possible and appropriate for all parabolic material in the NT Gospels. This includes a discussion of several parables whose literary arrangement may appear to frustrate the application of my methodology, due to these parables' apparent lack of integration into their literary contexts and/or literary isolation from narrative elements.

The final two chapters deal with possible objections to giving the NT Gospels' arrangement of the parables primary weight in their interpretation. The first possible objection is genre-related. Does not the polyvalent nature of the parables mean that we must value multiple readings, including readings that are heavily reader-directed and/or that make no reference to the parables' Gospel contexts? And is this not essential to ensure the parables have contemporary significance? In Chapter VIII, I evaluate scholarship that argues this way, and make a preliminary proposal for an alternative approach to giving the parables contemporary relevance. The second possible objection is historical. Critical scholarship has generally not regarded the NT Gospels' framing of many parables as an accurate indication of their origins and function in the ministry of the historical Jesus. In Chapter IX, I briefly discuss the question of the historicity of the Gospel arrangement of the parables, in light of arguments in my thesis and developments in recent Gospel origins scholarship. Further, I propose a new understanding of the relationship between the NT Gospels' literary arrangement of the parables and their function within the ministry of the historical Jesus.

In a concluding chapter (Chapter X) I outline the main findings of this thesis and suggest areas of further research having the potential to enrich future parable scholarship.

The title of my thesis, “To Put a New Face on the Matter”, is taken from 2 Sam 14.20, where by altering perceptions of a particular set of circumstances a parable changes the destiny of many individuals and the future of a nation.

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Chapter II
READING THE PARABLES OF JESUS: IRENAEUS AND SELECTED MODERN SCHOLARS

Have we not already heard these stories at Sunday School? - Ricoeur¹

If the interpretation of the parable said it all, one would need no parable. - Ågren²

¹ Ricoeur, “Listening”, 239.
² From a poem by the Finnish poet Gösta Ågren, cited in Merenlahti, Poetics, 42 (I have not been able to find an English language translation of this poem to verify the citation).
Introduction

To help conceptualise the questions with which my thesis is concerned, I begin this chapter by examining how the parables of Jesus feature in the writings of Irenaeus. I then discuss how these questions have been answered in modern parable scholarship. I also introduce - in general terms - a proposal of my own concerning parable interpretation which will be developed and tested throughout this thesis.

Irenaeus: Protecting the Image of the King

Irenaeus denounced the theological system (ὑπόθεσις; argumentum) of his Gnostic opponents as something which “neither the prophets announced, nor the Lord taught, nor the apostles delivered” (Adversus Haereses 1.8.1). At the same time, it is evident that Irenaeus’ opponents, in presenting their theological system, make frequent reference to material taught by the Lord and transmitted by the apostles. In Irenaeus’ view, this is only possible because his opponents “disregard the order (τάξις) and connection (εἰρμός) of the Scriptures, and so far as in them lies, dismember and destroy the truth” (1.8.1). By “transferring passages, and dressing them up anew, and making one thing out of another”, they deceive many by adapting the oracles of God to their badly composed fantasy (1.8.1).

Irenaeus illustrates the Gnostic use of Scripture using two fictitious scenarios. Firstly, he describes how a beautiful portrait of a king, constructed by a skilled artist from precious stones, is disassembled and the gems rearranged to form the image of a dog or a fox. This new arrangement of the gemstones is then declared to be the image of the king constructed by the skilful artist. In this way, the ignorant, having never seen the king or his image, are deceived, being persuaded that the image of the fox was in fact the beautiful image of the king. In the same way, having invented old wives tales, the Gnostics “by violently drawing away from their proper connection words, expressions and parables wherever found”, endeavour to “adapt the oracles of God to their

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4 All subsequent Irenaeus quotations from Adversus Haereses are referenced by way of numeration only. Quotations and numeration, unless otherwise noted, are from Roberts and Donaldson, Apostolic. Greek and Latin citations are from Harvey, Irenaei.

5 On “Scriptures” in Irenaeus see Grant, Irenaeus, 31-4; Parvis, “Irenaeus”, 20-1; Stanton, Jesus, 105-7; Campenhausen, Formation, 182-209

6 On this matter see e.g. Perkins, “Gnosticism”, 363-69: Gnostic and Valentinian writers “enlist parts of the emerging Christian Bible and the oral traditions about the words of the Saviour to frame a different experience of self, world and salvation” (371). Tertullian, De Praescriptione Hereticorum 38 similarly observes that “Valentinus…adapted his matter to the Scriptures; and yet he took away more, and added more, by removing the proper meaning of every particular word, and adding fantastic arrangements of things which have no real existence” (emphasis added). Cf. Williams, Biblical, 177; Attridge, “Truth”, 244 on a similar phenomena in the Gospel of Truth.
baseless fictions” (1.8.1).7 Secondly, Irenaeus describes a person taking ten unrelated phrases from Homer and skilfully weaving them into a short narrative in which Heracles is sent by Eurystheus to the dog in Hades (1.9.4):8

Thus saying, there sent forth from his house deeply groaning (Od x.76)
The hero Hercules conversant with mighty deeds (Od xxi.26)
Eurystheus, the son of Sthenelus, descended from Perseus (Il xix.123)
That he might bring from Erebus the dog of gloomy Pluto (Il viii. 368)
And he advanced like a mountain-bred lion confident of strength (Od vi.130)
Rapidly through the city, while all his friends followed (Il xxiv.327)
Both maidens, and youths, and much-enduring old men (Od xi.38)
Mourning for him bitterly as one going forward to death (Il xxiv.328)
But Mercury and the blue-eyed Minerva conducted him (Od xi.626)
For she knew the mind of her brother, how it laboured with grief (Il ii.409)

While the ignorant may be led to believe Homer authored this narrative, anyone familiar with Homer’s writings will recognise the individual lines of the narrative, but not the story itself. In the same way, anyone who has steadfastly retained the Rule of Truth (ὁ κανὼν τῆς ἀληθείας; Regula Veritatis) received at their baptism, will recognise - in the Gnostics’ writings - names, sayings, and parables from the Scriptures, but will not acknowledge the blasphemous system (ὑπόθεσις; argumentum) they have been made to substantiate there. By restoring the Homeric lines to their original setting, the invented narrative is at once destroyed. In the same way Irenaeus calls for Scriptural material to be set in its proper order and fitted to the body of truth, thus exposing his opponents’ fabrication as without foundation (1.9.4).

Irenaeus’ opponents, by his account, made considerable use of the NT parables, claiming to be custodians of parable interpretations given only to a spiritual elite by the “Saviour” (1.3.1).9 An example (from Irenaeus) of Gnostic use of the parables is their citing the Workers in the Vineyard to justify their system of thirty aeons, on the grounds that thirty is the sum of the hours at which recruitment occurs in the story (1.1.3; 1.3.1). In another example the Leaven is interpreted allegorically: Sophia is the woman, the meal is “the Saviour”, and the three measures are three

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7 ἐφαρμόζοντι βούλονταί τοῖς μύθοις αὐτῶν τὰ λόγια τοῦ θεοῦ; adaptare volunt fabulis suis eloquia Dei.
8 Irenaeus describes his opponents as being like those who bring forward any kind of hypothesis (ὑπόθεσις) they fancy, and then endeavour to support them out of the poems of Homer (1.9.4).
9 See reference to a similar claim by the Gnostics to special revelation concerning the parables in 2.27.2 (and likewise in Apocryphon of James 8.1-10).
types of man - spiritual, psychic and earthly (1.8.3). From the examples Irenaeus cites the Gnostics do not appear to have altered the form of the parables. The Gnostics’ error - in Irenaeus’ eyes - lies in their use of the parables to substantiate a theological system which Irenaeus regards as foolish and heretical. In arguing that the Gnostic use of the NT parables is inappropriate, Irenaeus helps introduce the central concerns of this thesis.

The Ambiguity of the Parables
Irenaeus characterises the parables as inherently ambiguous and thus able to be interpreted in various ways. The parables “admit of many interpretations” (2.27.3), even without altering the form of the story. Irenaeus’ understanding of the genre comes to the fore in his critique of Gnostic speculation concerning matters he regards as outside the bounds of human knowledge. In the process of doing so, the Gnostics (with “wretched success”) interpret the parables with reference to what is not clear or known with certainty (2.10.1-2; cf. 2.27.1). For example, the Gnostics argue there is a god above the god who created the universe, and then adapt the parables to this god they have invented. This process he critiques, since it involves explaining an ambiguity (ambiguitas) or enigma (aenigma), i.e. a parable, by means of another, even greater ambiguity/enigma, conjecture about another god. He argues that “no question can be solved by means of another which itself awaits solution” (2.10.1). Thus, “the parables ought not to be adapted to ambiguous expressions” (2.27.1). Rather, they are to be interpreted with reference to what is “manifest, and consistent and clear” (2.10.1).

The parables’ ambiguous nature also means they cannot be used to discover, or to argue for, that which is otherwise unknown. For example, to search out God from the parables, abandoning what is “certain, indubitable and true” (in the Scriptures), is the course of persons eagerly throwing themselves into danger, acting as if they have lost their minds (2.27.3). How then should these enigmatic stories be interpreted?

Interpreting the Parables With Reference to The Rule of Faith
Because of their ambiguous, enigmatic nature, the parables must be interpreted with reference to what is known with certainty. For Irenaeus, this means adapting the parables to the Rule of Faith, a form of summation of the early church’s theology and salvation history, drawn from Scripture and

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10 Similarly, the Wandering Sheep portrays how Achamoth wandered outside the Pleroma where she, their mother, experienced all the passions from which matter came, before being “shaped by Christ and sought by the Saviour” (1.8.4). The woman in the Lost Coin is “the Sophia above” who has lost Desire (Achamoth), but will find it again at the coming of the Saviour (1.8.4).

11 Similarly, OT parables and allegories can be “drawn into various senses, according to the kind of exegesis to which they are subjected” (1.3.6).

12 On this matter see further, 2.10.1-2; Schoedel, “Theological”, 35, 46; van Unnik, “Interesting”, 208-9.

13 “ex manifestis et consonantibus et claris”.

9
tradition. Immediately following his critique of Gnostic use of Scripture, Irenaeus sets out the basic elements of the Faith of the catholic church, received from the apostles and their disciples, a faith that must not be changed (1.10.1-3; cf. his similar “Rule of Truth” in 1.22.1). Irenaeus describes this Rule of Faith/Truth elsewhere as a hypothesis (ὑπόθεσις;15 argumentum) of faith; it is to this hypothesis that the parables are to be adapted (καὶ οἰκειοῦν τῇ τῆς πίστεως ὑποθέσει; et adjungere veritatis16 argumento) (1.10.3). In this process of “adaptation”, clear Scriptures are brought alongside the parables to interpret them, with the selection of the Scriptures being directed by the Rule of Faith. Irenaeus demonstrates this “adaptation” of the parables when using the Murderous Tenants to argue (against Marcion) that there is only one God, a central tenet of the Rule of Faith. With reference to many “clear” passages of Scripture, it is argued that the parable portrays one God the Father (the householder) who at one time sends the prophets (the servants) and at another time sends his Son (4.36.1-2).17

In a similar way, Irenaeus argues the parables are to be adapted to what is set out “clearly and unambiguously in express terms” in the “entire Scriptures (universae Scripturae), the prophets, and the Gospels” (2.27.1-2). Irenaeus viewed all Scripture as consistent and harmonious. That harmony is maintained by interpreting the parables with reference to Scriptures’ clear statements, so that the whole of Scripture is heard as a “harmonious melody” (2.28.3), and “the body of truth remains entire, with a harmonious adaptation of its members, and without any collision [of its several parts]” (2.27.1).18 Examples of this approach are seen in Irenaeus’ use of A Faithful or Unfaithful Slave? (4.26.2-5) to argue for recognition of the role of church leaders who stand in apostolic succession, as marked by their adherence to the tradition handed down from the apostles and their good conduct and speech. He cites A Faithful or Unfaithful Slave?, interpreting it with

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14 On the Rule of Faith/Truth, see Parvis, “Irenaeus”, 20: “a sort of summary or condensation of what is taught in Scripture… a sort of proto-credal summary of the faith”; Grant, Irenaeus, 47-9: “Irenaeus’ rule of faith or truth is the same as the hypothesis of Scripture” (49); Westerholm & Westerholm, Reading, 63-4.

15 On the meaning of ὑπόθεσις/argumentum in Irenaeus, see van Unnik, “Interesting”, 206-7; Hefner, “Theological”, 295-7; Grant, Irenaeus, 53: “the plot of the whole sacred story from creation to the coming of God’s kingdom”; Green, “What”, 454: the “narrative sense” of Scripture. Behre, “Scripture”, 182 helpfully distinguishes between the use of ὑπόθεσις in Hellenistic literary theory to refer to the “plot or outline of a drama or epic”, and its use in philosophical writings to refer to the “starting point of first principles… of demonstrations” (also Hefner, “Theological”, 296: “a first principle from which the very being of the things in question unfolds”). It carries both meanings for Irenaeus, being the entire drama of salvation history and the first principles for all theological knowledge. Since Irenaeus regards the hypothesis of faith as fixed and true, his use of the word differs from its contemporary meaning (designating something to be tested) and from the way he uses it in regard to other systems of thought.

16 Harvey, Irenaei, 1.95n4 suggests this translation of πίστεως is “free, but quite intelligible”, Irenaeus previously having used ἀλήθεια as the synonym for πίστις; but see Unger and Dillon, Against, 188n32 on textual issues, suggesting the Latin reflects the original Greek.

17 Irenaeus cites Matt 5.22; Ps 34.13-14, Is 1.17-18; Jer 6.17-18; 7.3, 29-30; Zech 7.9-10; 8.17. The Wedding Banquet is put to a similar use, as is the Prodigal Son, the Two Sons, the Workers in the Vineyard, the Barren Fig Tree, and the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (4.36.5-8).

18 See Schoedel, “Theological”, 36: the “parables cannot be out of harmony with the rest of Scripture”; exegesis of the parables must work “within a framework provided by the clear words of Scripture”.

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reference to Is 60.17 and 1 Cor 12.28, which give the parable clear application to the issue at hand. The same parable is subsequently cited in his defence of the “ancient law of human freedom” (4.37.1-7), where it is interpreted with reference to Matt 5.16; Luke 6.46; 12.35-6; 21.34.

Irenaeus’ exegesis and argument provide evidence of the parables’ inherent flexibility, the ease with which they can be adapted to various ends, and the interpretive significance of the Scriptures brought alongside them. This is not a random process for Irenaeus. There is a guiding hand that establishes the subject matter to which the parables will be adapted and directs the choice of clear statements from Scripture to be brought alongside the parables in the interpretive process. That guiding hand is the Rule of Faith, the summation of Scripture and apostolic tradition.

Evaluation
Irenaeus’ interpretation of the parables is both similar to, and different from, Gnostic interpretation. Both employ a similar method. Both have a ὑπόθεσις, established without reference to the parables, which determines their reading of the parables.19 The heretics adapt the parables to their ὑπόθεσις so that they become vehicles of Gnostic thought and Irenaeus adapts the parables to his ὑπόθεσις, so that they illustrate the Rule of Faith/Truth. Both evidence reasonable freedom in their selection of non-parabolic Scripture passages to inform parable interpretation.20 The major difference between Irenaeus and his opponents, when interpreting the parables, lies in the nature and substance of their respective hypotheses. The Gnostics adapt the parables to a theological system that Irenaeus regards as speculative, fictitious and lacking apostolic foundations.21 In contrast, Irenaeus adapts the parables to what he asserts can be known with certainty from the Scriptures and the Rule of Faith, handed down to him from the apostles. Thus Irenaeus’ interpretation of the Workers in the Vineyard is - in his mind - correct because he first holds as certain that there is one God, a central element of his hypothesis. His opponents’ adaptation of the same parable to an argument for the existence of thirty Aeons (1.1.3) is regarded as the height of foolishness, since the parable is being interpreted with reference to what is unknowable, and made to substantiate what Irenaeus regards as a speculative fantasy.

Irenaeus’ method of interpreting the parables inevitably poses questions, even for those who affirm the orthodoxy he so valiantly defends. His approach leaves me uneasy on two accounts. Firstly, by the extent to which Irenaeus’ hypothesis so dominates the parables, so that they say nothing more

19 See e.g. Hefner, “Theological”, 304: one “hypothesis of the truth is pitted against another as the most adequate key for interpreting the divine revelation”; Bingham, “Irenaeus”, 370: “the methodology of both Gnostic and bishop are quite similar”.

20 See Presley, “Demonstration”, 197: “Under the direction of the divine revelation received at baptism and summarised within the regula, [Irenaeus] is able to network freely the various terms, phrases, images, passages, and concepts embedded in Scripture”.

21 Similarly Hefner, “Theological”, 296: “[Irenaeus’] system is truth; theirs is figment, blasphemy, or pseudo-knowledge”. See also Bingham, “Irenaeus”, 377; Miller, “Words”, 477-80 regarding different conceptions of Scripture between the two.
than has already been established by way of hypothesis, which seems to relegate the parables to a secondary literary/rhetorical role. The parables are adapted and in doing so they illustrate truth already established. They are not heard to speak with their own voice (if in fact they have one). Is it possible, even for an enigmatic form of speech, to be more than an illustration or a rhetorical device used to substantiate or commend something established on other grounds? Secondly, while Irenaeus’ use of the parables is thoroughly informed by the person and work of Christ (“the treasure hid in the Scriptures is Christ” (4.26.1)), his method leaves the parables somewhat detached from the life and ministry of the Jesus of history and the Jesus of the Gospels. Is it possible to situate the parables within the ministry of the historical/Synoptic Jesus and still retain theological coherence with wider Gospel/NT teaching? In what follows I give more precise definition to these matters and then examine how they have been dealt with in modern parable scholarship.

Irenaeus and Twentieth Century Parable Scholarship

In the remainder of this chapter I review the work of six scholars dating from the middle of the twentieth century to early in the present century: C.H. Dodd, J. Jeremias, B.B. Scott, W. R. Herzog, N.T. Wright and K. Snodgrass. I chose these scholars because each has provided a substantial treatment of a good number of NT parables, has been influential in shaping subsequent scholarship, and represents a different approach (from the others) to parable interpretation. Together these scholars are representative of the main scholarly viewpoints during the last one hundred years concerning the issues outlined below. I have chosen to examine a smaller rather than larger number of scholars because brief and therefore general reviews of individual scholars, or the grouping together of similar scholars, does not allow the kind of detailed analysis that is required to fully appreciate the typically complex mechanics of a scholar’s methodology. In reviewing these scholars’ treatment of the parables, I examine two questions Irenaeus’ work left unresolved for me:

1. Are the parables inherently ambiguous, in need of interpretation, and able to be interpreted in various ways, as Irenaeus understood them to be?

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22 I expect it is uncontroversial to say that the telling of the Workers in the Vineyard in the ministry of the historical or Synoptic Jesus is unlikely to have been primarily intended to demonstrate that the God of the OT and of the Christians is one and the same God.

23 I have focused in this chapter on scholarship since Dodd, not because this scholarship is more important than parable scholarship from other eras, but because anyone writing about the parables with a word limit must limit their inquiry in some way. In subsequent chapters I refer to a broader range of scholarship, including from earlier periods. In this chapter I do not discuss the scholarship of Reuben Zimmermann, arguably the foremost parable scholar of the present time, because he is a primary dialogue partner in Chapters IV and VIII, and I interact with scholarship from Zimmermann, et.al., Kompendium in my treatment of individual parables in Chapters V and VI.

24 This is partly because in parable scholarship theory and practice do not always perfectly align (though I have selected scholars where this is less of an issue), so that the analysis of interpretive practice alongside interpretive theory helps ensure a correct discernment of a scholar’s methodology.
I will examine this question in various ways throughout the thesis, testing Irenaeus' understanding of the nature of parables, and asking whether it needs to be qualified in any way, since this understanding of the parables has far reaching implications for how we read them. If the parables are as versatile and ambiguous as Irenaeus' arguments suggest, we may expect them to be readily adapted to many and varied hypotheses, but also hesitate to conclude that their having been so adapted constitutes (of itself) good evidence in support of these hypotheses. The parables' ambiguity also implies that a parable's interpretation will be heavily shaped by whatever hypothesis it is adapted to, and will function mainly to illustrate or commend that hypothesis. In what follows I argue that there is widespread evidence of these things in modern parable scholarship, leaving unresolved the question of whether (and how) a parable might speak with its own voice.

2. Are the parables best adapted to a theologically defined hypothesis for their interpretation, as Irenaeus proposed, or should the hypothesis be alternatively (e.g. historically) defined? Or is there an alternative approach to interpretation that does not require recourse to a hypothesis?

This second question is important because scholars have proposed or assumed a range of very different hypotheses in parable interpretation. And - as will be seen - once a hypothesis is chosen, so much else follows for reading the parables. In exploring this issue, I will also examine whether the Rule of Faith's domination of the parables in Irenaeus is a function of the dogmatic nature of that particular hypothesis, or whether other hypotheses exercise similar influence over interpretive outcomes. My six dialogue partners below argue in different directions on these matters. Dodd and Jeremias rejected the adaptation of the parables to an ethical or theological scheme, insisting the parables be read with reference to the circumstances of their origins in the ministry of the historical Jesus. Scott rejected the use of any grand scheme for parable interpretation, arguing that the parables have their own voice that must not be silenced by historical particularity or dogmatic concerns. With Herzog and N.T. Wright, the parables are again in the service of grand schemes, though schemes that are socio-cultural and historical in nature. Snodgrass interprets the parables with reference to a general portrait of the teaching and ministry of Jesus, thoroughly informed by the NT Gospels and the Scriptures as a whole.

In this chapter I also introduce, in general terms, a proposal of my own for an alternative approach to interpretation of the parables of Jesus, to be developed throughout the remainder of the thesis.
Dodd: The Parables Within the Ministry of Jesus

Dodd, writing in reaction to Jülicher whom he felt had reduced the parables to illustrations of “moral generalities”, sought to restore the parables to their place in the ministry of Jesus. The task of the interpreter of the parables is to identify the “original situation” of a parable in the ministry of Jesus, and by relating the parable to this setting, “its original meaning and application” will follow. Dodd was influenced by the form criticism of the day, and so took the view that the NT Gospels did not always preserve the original settings of the parables. This forced Dodd to rely on the “general orientation” of Jesus’ ministry and teaching to identify the parables’ original situations. Describing Jesus’ ministry and teaching, Dodd emphasised the kingdom of God as a present reality. In the ministry of Jesus, the “kingdom of God has come into history” and Jesus has assumed the “eschatological’ role of the ‘Son of Man’” through whom “judgment and blessedness have come into human experience” in the present time.

Dodd’s approach may be illustrated, and the influence of his highly realised eschatology clearly seen, in his reading of the Wheat and the Weeds. Dodd dismisses the parable’s Matthean interpretation as the “developed eschatology of the church”. Instead, he argues that the parable is designed to answer an objection to Jesus’ ministry and proclamation: given the “many sinners in Israel”, how can Jesus claim that “the kingdom of God has come?” In reply, the parable explains that just as a farmer does not delay his reaping because of weeds, so the coming of the kingdom does not delay because of the presence of sinners in Israel.

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25 Dodd, Parables, 25: Jülicher’s monumental study a half century earlier reduced the parables to “forcible illustrations of eminently sound moral and religious principles”. Dodd saw that the “general effect” of all this was “undeniably… rather flattening”.

26 Dodd, Parables, 31. In understanding the parables this way, Dodd (see 23, 26) was influenced by A.T. Cadoux’s earlier study on the parables (also Jeremias, Parables, 21).

27 Dodd, Parables, 27 notes the tendency of “recent writers from Jülicher to Bultmann” to discount the interpretive guidance of the evangelists, an approach he followed in relation to many parables (see the discussion in 26-32).

28 Dodd, Parables, 32.

29 Dodd, Parables, 51.

30 Dodd, Parables, 107. Dodd downplayed any sense in which the kingdom of God might be understood as still to come, emphasising that we are living now in a new age, in which the kingdom of God is present, the judgment and grace of God “decisively revealed” (109).

31 Dodd, Parables, 184; thus “we shall do well to forget this interpretation as completely as possible”.

32 Dodd, Parables, 185. Dodd provides no clear method for identifying this as the original situation for the parable. It seems that an understanding of the parable - determined by Dodd’s eschatology and his general reconstruction of Jesus’ ministry - precedes the identification of this parable’s specific context.

33 Dodd, Parables, 185. The “coming of the kingdom is itself a process of sifting, a judgment”.

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Evaluation

Like Irenaeus, Dodd adapts the parables to a hypothesis. Dodd’s hypothesis is a particular reconstruction of the ministry and teaching of the historical Jesus, dominated by what he called “realised eschatology”. In adapting the parables, Dodd also recognised (with Irenaeus) the need to interpret the parables with reference to something certain, making frequent reference to Jesus’ “explicit and unambiguous sayings”, provided Dodd judged them to be historical.\(^{34}\) As with Irenaeus, Dodd’s hypothesis, his general view of the teaching/ministry of Jesus, directs his choice of clear Scriptures chosen to interpret individual parables.\(^{35}\) Overall, Dodd adopts a similar methodology to Irenaeus, though substituting a historical hypothesis for Irenaeus’ theological one.

The ease with which Dodd relocates parables from their Synoptic settings to new settings in the ministry of the historical Jesus\(^ {36}\) supports Irenaeus’ characterisation of the parables as ambiguous and malleable in nature.

Dodd’s hypothesis, especially his eschatology, proved contentious (see on Jeremias immediately below), and lacks the kind of certitude Irenaeus required of a hypothesis before it is suitable to interpret the parables. But his work is important, as the most convincing attempt up to that time to link the parables to specific contexts within the teaching and ministry of the historical Jesus, and to interpret them with reference to those contexts.\(^ {37}\) Dodd’s study also hints at some of the methodological difficulties of doing so, particularly the subjectivity involved in reconstructing - within his general portrait of the ministry of the historical Jesus - the precise circumstances to which a parable was designed to speak,\(^ {38}\) an issue which comes more to the fore in Jeremias’ scholarship.

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\(^{34}\) Dodd, *Parables*, 32. Where the Synoptic arrangement of the parables coheres with his hypothesis, Dodd uses material adjacent to a parable to interpret it (e.g. 119-20: the parables of Luke 15). Where the Synoptic arrangement is incompatible with Dodd’s hypothesis, the hypothesis directs the selection other NT sayings/material to interpret the parable (see e.g. his approach to the Seed (176-80) which begins with a discussion of his understanding of the kingdom (176-8), which then directs the selection of Matt 9.37-10.1 to give interpretive direction to his reading of the parable (178-9)).

\(^{35}\) E.g. the Seed is interpreted with reference to Matt 9.37-38 and Luke 10.2, which he understands to refer to a harvest taking place as Jesus sends out his disciples (Dodd, *Parables*, 178-9); the Wedding Banquet and Great banquet with reference to Matt 4.17; 21.31-2; Luke 15.1-2 (121).

\(^{36}\) For example, the Wedding Banquet and the Great Banquet are arranged by Matt/Luke to reflect the “interests of the Church at a later date” (Dodd, *Parables*, 121). Dodd’ proposal is that these parables portray “divine generosity” and originally functioned as a “retort to the complaints of the legally minded who cavilled at [Jesus] as the friend of publicans and sinners” (123). Similarly, Dodd argues the Mathean/Lukan presentation of the “Talents”/”Pounds” reflects the eschatological concerns and theology of the early church (152-3) and proposes that, in the ministry of the historical Jesus, the parables were designed to expose the conduct of the “pious Jew” (146-50) who sought “personal security in meticulous observance of the Law” (citing here Matt 23.23; Mark 10.20), and in doing so made “the religion of Israel barren”, of no benefit to sinners and Gentiles (151-2).

\(^{37}\) Jeremias, *Parables*, 21 rightly describes Dodd’s study as “introducing a new era in the interpretation of the parables”.

\(^{38}\) In practice, Dodd’s methodology begins with carefully scrutinising a parable, then moves from that to identify its “original situation” (cf. Dodd, *Parables*, 31). Given the parables’ ambiguity, this is a highly subjective process, which inspires little confidence. If a parable can mean various things, presumably one original situation may be as good as another. See the helpful critique of Dodd in Dietzfelbinger, “Samen”, 86-7, 89, including his observation that Dodd’s historical contexts are “aus einer bestimmten Deutung des Gleichnisses erschlossen” (89), an issue that will be explored further in discussing Jeremias’ methodology immediately below.
Jeremias: Parables as Weapons of Warfare

Jeremias shared Dodd’s conviction that the parables originated in specific situations in the ministry of Jesus:

> The parables of Jesus are not - at any rate primarily - literary productions, nor is it their object to lay down general maxims…but each of them was uttered in an actual situation of the life of Jesus…they were preponderantly concerned with a situation of conflict. They correct, reprove, attack…the parables are weapons of warfare.\(^39\)

Jeremias argued that the early church had altered the form and arrangement of the parables to reflect “its own situation between the cross and the Parousia”.\(^40\) Through application of form critical methods,\(^41\) he sought to recover the parables’ original settings in the ministry of the historical Jesus.\(^42\) For example, a group of parables presented in the Synoptics as a warning for Jesus’ disciples “not to become slack because of the delayed Parousia”, were according to Jeremias, originally “crisis-parables” in the ministry of the historical Jesus, designed to awaken a “deluded people… to a realisation of the awful gravity of the moment”.\(^43\)

At the same time Jeremias sought to rectify what he saw as Dodd’s “one-sided nature of his conception of the Kingdom… [which] resulted in a contraction of the eschatology”.\(^44\) Jeremias understood the kingdom as present reality but awaiting eschatological fullness, and this understanding informed his reading of individual parables. For example, in the Wheat and the Weeds, Jesus confronts “doubts about his mission” and “frustrated hopes” because he had not moved to bring the expected “Messianic deliverance”, providing assurance that with the “same certainty as the harvest comes”, so God will, “when the eschatological term… is complete, bring in the Last Judgment and the Kingdom”.\(^45\) As Jeremias follows a virtually identical methodology to Dodd, it is his adaption of the parable to a different kind of eschatology (his hypothesis) that leads directly to a different reading of the parable.

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\(^{39}\) Jeremias, *Parables*, 21-2, acknowledging his debt to Dodd.

\(^{40}\) Jeremias, *Parables*, 23.

\(^{41}\) Jeremias, *Parables*, 20-1: “the fundamentally important insights which we owe to the Form-criticism school have so far received no fruitful application [to]… the study of the parables”, a situation he sought to rectify.

\(^{42}\) Jeremias, *Parables*, identified ten “definite principles of transformation” (23) which explained how the original parables had been transformed for the use of the early church (as per the form/arrangement of the NT Gospels) and which guide the recovery of the original meaning of the parables in the ministry of the historical Jesus (see 23-114, the summary in 113-4). See the substantive critique of these laws of transformation in Blomberg, *Interpreting*, 79-84.

\(^{43}\) Jeremias, *Parables*, 63.

\(^{44}\) Jeremias, *Parables*, 21.

Jeremias also proposed a “comprehensive conception of the message of Jesus”, made up of nine “simple essential ideas”, categories into which the parables “fall naturally”. The effect of this thematic scheme and of Jeremias’ search for an original context for each parable, on the interpretation of individual parables, can be illustrated by his reading of the Workers in the Vineyard. Jeremias rejects the Matthean presentation of the parable (illustrating “the reversal of rank which would take place on the Last Day”), proposing instead that the parable portrays “the behaviour of a large-hearted man who is compassionate and full of sympathy for the poor”, a picture of God in his dealing with humanity. Accordingly, the parable is placed alongside other parables demonstrating “God’s mercy for sinners”. Then, with reference to Synoptic descriptions of “those who criticised and opposed the good news”, Jeremias finds the parable to function as Jesus’ justification of his conduct, and vindication of the good news.

Evaluation
Jeremias understood the parables to be weapons of warfare, argued that Jesus’ opponents were the primary audience of the parables, and understood Jesus’ eschatology to be less realised than that of Dodd. These are the main elements of Jeremias’ general hypothesis, to which the parables are then adapted, and which directs the selection of clear Scriptures that inform his reading of a parable. His methodology is in this way similar to that of Irenaeus and Dodd.

Jeremias argued that parables must be interpreted with reference to their original settings within the ministry of Jesus, but in my view did not provide an adequate methodology for identifying those settings. Jeremias’ proposed settings are argued for on the basis that: (i) they cohere with his overall hypothesis; and (ii) there is a “fit” between parable and setting. In the process of defining a parable’s setting Jeremias often placed a great deal of weight on his view of what the parable

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46 Jeremias, Parables, 115: “Now is the day of salvation”; “God’s mercy for sinners”; “The assurance of salvation”; “The imminence of catastrophe”; “It may be too late”; “The challenge of the hour”; “Realised discipleship”; “The Via Dolorosa and exaltation of the Son of Man”; “The consummation”.

47 Jeremias, Parables, 34-5. His grounds for doing so are poor: an unlikely reading of Matt 20.8, and his assertion that the frames are arbitrarily assigned and at odds with the parable itself (35-7). See further the discussion on this parable in Chapter VII.

48 Jeremias, Parables, 37.


50 Jeremias, Parables, 38.
meant, and ended up arguing from parable to context (rather than the other way around). The fact that a parable “works” in a particular setting became validation that this was in fact the original historical context of the parable. For example, it is because the Workers in the Vineyard portrays a “large-hearted” and compassionate man, and because the “emphasis” lies on the second half of the parable that “the parable is clearly addressed to those who resemble the murmurers, those who criticised and opposed the good news”. Because the parable can be shown to “work” in that context, Jeremias is quick to claim: “Here, clearly, we have recovered the original historical setting. We are suddenly transported into a concrete situation in the life of Jesus”. This is an unstable argument, given the malleable nature of the genre, and an example of what Irenaeus described as using one ambiguity (a parable) to argue for something otherwise uncertain (the original setting of a parable).

Jeremias’ use of clear Scripture to support his argument does not remove the ambiguity. Even if the meaning of a particular Scripture is clear and certain, its significance for any particular parable is not certain. Jeremias rightly observes that in the Synoptics “over and over again we hear the charge brought against Jesus that he is a companion of the despised and outcast”. But even if this points to the historicity of this form of opposition to Jesus’ ministry, that is not in itself an argument that the Workers in the Vineyard was originally designed to speak to that opposition. We could also for example, observe how over and over again in the Synoptics the disciples are portrayed as not understanding Jesus’ ministry and needing instruction concerning aspects of discipleship/leadership. The parable could function in either setting; that it does so is not grounds for either setting to be designated historical, or the original setting of the parable. Here, Jeremias’ argument overreaches its foundations.

The ease with which the parables, already adapted to a Synoptic context, are adapted by Jeremias to his own hypothesis (his eschatology resulting in different readings to those of Dodd) affirms

51 This sequence occurs frequently. E.g. (i) The Workers in the Vineyard. Having dismissed the parable’s Matthean context, “we must... study the parable without reference to its context” (Jeremias, Parables, 36). Then, once the meaning of the parable is established (36-7) Jeremias asks “Why did Jesus tell the parable?” (37), a question which leads into his proposal of an original context for the parable (37-8). (ii) The Talents/Minas. Having dismissed the Matthean/Lukan presentation of the parables (56-60), Jeremias then argues the original parable was addressed to religious elite (61, based on the Jewish symbolism of “servant” (see 57-8)), and then proposes an original context for the parable, drawing on Luke 11.52 (61-2). (iii) The Sower. Having rejected the Synoptic interpretation (150), Jeremias argues (based on the symbolism of harvest) that the parable portrays “the eschatological overflowing of divine fullness”, the “triumphant end” God has promised (150). Jeremias then finds it “easy” to visualise the situation that gave rise to the parable (151). Thus Jeremias has a parable go in search of a context, validating his findings by the “fit” between the two. The parables are simply too enigmatic and malleable (even where symbolic imagery is present) to support this kind of argument.

52 Jeremias, Parables, 37-8.

53 Jeremias, Parables, 38.

54 Jeremias, Parables, 38. Cf. similarly his reference to Luke 11.52 in regard to the Talents/Minas; his reference to Mark 3.6; 6.5; John 6.60 in deciding the context of the Sower.
Irenaeus’ view of the parables’ ambiguity. Their adaptability is aided by their sometimes complex plots, multiple motifs, and/or motifs and imagery with a range of symbolic meanings, all of which give flexibility for a scholar when deciding where the emphasis lies.55

Jeremias’ inability to provide a sound methodology for identifying the parables’ original context, while at the same time rejecting many of their Synoptic settings as ahistorical, opened the way for the parables to be examined independent of any specific setting in the ministry of Jesus, an approach advocated by Scott.

Scott: Parabolic Autonomy and Priority56
Scott emphasised the “narrativity and fictionality” of the parables of Jesus,57 arguing that as “narrative fictions” the parables have a “freedom or independence vis-à-vis their contextualisation” and even “a priority over their context…they interpret the context not the other way around”.58 Scott rejects Dodd/Jeremias’ proposal that “a specific situation in the ministry of Jesus accounts for a parable”,59 arguing instead that the Synoptic form and arrangement of the parables represents only one of many possible performances of an underlying narrative structure.60

55 See e.g. Jeremias’ emphasis on “the whole field at the moment of harvest”, to justify an eschatological reading of the Sower, while rejecting a reading that (only or also) gives hortatory significance to the seed that bore no fruit (Jeremias, Parables, 149-51). Others have, for example, seen an emphasis on the motif of failure (e.g. Scott, Parables, 361), or the motif of (careless) sowing (e.g. Geischer, “Verschwenderische”, 424-5). The hypothesis, not the parable, is deciding on the point of emphasis.

56 In forming his approach to parable interpretation Scott was influenced at significant points by Via, Parables; Crossan, Cliffs; Crossan, Raid; Funk, Language; Ricoeur, “Biblical” (see references to this scholarship throughout Scott, Hear, 7-62). While these scholars differ significantly at points, they all endeavour to work with the parables as fairly autonomous literary forms, seeking to establish their meaning and function primarily through analysis of their linguistic and structural elements. To varying degrees they give emphasis to the “extravagant” or “paradoxical” elements within the narratives at crucial points in their interpretative practice. I have chosen Scott as at least partially representative of this body of scholarship because he translates many of the central claims of this scholarship into a structured interpretive strategy and applies this strategy consistently to an analysis of most of the narrative Synoptic parables. For overview and discussion of this scholarship (from different viewpoints) see e.g. Champion, “Parable”, 16-32; Thiselton, Two, 347-52; Norman Perrin, Jesus, 133-68; S. Wright, Storyteller, 33-8; Blomberg, Interpreting, 136-50.

57 Scott, Hear, 41.

58 Scott, Hear, 41-2. Scott was particularly influenced on this matter by Via. Via, Parables, (esp 70-107) argued for the parables to be understood as literary and aesthetic objects, having an independence and autonomy from any context. However, as his argument develops it is evident a literary hypothesis (arguing the parables contain “two basic plot movements… the comic and the tragic” (96)) and an existential hypothesis (arguing parables portray the “the gain or loss of existence itself” (101)) will guide his interpretation of the parables (Herzog, Parables, 43 rightly saw that “when he moved from aesthetic analysis to translate [the parables’] meaning, Via relied on existentialism to provide the semantic clues”). Via eventually articulates a theological dimension for the parables also (e.g. his expansion of the definition of the tragic/comic to include theological realities (Via, Parables, 110-3; 145-7)), and in the end recognises a relationship between the parables and the life and ministry of Jesus (e.g. 93-95; 181-2; 191-2. At each major point in the development of Via’s argument, the autonomy and independence of the parables is being compromised by their adaptation to external hypotheses.

59 Scott, Hear, 42; arguing that storytellers develop a corpus of stories that they tell in various situations.

60 This underlying narrative structure “has to be reconstructed from the extant versions” (Scott, Hear, 41). Scott argues the Synoptic “performance” of a parable is also a “distortion” of that parable (55-6). He quotes Ricoeur in support of this crucial point (55), though in my view Ricoeur’s overall analysis is problematic for Scott’s argument. Ricoeur’s inquiry into how a parable’s “narrative ‘sense’ implies its metaphorical ‘referent’” (Ricoeur, “Biblical”, 96; see 96-105) is notable for how it gradually concedes the need for other aspects of the Gospels to play a part in the interpretative process (though Ricoeur does not in the end give this adequate weight in his overall hermeneutic; see further Pidel, “Ricoeur”, 195-200: “what Ricoeur gives with one hand, he seems to take with [the] other”; Vanhoozer, Biblical, 136-141).
Scott’s actual interpretive method, applied consistently to most Synoptic narrative parables, can be explained as follows, using the Workers in the Vineyard as an example:\footnote{Scott, \textit{Hear}, 281-298.}  
1. Scott dispenses with redactional elements in the Synoptic form and arrangement of a parable. In the case of the Workers in the Vineyard, this leads to a narrative consisting of Matt 20.1-14a (with 20.8c also possibly excluded), with no known setting in the ministry of Jesus.  
2. A parable’s “surface structure” is analysed to identify literary and semantic elements, including narrative structure, use of repetition, symmetry, parallelisms, and chiasmi. The Workers in the Vineyard has two main narrative sections (20.1-7; 8-14a), and uses time markers to structure the narrative.  
3. The narrative is further analysed, having reference to: (i) Jewish symbolism and socio-cultural and economic factors (e.g. OT symbolic use of vineyard imagery, the value of a denarius, the meaning of \textit{dikaios}, the dynamics of patron-client relations); (ii) Additional literary features, such as the “folklore of three”, the use of repetitive patterns, and economy of language; and (iii) The likely impact of the narrative on its audience as it unfolds, due to the effect of such things as narrative “gaps” and “suspense”, audience identification, elements of surprise, and reversal of audience expectation. Scott finds that the Workers in the Vineyard’s audience will identify with those first employed and their renumeration expectations, and will perceive the master’s behaviour as unjust.  
4. In a section entitled “From Story to Kingdom”, Scott juxtaposes the narrative and the kingdom of God, exploring the relationship between the two. In the Workers in the Vineyard, the “justice” portrayed in the parable subverts normal expectations of justice in the kingdom of God. The parable relativises justice, by showing it is incapable of organising the affairs of the kingdom. Finding in the landowner’s unexplained need for labourers a “metaphor for grace”, the parable teaches that “invitation, not justice, is the way of the kingdom”.\footnote{Scott, \textit{Hear}, 297-8.} Scott’s method at this point is complex and further discussion is needed.  

\textbf{Evaluation: Parable Autonomy and Priority?}  
Scott’s position, arguing for the autonomy of the parables and their independence of any particular context, proved difficult to maintain in his interpretive practice, where contextual dependency is evident, as I will now demonstrate.  

Scott rightly recognised that a parable “belongs to a specific world… [the] world of first-century Palestine… [which] informs the repertoire, the conventions, world view, ideologies, and stereotypes
active in a text”. The “cultural context is critical for the parables’ interpretation”. However, first century Palestine is a particular socio-historical context, and if the parables are dependent on this context that amounts to a compromise in their autonomy. The interpretive significance of reading the parables in a first century Palestinian context is seen (for example) in how this contributes substantively and directly to a theological dimension to Scott’s interpretive outcomes that the parable narratives - of themselves - do not demand, and that would not necessarily arise if the narratives were heard in another socio-historical context.

Scott also reads the parables with reference to an “Implied Author” and “Implied Reader”. Scott’s Implied Author is a “Jewish Jesus”, who told parables to subvert a “common wisdom” (but apparently not in controversy with the Pharisees), whose concerns differed from those of the early church, who preached the kingdom, and whose “primary discourse” for proclaiming the kingdom was parable. The Implied Reader in Scott’s analysis is a Jewish inhabitant of first century Palestine, with a thoroughly Jewish world-view, and intimately familiar with Jewish sacred writings. While Scott argues his Implied Author and Reader do not compromise the autonomy of the narratives, since they are given definition by the parables, it is evident that his portraits of these figures involve important features that cannot be known from the parabolic narratives themselves. His recourse to literature and history (to construct the Implied Author and Reader) again compromises his argument for the parables’ autonomy.

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63 Scott, Hear, 76; hence “our reading is not ahistorical”.

64 Scott, Hear, 42; italic mine. Scott does not see this as inconsistent with his argument for parabolic autonomy, since such “meaning” is part of the narratives themselves; it is “taken up into the text and transformed into the narrative”. The “social context is part of the parable’s repertoire and is subsumed into the literary, fictional world of the parable” (74).

65 This is evident even as Scott analyses the structure and semantics of a parable. See for example, how Scott finds dikaios (Matt 20.4) to have a “distinctive religious heritage in Judaism” referring to persons under the law having “the correct orientation toward God” (Scott, Hear, 291-2); his observation that “widow” (Luke 18.3) evokes a person who in the OT has need of “special protection”, as mandated by divine decree (180-1).

66 Scott, Hear, 68.

67 Scott, Hear, 66-7. This goes beyond what can be known from the parables themselves.

68 Scott, Hear, 42; Jeremias’ proposal is apparently “especially untrue”, though it is hard to see how autonomous parabolic narratives can tell us that.

69 Scott, Hear, 68. How the parables tell us this is not demonstrated.

70 Scott, Hear, 70.

71 Scott, Hear, 61.

72 The “Jesus of the parables” as “implied author”, is “a construct, a projection, of the parables” (Scott, Hear, 66). The “implied reader” is “a textual strategy that represents the predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its magic” as opposed to a “real reader” who imparts “situational meaning” to a parable, bringing the “pragmatics of a specific situation to bear in the production of meaning” (75). For Scott, this textual (rather than situational) emphasis, respects the autonomy of the narratives, with a view to uncovering “the structural dynamics that allow a text to communicate and structure its perception in a variety of situations” (42). But Scott is clearly working with definitions of the implied author and reader that go beyond what we can know from the parables.
Scott's theory of parabolic autonomy, and his intention to practice literary criticism focused primarily on the narratives themselves, comes under serious strain as he discusses the relationship between the parables and the kingdom. Scott recognises that the parables have a “religious dimension that is distinctive and explicit”, because their “original hermeneutical horizon” is the Kingdom of God; thus “the kingdom generates parable”. Since most of the parables are not obviously “religious” in their subjects and few signal in themselves that they speak to a subject outside of their own narrative concerns (let alone specify that this subject is the kingdom of God), Scott’s argument here seriously qualifies his assertion of parabolic autonomy and priority. At the same time, Scott argues that “kingdom of God” is a tensive symbol, polyvalent in nature, the content of which is “nebula”, unable to be “coded with specificity”. This “demands” that “transference” of meaning is from discourse (parable) to symbol; the parables define the symbol of the kingdom. However, Scott heavily qualifies that viewpoint when he subsequently recognises that the symbol of the kingdom carries implied “expectations drawn from the religious heritage’s repertoire”, so that an audience “confronts simultaneously story and the expectations implied in the kingdom of God”. This is a long way from parables being self-referential, able to interpret their context, or even able to inform a symbol.

The parables’ dependent (rather than autonomous) nature is also seen at the point where Scott moves to “search out the interaction and intersection of narrative and kingdom”. An example will illustrate. Scott argues the Workers in the Vineyard is designed to provoke an audience to an “accusation of injustice”. Even assuming this is so, we must still decide how the parable, with its apparent portrayal of injustice, informs the symbol of the kingdom. Does this kind of “injustice” characterise the kingdom, or is it antithetical to the kingdom (and thus being denounced in the

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73 Scott, Hear, 51. In my view, this crucial, far-reaching assertion cannot be reconciled with Scott's desire for a literary approach, focused on the parable narratives alone.

74 Scott, Hear, 55-6; also “the symbol of the kingdom of God gives a parable its specific religious content”. It is not clear why, in a purely literary approach, a specific religious dimension should be present. Why should the parables' referent not be e.g. “human experience” (Ricoeur, “Biblical”, 34), human reality in all its wholeness (104), or “man’s existential possibilities” (Via, Parables, 39)?

75 See Ricoeur, “Biblical”, 96: “if we do not start with the conviction that ‘metaphor articulates a referent…’, then we shall never receive this conviction from a further investigation of the linguistic structure of the parable”; also Zimmermann, Puzzling, 149: “the transfer signals that demonstrate the metaphorical character of a parable as well as the impulses of comprehension that pre-structure the meaning of the text are not generally located exclusively in the parable itself”.

76 Scott, Hear, 58. Scott's analysis of the Jewish understanding of “Kingdom of God” (58-61) is reductionist. By way of contrast, see the extended treatment of the phrase in ancient Jewish (as well as early Christian) sources, in Allison, Constructing, 164-204.

77 Scott, Hear, 61.

78 Scott, Hear, 62. Thus narrative only becomes parable as it “enters into the kingdom's field of reference”. Similarly he refers to how “narrative and the kingdom interact to create a parable” (76). An example is how the Workers in the Vineyard “sets in sharp juxtaposition the expected values of the kingdom and the values the parable associates with the kingdom” (296). For this to occur an audience must bring its own understanding of the kingdom to the parable; an empty symbol cannot inform interpretation in this way.

79 Scott, Hear, 76.

80 Scott, Hear, 296.
parable)? Scott argues the parable relativises justice, portraying it as incapable of organising the affairs of the kingdom. In making this crucial point Scott is influenced by his own general hypothesis concerning the parables, that they “belong to the wisdom tradition”, but “invoke not the major themes of the tradition but the minor ones”, so that they “play against the expectations of common wisdom”. This hypothesis regularly provides Scott with crucial guidance concerning how a parable informs the symbol of the kingdom, but is not derived from or even demanded by the narratives themselves, which can be (and have been) read as confirming common wisdom and expectations concerning the kingdom of God. Scott goes on to argue that the parable portrays how “invitation, not justice, is the way of the kingdom”. The emphasis on “invitation” is not demanded by the story’s structure or semantics and is an unlikely focus, given that the entire second half of the story relates to payment of wages. Other motifs might have been given interpretive emphasis and we are not sure why they have been overlooked. The story itself only takes us so far. It is a story with a range of motifs and a complex plot, able to interact with a similarly multi-faceted symbol (the Kingdom) in a variety of ways. We are left needing guidance as to where the emphasis lies and concerning the precise nature of the interaction between parable and kingdom. That guidance must come from outside the parable.

Scott - Summary
While Scott rightly emphasised the narrative character of the parables and demonstrated how attention to their linguistic, semantic and structural features may inform interpretation, he was not able to demonstrate that this approach could facilitate parabolic autonomy. Scott's interpretive

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81 Scott, Hear, 297. In making this point it is notable how Scott cites a fourth century Rabbinic parable at a crucial point of his argument (296-7) and even calls in Pauline theology in support (297).

82 Scott, Hear, 65-7. Scott recognises a need to reconstruct the “linguistic, mythical, and wisdom traditions in which the parables operate” (as an alternative to Jeremias’ Sitz im Leben), but only then to argue that the parables contest these traditions (68). Similarly, the parables challenge the normal “implied structural network of associations” of the symbol of the kingdom of God (61).

83 Scott acknowledges that the narratives can also be read as confirming common wisdom (Scott, Hear, 67) and does not satisfactorily explain why the subversion of common wisdom is to be preferred.

84 Scott, Hear, 297-8.

85 A further example is Scott's reading of the Sower (Scott, Hear, 358-362). The “wide and extensive set of metaphorical possibilities” associated with sowing and reaping in the ancient world (361) might give the parable a moral message, or point to eschatological judgment, or to the resurrection of the dead. But Scott finds the parable to “resist” all such symbolism, and identifies a structural emphasis on “failure” (I suggest a climactic scene of “triple growth” (350) surely has an equal claim?). Further, even if we assume “failure” is the emphasis, does the kingdom involve failure, or is the parable a warning against failure? For Scott, the parable portrays a kingdom where “in failure and everydayness lies the miracle of God’s activity” (361-2). At three crucial points: (i) rejecting the normal symbolism of seed/sowing; (ii) emphasising failure; (iii) deciding failure is the way of the kingdom (rather than incompatible with it), Scott is making interpretative choices that are not demanded by the narrative, but reflect his own prior view of the nature of the kingdom of God, and the nature of the parables. These hypotheses are as influential for Scott, as the rule of faith was for Irenaeus.

86 Scott often resorts to the clear statements of Scripture in support of his particular choice of emphasis. E.g. in his “From Story to Kingdom” section of the Rich Fool he cites Mark 5.23-4; 10.35; 12.41-4; James 2.15-16 in support of his reading; for the Workers in the Vineyard, Rom 3.22-4; Luke 17.21; for the Forgiven and Unforgiving Servant, Matt 5.39, Rom 3.23. These scriptures support his chosen emphasis (and hypothesis); had he chosen an alternative emphasis, other scriptures could have been selected in support.
outcomes are historically dependent and he frequently has recourse in interpretation to his own hypotheses concerning the parables’ external referent (the kingdom of God) and concerning how the parables relate to that referent (by subverting conventional associations). Scott does not adequately demonstrate how the parables may have priority over and interpret their context. At best he anticipates the possibility of a genuine dialogue between parable and symbol (the kingdom), though he leaves us without clear guidance as to how the particular voice of the parable might be established to enable such a dialogue to take place.

Scott pioneered the use of “reception-theory analysis”\(^{87}\) to explore how the parables might have been “heard” by a first century Palestinian audience. In my view this aspect of his interpretive practice has an important contribution to make to understanding the function of the parables within the ministry of the Synoptic Jesus, where the details of a parable’s audience and precipitating circumstances can be defined more precisely than was possible using Scott’s methodology (where audience was only defined in general terms).\(^{88}\)

**Herzog and N.T. Wright - Introduction**

Despite Jeremias’ influential view that the parables constitute a “particularly trustworthy tradition” that brings us “into immediate relation with [the historical] Jesus”,\(^{89}\) many historical Jesus scholars pay little attention to them in constructing their portraits of Jesus. For example, Sanders,\(^{90}\) Allison,\(^{91}\) Horsley,\(^{92}\) and Crossan,\(^{93}\) make only limited reference to the parables and do not give them a material role in the formation of their particular portraits of the historical Jesus. For some of

\(^{87}\) Scott, *Hear*, 75.

\(^{88}\) I discuss how this approach informs my own methodology in Chapter IV.

\(^{89}\) Jeremias, *Parables*, 12; cf. similarly Scott, *Hear*, 63-4; Snodgrass, *Stories*, 31: “With regard to the authenticity of the parables, virtually everyone grants that they are the surest bedrock we have of Jesus’ teaching”; Kloppenborg, “Jesus”, 375 (and see scholarship cited in 375n1). This view has recently been challenged in Meier, *Marginal V*, though I suspect not all will be persuaded by him (by way of reply to Meier’s controversial proposal see e.g. Snodgrass, “Bedrock”, esp 144-6, critiquing Meier’s use of the criterion of multiple attestation; Zimmermann, “Memory”, 156-72).

\(^{90}\) Sanders, *Jesus*, does not engage in depth with the parables, and mentions them mainly to refute historical claims others have drawn from them (e.g. 109-11; 179-81; 277-81). Sanders, *Historical*, contains no substantive engagement with the parables, only occasionally referring to them to substantiate historical detail or confirm some thematic idea substantiated principally elsewhere. He briefly examines three parables (196-8) to illustrate his argument (already established on other grounds) that the values of the kingdom of God would “be quite different from those that prevailed” (196).

\(^{91}\) Allison, *Constructing* makes only summary reference to various parables, particularly those concerning the end of the age, judgment and reward, and only as one piece of evidence alongside many others (see e.g. 35-36; 192-3; 216-7) in support of the thesis he is arguing for.

\(^{92}\) Horsley, *Politics* (to take a representative work of his), contains engagement with one parable, Mark 12.1-9 (48-9). An entire chapter on Jesus’ conflict with the Jewish leaders (128-153) contains no engagement with any of Jesus’ parables. This neglect of the parable is notable given Horsley’s argument for the historical significance of the speeches of Jesus (see esp. 12-25).

\(^{93}\) Crossan’s historical reconstruction of Jesus contains a brief section on the parables of Matt 13 (Crossan, *Historical*, 276-282), which are adapted to his overall thesis of the Kingdom of God as a “sapiential Kingdom” that “looks to the present…how one could live here and now within an already or always available divine dominion….”, and also a “Kingdom of the nobodies and the destitute” (292). He has cursory interaction with a few other parables, but no other substantive engagement with any one parable.
these scholars, the neglect of parables reflects uncertainty regarding their authenticity. For others, it is the enigmatic nature of the parables that prevents them from making a contribution in their own right to a portrait of the historical Jesus. Allison puts it succinctly:

Jesus’ parables…are inherently polyvalent and so exceedingly pliable, which is why an exegete’s larger frame of reference typically determines interpretation… The meaning of the parables and their metaphorical possibilities are not inherent properties of the parables as freestanding works of art but rather depend upon the narrative in which they are embedded or upon the nonliterary contexts into which we attempt to place them.

John Meier, whose initial portrait of the historical Jesus is not informed by the parables makes a similar point in explaining why he waited until volume five of his “Marginal Jew” project before examining the parables:

When it comes to interpreting the parables as part of the quest for the historical Jesus, the need for an overarching interpretive framework of Jesus’ ministry, as reconstructed in our previous four volumes, appears both obvious and pressing. Without such a framework, it is difficult if not impossible to guess what Jesus might or might not have meant by a particular parable - especially when, read in isolation, a given parable is open to an almost endless number of interpretations.

These historical Jesus scholars share Irenaeus’ view that the ambiguity of the parables means they cannot be used to argue for something not otherwise already known with certainty (a reconstruction of the historical Jesus).

Other historical Jesus scholars such as N.T. Wright and Herzog (see below) have demonstrated that once a portrait of the historical Jesus has been constructed on other grounds, the parables may then be adapted to that portrait. This is a similar methodology to that used by Irenaeus, in that the parables are adapted to a hypothesis, albeit a historical hypothesis for these scholars. In discussing Herzog and Wright, I evaluate their use of historical hypotheses for parable interpretation and also explore whether their hypotheses dominate in the interpretive process. As we have seen in the scholarship of Irenaeus, Dodd and Jeremias, general hypotheses, whether historical or theological (or a mix of the two), tend to dominate the parables adapted to them. Scott’s approach suggests the possibility and problem of an alternative approach. His intention was that general socio-historical data inform how we interpret the parables, but without dominating

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94 E.g. Sanders, Jesus, 320: “we do not know that all the parables attributed to Jesus were actually told by him” (cf. 281, 386 n24).

95 Allison, Constructing, 117-8. Similarly Liebenberg, Language, 164: “to view the structure of the parables as keys to the unique message of the historical Jesus is mistaken since the structures themselves invite polyvalency rather than promote fixed meanings”.

96 Meier, Marginal V, 4-5.

97 I have chosen these two historical Jesus scholars because they discuss a reasonable number of Synoptic parables, discuss them in some depth, and explore the function of these parables in the ministry of the historical Jesus in some detail.
them.\textsuperscript{98} That much seems possible and desirable. But in Scott's scholarship this left many aspects of interpretation open and undecided, necessitating recourse to his own general hypotheses to complete the interpretive process. That is the problem; when reading the parables in literary isolation there are insufficient parable-specific signals to adequately inform interpretation, so that recourse to general hypotheses is required (to complete the interpretive process), hypotheses which then tend to play a dominant role in shaping interpretive outcomes. However, Scott’s recourse to socio-historical research was limited, and emphasised only broad themes and general aspects of the ministry of the historical Jesus. It seems conceptually possible that a historical context \textit{defined in more detail} might have the potential to inform parable interpretation to a greater extent. Could more detailed socio-historical data, and a more detailed portrait of the historical Jesus, be sensitively applied so that they \textit{inform} our readings of the parables generally and also provide sufficiently detailed \textit{parable-specific interpretive signals} so as to enable their interpretation to occur without domination by a general hypothesis?

To answer this question I consider the scholarship of Herzog and N.T. Wright, who both interpreted the parables with reference to reconstructions of the historical Jesus that were as precise and detailed as they felt able to make them.

\textbf{Herzog: Parables Encoding the Socio-Economic Realities of Peasant Life}

In his initial study on the parables (\textit{Parables as Subversive Speech}), Herzog argued Jesus was a teacher, similar to Paulo Freire, using parables to expose the oppression and exploitation of the rural peasantry at the hands of the elite. The “hypotheses” that guide Herzog’s approach to reading the parables, are:

1. Jesus, like Paulo Freire, worked among the poor and oppressed, in advanced agrarian societies, deformed by colonial exploitation, and where religion sanctioned oppression.\textsuperscript{99}
2. The parables are to be “read first as scenes from the larger world of agrarian society and the political control of aristocratic rule”.\textsuperscript{100}

\textsuperscript{98} In Scott’s theory, the crucial signals to inform interpretation were to come from a literary analysis of the parables themselves.

\textsuperscript{99} Herzog, \textit{Parables}, 25-28: both were teachers, seeking to expose oppression and exploitation, and were regarded as politically subversive for doing so.

\textsuperscript{100} Herzog, \textit{Parables}, 73. Herzog is arguing that the parables are, in the first instance, “about” the subjects they narrate, rather than being metaphorical in nature. The parables’ characters “can be associated with the social types who inhabited agrarian societies”. The values that inform the “aristocrats, their bureaucrats, and the peasantry” of those societies are evident in the parables, as well as the “plight of the unclean and degraded and the expendables”. Herzog’s reconstruction of the world of early first century Palestine, giving particular attention to “the social and economic world of agrarian societies” and the “political world of aristocratic empires” (52; see 53-73 for details), was an effort to “explain the social scenes of the parables” (51).
3. The parables ultimately function (for a peasant audience) to expose oppression and exploitation the peasants no longer recognise, and to help identify possibilities for social change.\footnote{Herzog, \textit{Parables}, 16-29: “This is the hypothesis that guides the readings of the parables proposed in the study” (29; italics mine). Herzog reached this understanding of the parables through examining the techniques of Freire’s literacy campaigns amongst the poor.}

Herzog’s hypotheses create a fairly one-dimensional Jesus (teacher of the rural poor), a historical situation dominated by a single issue (exploitation/oppression), a homogenous audience (rural peasants), and a single purpose for the parables (liberation of the poor). A selection of parables are then adapted to these hypotheses, making their own contribution to the “liberation praxis of Jesus’ ministry”.\footnote{Herzog, \textit{Parables}, 3.} For example, in telling the Workers in the Vineyard, Jesus sought to expose how a landowner “smothers” the fact of his dependency on his workers (who might have shown power through solidarity had they recognised this), and instead shrewdly divides them against each other, and in banishing one is able to “intimidate the others and put them in their place”.\footnote{Herzog, \textit{Parables}, 95-6.} The Hidden Talent portrays as a “hero” a retainer who breaks with his master’s exploitative capitalist business practice (to which he had previously been party), through refusing to invest his master’s money and by publicly naming his master’s behaviour for what it is (and suffering a dire fate as a result).\footnote{Herzog, \textit{Parables}, 167. Further examples: (i) The Unrighteous Manager Who ActedWisely illustrates how the oppressed might employ the “weapons of the weak” in a “world dominated by the strong”, providing a “glimpse of a time when debts would be lowered and a place where rejoicing could be heard” (258). (ii) The Friend at Midnight portrays village hospitality to strangers, that honours the requirements of Torah and imitates the hospitality of Abraham (in contrast to the feasting of the elite that nurtured patron-client relationships), and enables the peasants to resist the elite’s attempts to dehumanise them and reduce their lives to an obsession with survival (194-214).}

In a subsequent study (\textit{Prophet and Teacher}), the parables are examined with reference to a historical portrait of Jesus combining four “different but related lenses”: Jesus is (i) a prophetic figure in the tradition of Israel’s prophets; (ii) a teacher; (iii) a healer and exorcist; and (iv) a reputational leader brokering God’s reign.\footnote{Herzog, \textit{Prophet}, 12-24; quotation from 24.} The parables are then adapted to this multi-faceted portrait of Jesus. Herzog acknowledges the significance of his historical portrait of Jesus for parable interpretation. For example, because Jesus is a “prophet of the justice of the reign of God spelling out the meaning of God’s Torah for his troubled time” we should expect to find “a concern for the Torah in the parables of Jesus”.\footnote{Herzog, \textit{Prophet}, 141. Similarly, because Jesus is a “figure in the prophetic tradition”, we should expect to find “contained” in the parables “some of the themes of Jesus’ prophetic work” (120).} In this study, Herzog’s understanding of the historical Jesus has evolved significantly from his earlier study, and his understanding of some individual parables has also evolved, along similar lines. For example, consider the Murderous Tenants:

\[\text{\footnotesize 27}\]
1. Told by a Jesus who is pedagogue to an oppressed peasantry, the parable codifies “the futility of violence” in circumstances where rebellion will inevitably be crushed, opening conversation among the peasants about other ways to “reclaim their honourable status as heirs”.107

2. Told by a four-dimensional Jesus, the parable stands in a “long tradition of prophetic critiques of ruling classes”.108 It reaffirms “the debt codes of the Torah”109 and provides hope for the peasantry that “God’s justice will prevail” in judgment on the wicked and return of the land to those who “respect Torah and love justice”.110

Evaluation
Herzog demonstrates the pedagogical power of the parables to open the possibility of a new future for an audience. His approach is not so concerned with what a parable “means”, but with how the parables make a rhetorical and pedagogical contribution to the situation into which they were spoken. His concept of “codification” highlights the way parables expose things people can no longer perceive (about themselves and their circumstances), with a view to catalysing a process of personal and social renewal. This aspect of Herzog’s work has contributed to my own methodology, and I discuss it further in Chapter IV.

Herzog’s interpretive outcomes are thoroughly shaped and coloured by his hypotheses, as is evident for example by his recurring emphasis on oppression and injustice. Historical hypotheses, like theological ones, easily dominate in parable interpretation. This, together with the way interpretations vary between his two studies is evidence of the ambiguity and malleability of the genre. This must cast doubt on Herzog’s criteria for judging the success of his project: “the results will have to be tested by the readings of the parables themselves”.111 The malleability of the genre means the parables are far too willing to oblige. Thus evidence of the parables’ coherence with a particular historical Jesus reconstruction is a very weak argument for the historical validity of that reconstruction, or for the historical validity of the parable readings that follow from it.

The parables’ ambiguity also raises questions about the suitability of a historical Jesus portrait to serve as a hypothesis for interpreting the parables. That two so very different portraits of Jesus and his ministry can be proposed by the same scholar reminds us that method in historical research

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107 Herzog, Parables, 113.

108 Herzog, Prophet, 201.

109 Herzog, Prophet, 203.

110 Herzog, Prophet, 204. The parable also legitimises Jesus’ own ministry, with his focus on the needs of the poor, blind and sick (“the most valuable ‘stones’”) in contrast to the elite’s preoccupation with “monumental buildings”. The shift in his understanding of the source of the peasants’ liberation - from human to divine initiative - is striking. For similar readings of this parable see Horsley, Politics, 48-9; Crossan, Historical, 352.

111 Herzog, Parables, 39.
alters over time, and the ongoing labour of socio-historical research continues to provide new insights into the historical Jesus and his world. Can a level of consensus arise within this scholarship, concerning the historical Jesus and his ministry, so as to provide the certainty Irenaeus rightly saw was needed in a hypothesis, before it was appropriate to adapt the parables to it?\textsuperscript{112}

Herzog’s scholarship also highlights the subjectivity involved in adapting the parables, even to his reasonably detailed historical reconstruction of the person and ministry of Jesus. Subjectivity is minimised in Herzog’s initial study because there is only one audience (the peasants) and the parables concern a single subject (oppression and exploitation, as narrated in the parables). But the reader must still decide whether Jesus is naming oppression or seeking to open alternatives for his audience, a crucial interpretive choice. Further, such a narrow hypothesis inevitably excludes a range of parables that are about other things.\textsuperscript{113} Where a historical hypothesis is more detailed and multi-dimensional (as in *Prophet and Teacher*), subjective judgments are required to identify the precise aspect of a hypothesis with which a parable is concerned. This subjectivity is usually dealt with by a scholar making recourse to the particular emphases that dominate their historical reconstruction. Herzog’s scholarship illustrates that this subjectivity exists even when parables are said to be “about” the subjects they narrate, negating the need to identify a metaphorical referent in the interpretive process. Two examples will illustrate:

1. A typically multi-faceted portrait of the historical Jesus will recognise that he spoke to various audiences, but cannot signal which audience a particular parable was addressed to. In *Prophet and Teacher*, the Workers in the Vineyard is told by Jesus the teacher, speaking to an oppressed peasantry,\textsuperscript{114} encoding aspects of their socio-economic situation they no longer recognise. This choice of audience reflects Herzog’s predominant emphasis on the peasantry.

\textsuperscript{112}Herzog, *Parables*, 49 acknowledges this lack of certainty, citing Schweitzer: “There is really no other means of arriving at the order and inner connexion of the facets of the life of Jesus than the making and testing of hypotheses” (Schweitzer, *Quest*, 7). How historical research develops, directly impacting parable interpretation, can be see by comparing Herzog’s reading of the Workers in the Vineyard with that of van Eck and Kloppenborg. These scholars adopt a similar methodological approach to Herzog, emphasising the socio-economic realities depicted in the parables, as the grounds for their interpretation. However (informed in part by their analysis of Egyptian papyri, sources not examined by Herzog), they come to very different conclusions concerning the socio-economic realities depicted in the parable, finding the owner to exhibit a concern for the “most vulnerable in society” as demanded by Israel’s prophetic tradition (van Eck and Kloppenborg, *Unexpected*, 9). His (unusual) personal involvement in the hiring process, and his “offering benefits beyond the strict norms of economic exchange” makes him “a patron or benefactor whose actions create enduring and effective bonds with his clients” (9).

\textsuperscript{113}E.g. in Herzog, *Prophet*, 204-8, the Great Banquet depicts both the elite’s “rejection of the God who redeemed the people from bondage, made a covenant with them at Sinai, and let them into the land of promise” and “a God who is willing to be shamed by the prominent expected guests in order to open the banquet to the least likely people”. It discloses an alternative moral universe where those at the margins replace the elite “when the people of Yahweh gather for the great banquet” (208). This reading ultimately transcends the tightly defined parameters of Herzog’s initial hypothesis. The Sower might also have been excluded from this hypothesis, except that Herzog finds symbolic (even allegorical) meaning in the parable’s motifs (see Herzog, “Sowing”), a surprising departure from his assertion that the parables are “about” the realities they depict (but apparently not agricultural realities). Perhaps the parable might have been designed to codify inefficient farming practices, and to stimulate conversations about new methods of farming? Cf. Van Eck, “Harvest”, 5-9, for a reading of the Sower similar to that of Herzog.

\textsuperscript{114}This is explicit in Herzog, *Prophet*, 146,151.
as the recipients of Jesus’ ministry. But since Herzog’s Jesus is also a prophetic figure (in this study), it seems equally possible that the parable might have been directed to the ruling elite (frequent recipients of Jewish prophetic critique), exposing their exploitation of the peasantry and calling them to repentance.

2. A detailed historical Jesus portrait has the potential to correspond to a parable (with its various motifs and plot elements) in a variety of ways, but does not provide guidance as to the particular issue with which the parable is concerned. Reading of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, Herzog gives particular emphasis to the Pharisees’ Temple tithe, arguing Jesus intends the parable to help the peasants “decode tribute taking”, so that “the temple’s claim to tithes as divine obligation” is subverted and the Temple tithe exposed as another form of oppressive tribute.\textsuperscript{115} This choice of motif, and understanding of its significance, is consistent with Herzog’s dominant concern with exposing exploitative socio-economic systems. But it is otherwise unclear why the dominant emphasis should be on the Pharisees’ tithe payment, rather than for example, on the repentance of the Tax Collector, an emphasis also quite at home in Herzog’s broader scheme, where Jesus is “broker of God’s acquittal and forgiveness”.\textsuperscript{116}

Historical Jesus scholarship is generally restrained in suggesting parable-specific details (e.g. audience, precipitating circumstances, associated direct speech elements) that might help signal a parable's particular contribution within the ministry of the historical Jesus. Herzog’s study is no exception. This lack of parable-specific data means a scholar faces considerable subjectivity in determining precisely how a parables is to be adapted to a (general) portrait of the historical Jesus. This problem is usually resolved by a scholar having recourse to dominant emphases within their particular historical reconstruction, with associated interpretive outcomes clustering around these emphases. This again positions a scholars’ (historical) hypotheses to play the dominant role in the interpretative process, and in practice limits the diversity of interpretive outcomes.

Are these limitations a function of Herzog’s particular historical paradigm, or do they apply to historical paradigms generally? An examination of another historical Jesus scholar, whose historical portrait incorporates far more Synoptic material than that of Herzog, will help answer this question.

\textsuperscript{115} Herzog, \textit{Prophet}, 165 (see the full discussion at 162-5)

\textsuperscript{116} See Herzog, \textit{Prophet}, 164-5, recognising that Luke 18.14 speaks to Jesus “role as broker of God’s acquittal and forgiveness”, and that “the toll collector experiences God’s acquittal”, though ultimately Herzog’s emphasis lies on the participation of both figures in an oppressive system of tribute taking, and on how the parable speaks to these issues.
N.T. Wright: The Parables, the Story of Israel, and the Story of Jesus

Wright argued that Jesus spoke to a nation (Israel) “waiting for redemption”, for their “return from exile”, proclaiming that this redemption was taking place in his own ministry, even in an “extremely paradoxical fashion”. For Wright, the parables are an integral component of Jesus’ proclamation, evoking the story of Israel (emphasising exile and return), even while explaining how, in the ministry of Jesus, that story is reaching its (unexpected) conclusion. In the parables, “Jesus was articulating a new way of understanding the fulfilment of Israel’s hope”. The Prodigal Son evokes the story of how Israel goes into a “pagan country, becomes a slave, and then is brought back to her own land…exile and restoration is the main theme”, even while also announcing that Israel’s long awaited return from exile is taking place in the ministry of Jesus. The Sower is a “story about the return from exile, as it is taking place in Jesus’ own work”, where “Israel’s god is acting, sowing his prophetic word”, so that “Jesus’ hearers are living in the days of the return”. However, the “final harvest will not come about” as popularly imagined; even though “the eventual harvest…will be great”, much of the seed is wasted, thus many will “remain in the ‘exilic’ condition”.

Wright argues the parables do not merely pass on “information about the kingdom”, but play a direct role as a “means of bringing it to birth”; the parables are not “second order activity, talking about what is happening…they are a part of the primary activity itself….Jesus’ telling of these stories is one of the key ways in which the kingdom breaks in upon Israel, redefining itself as it does”. Thus for Wright, the parables are “highly situational” in their origins; they are birthed in and form part of the “period of [Jesus’] public career and ministry, of his work as a prophet of...

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117 Wright, Victory, 128. “Return from exile” is a generic category that includes “resurrection-forgiveness-restoration-return from exile - the reign of YHWH”, all with a national rather than an individual emphasis. For a recent evaluation of Wright's “return from exile” theme (also summarising scholarly discussion and critique), see Bird, “Exile”, 209-31.

118 E.g. Wright, Victory, 131: “Jesus is reconstituting Israel around himself. This is the return from exile; this, in other words, is the kingdom of Israel’s God”; “Jesus is implying that his own career and kingdom announcement is the moment toward which all Israel’s history had been leading…” (235; italics original); “Israel’s god was now at last becoming king, through his (Jesus’) own work, his own life, and finally, it seems, through his own death” (466).

119 Wright, Victory, 127.

120 Wright, Victory, 130: “Jesus’ parables… continue the long Jewish tradition of telling the story of Israel herself, and showing how it is arriving at its paradoxical conclusion”. “Such parables… are Israel’s-story-in-miniature”.

121 Wright, Victory, 176; italics original.

122 Wright, Victory, 126-7. The Exodus is the “ultimate backdrop”; the parable is “about” exile and restoration.

123 Wright, Victory, 233-4; citing how motifs of sown seed (equals the word of Yahweh) and return from exile combine in Is 55.10-13.

124 Wright, Victory, 234. The Rich Man and Lazarus portrays “what was happening to rich and poor in the present time” (Wright, Victory, 255; italics original). Lazarus’ welcome by Abraham is a picture of Jesus’ welcome of the poor and outcast, “a sign that the real return from exile, the new age, the ‘resurrection’, was coming into being” (255). Like the rich man’s five brothers, the “rich, the Pharisees, the grumblers… now need to repent if they were to inherit the new day” (254).

125 Wright, Victory, 176; italics original.
judgment and renewal". In collaboration with Jesus’ direct speech proclamation and teaching, symbolic prophetic actions, miraculous deeds, and general ministry praxis, the parables announce and enact Israel’s return from exile, the coming of the kingdom of God. The parables are, by nature, situated “within precisely the Jewish prophetic tradition”; they “belong with, rework, reappropriate and redirect Israel’s prophetic and apocalyptic traditions”.

Evaluation

For Wright, the parables make sense “only within the whole context of Jesus’ career”, and are to be examined in detail “once, and only once, their total context, and setting within the ministry of Jesus is fully understood”. That “total context” for Wright is an understanding of Jesus as one proclaiming and enacting Israel’s return from exile, the coming of the kingdom of God. It is this historical hypothesis to which Wright adapts the parables, and which so thoroughly shapes his interpretation of them. Because Jesus is proclaiming and enacting Israel’s return from exile, the parables are proclaiming and enacting Israel’s return from exile, with motifs of exile and return identified with surprising ease in a wide range of parables. The parables are again seen to be an obliging literary form, readily adapting (on account of their malleable nature) to Wright’s very detailed historical reconstruction. Even though Wright regards the parables as a “primary”, first-order activity within the ministry of Jesus, the substance of their contribution is largely determined by reference to his hypothesis. When the parables speak, it is the voice of Wright’s hypothesis that is heard.

126 Wright, Victory, 180. See the discussion at 179-182.
127 E.g. Wright, Victory, 639: the Talents/Minas is the “key explanatory riddle” for understanding Jesus’ entry to Jerusalem; it is “a new encoding, in an acted narrative, of the widespread and well-know biblical prophecies” that make these actions “prophetic… messianic, and… something more”.
128 Wright gives particular emphasis to Jesus’ table fellowship with sinners; see e.g. how these “celebratory meals” are linked to the Prodigal Son (Wright, Victory, 130) and the Rich Man and Lazarus (255).
129 Wright, Victory, 177; italics original. Wright argues this point persuasively in my view.
130 Wright, Victory, 180. Wright’s sometimes fairly allegorical readings of the parables are an example of how “allegory flourishes at times of intense cultural disruption, when the most authoritative texts of the culture are subject to reevaluation and reassessment” (Madsen, Rereading, 135, discussing this phenomena in relation to other texts).
131 Wright, Victory, 180-2.
132 Cf. Snodgrass, “Reading”, 65: Wright’s approach means that at least some parables “have been overread and conformed to a larger hypothesis” (for what this means for individual parables, see 69-75); Denton, “Interpreted” 250-1 on the importance of Wright’s “hypothesis of Jesus’ work as the occasion of Israel’s return from exile” in interpreting the parables (italics mine), and how this stands in some tension with “the context of the sources on Jesus in their particularity”.
133 There is a tension between Wright’s claim that the parables have a first order role in the ministry of Jesus, contributing in their own right to his proclamation and enactment of the kingdom, (176) and their heavy dependence on his overall hypothesis, which largely determines the substance of their contribution (by providing the crucial interpretive signal as to what the parables are “about”). Thus while the parables may “explain” what is happening elsewhere in Jesus’ ministry (639, citing 6 specific parables as examples), in a very real sense, the explanation has first been provided by Wright’s hypothesis.
Because Wright’s hypothesis so dominates his parable readings, other possible interpretive outcomes are excluded, since his hypothesis contains nothing to signal this interpretive direction, and parable specific data is usually lacking (or has itself been interpreted with reference to Wright’s hypothesis). Some examples. Since Wright’s hypothesis emphasises how Israel’s story is reaching its unexpected climax in the ministry of Jesus, Wright gives little emphasis to the significance of the kingdom of God outside of Israel, and beyond the term of Jesus’ public ministry, in his readings of the parables of growth.\(^{134}\) Since Wright’s Jesus enacts the return of YHWH to Zion, and as a prophet pronounces imminent judgment on Israel, Wright does not recognise a broader eschatological dimension to the master-servant parables.\(^{135}\) Wright’s view that the parables are primarily prophetic instruments, designed to give a new perspective on how Israel’s return from exile is occurring in the ministry of Jesus, means the didactic potential of the parables is given less emphasis.\(^{136}\) It is not my intention to evaluate these issues, but merely to point out that Wright’s hypothesis has its own particular emphases, and with that limitations, which directly influence what can be said, and will not be said, about the parables (as they are adapted to that hypothesis).

Wright’s hypothesis is that the parables tell how the long story of Israel is being recapitulated and brought to its conclusion in the ministry of Jesus. Herzog’s (initial) hypothesis is that the parables tell the story of the peasant’s oppression. Both recognise the ability of the parables to tell an audience’s story in a new and subversive way, and in doing so to open new possibilities for their lives. But which story do they tell? Should we push for a prophetic, apocalyptic use of the parables (Wright), or can we also recognise a didactic function (Herzog). Perhaps the point is that hypotheses tend to force us to choose, and to choose for all the parables. Wright and Herzog have resolved my initial difficulty with Irenaeus in that they ground the parables thoroughly in the ministry of the historical Jesus. But their (historical) hypotheses, being subject to considerable scholarly critique, are less concrete than Irenaeus’ theological hypothesis, even while being (almost) as

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\(^{134}\) See Wright, *Victory*, 230-239 (the Sower) and 240-2 (the Seed, the Mustard Seed and the Leaven). With regard to the Sower, Wright’s emphasis lies on how the story depicts what is taking place in the ministry of Jesus (rather than the broader implications of that ministry, though these are briefly alluded to in places). The other parables are not primarily or “originally” about “the influence of Christianity on the world”, but “about the effect of the kingdom’s inauguration within Israel” (even if Wright can recognise “a hint” in the Mustard Seed concerning Gentile inclusion) (241).

\(^{135}\) See Wright, *Victory*, 632-40: “The best way to read the master/servant parables is in terms of their immediate context in all three synoptics, that is, of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem” (635). The Hidden Talent explains Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem “as the symbol and embodiment of YHWH’s return to Zion”, (639; italics original) and also warns of imminent judgment for a nation that had neglected its master’s business and rebelled against his lordship, thus anticipating the destruction of Jerusalem in 70C.E. (637-8). Similarly the parables of Luke 12.35-48 are stories about “the imminent return of YHWH to Zion, and the awesome consequences which will ensue if Israel is not ready” (640). This reading of the master-servant parables is influenced by Wright’s non-eschatological reading of the Olivet discourse. Wright’s view is that Matt 24/Mark 13/Luke 21 all refer primarily to the coming judgment on Jerusalem (70C.E.), and the vindication of Jesus (and his disciples) at that time. This is what is meant by the coming of Son of Man (see the extended discussion in 339-368). This is one of the more controversial aspects of Wright’s study: see e.g. Dunn, *Jesus*, 793-5; Stein, “Wright’s”, 213, 216-8; Snodgrass, “Reading”, 63-4, 72-5; Nicholas Perrin, “Jesus”, 103-112; Nicholas Perrin, “Stone”, (esp 265-75); Humphrey, “Glimpsing”, 170-180; Marsh, “Theological”, 83-4; Eddy, “(W)Right”; Allison, “Victory”.

\(^{136}\) See e.g. his treatment of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Wright, *Victory*, 255-6): the “point” of the parable is not that it is “simply a statement on the abstract ‘ethical’ issue of wealth and poverty”, but rather that it describes “what was happening to both rich and poor in the present time” (255; italics original).
dominating of the parables. Is there a way to recognise these scholars’ excellent historical work, without requiring such heavy conformity on the part of the parables? And can we unlock the unique voice of the parables, or must they always sing a hypothesis’ song?

**An Alternative Proposal for Parable Interpretation**

It is difficult to avoid recourse to a hypothesis when interpreting the parables of Jesus. The hypothesis may be theological, historical, ideological, existential, or literary in nature, or a combination of these. The hypothesis may concern the nature of the parables, the general meaning of the parables, and/or the general function of the parables. The hypothesis may be acknowledged or assumed. However, as we have seen (above), the relationship between a parable and any hypothesis may be problematic. To summarise the main issues. Firstly, hypotheses generally lack the certainty Irenaeus argued was desirable when interpreting an enigmatic literary form. The parables are obliging evidence, but not good evidence (given their malleable nature) for the validity of the hypothesis. Secondly, a hypothesis, even if regarded as certain (e.g. Irenaeus’ rule of faith), is typically general in nature, lacking parable-specific interpretive signals to identify: (i) the subject to which an individual parable speaks; and/or (ii) the precise way in which the parable speaks to this subject. The parables often have complex plots, multiple motifs, and motifs and imagery having the potential to carry a range of symbolic and metaphoric meaning, so that they have the potential to interact in multiple ways with a hypothesis that is itself likely to be multi-faceted, introducing considerable subjectivity into the interpretive process. To resolve this subjectivity and complete the interpretive process, scholars generally take their interpretive cues from a hypothesis (or some dominant aspect of it), which will then typically dominate the (comparatively open) parables adapted to it, largely determining the essence of their interpretation. This often means that interpretive outcomes coalesce around dominant themes, and/or that the parables function to illustrate what is already clearly established within a hypothesis, but may make no contribution in their own right to the substance of that hypothesis.

The dynamics of the relationship between parable and hypothesis, when brought into direct interpretive relationship, may be portrayed as follows:

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137 So e.g. Herzog, *Parables*, 42: “Because every text requires some context, the removal of the parables from the Gospels necessitated providing another context in which they could be read”. He rightly identifies the need to “create or ‘discover’ another context in order to make sense of their proposed readings of the riddles called parables” (44).

138 Even a “devotional” reading of a parable will be informed by whatever understanding a reader brings to the parables concerning the life and ministry of Jesus, biblical/NT theology, and the nature of the parables..

139 For example, a wide range of parables concern the existence of the one God (Irenaeus); Israel’s return from exile (N.T. Wright); socio-economic injustice (Herzog).
It is to some extent inevitable that our general understanding of (or assumptions concerning) the teaching and ministry of the historical/Synoptic Jesus, NT theology and narrative, and the parable genre, will contribute to how we read the parables. An interpretive relationship between the two appears not only to be inevitable but desirable, given the origins and literary location of the parables. The question is whether the relationship between parable and hypothesis can be structured in such a way so that in reading the parables we benefit from the insight general hypotheses impart, but avoid the methodological problems identified above.

The Potential of the Gospel Arrangement of the Parables: from Dominance to Dialogue

My proposal in this thesis is that the arrangement of the parables of Jesus within the NT Gospels has the parables situated in literary proximity to data that (in dialogue with the parables - see below) provides the crucial interpretive signals that enable the reader to establish:

1. The subject matter to which each parable speaks.
2. The nature of the relationship between the parable and the subject to which its speaks.

To the extent this can be demonstrated, the NT Gospels’ literary arrangement of the parables can be seen to carry a particular interpretive significance for the parables in light of the above discussion. If situational and parable-specific material can supply the crucial interpretive signals for each parable, then the interpretive direction for any one parable may be determined without direct reference to a general hypothesis. This is the interpretive approach I explore in this thesis. In arguing for the material placed in literary proximity to the parables (in their NT Gospel arrangement) to have priority in their interpretation, I do not mean to suggest that hypotheses have no interpretive significance. Historical and theological hypotheses will for example, continue to inform how we understand the Jesus who tells the parables, his audience, the general purpose of his ministry/teaching, and aspects of the stories themselves. But the relationship between the parables and these hypotheses is not a dominant one when the crucial interpretive signals come from elsewhere. If the subject of a parable and the relationship between parable and subject can be signalled by situational and proximate Gospel data, narrative (parable) and grand narrative (hypothesis) need not be brought into direct dialogue at these crucial points of interpretation.
Hypotheses then become a second order interpretive influence; they inform but do not dominate interpretation.

The difference between a hypothesis dominating interpretation of a parable and informing interpretation may be illustrated using an example. N.T. Wright’s interpretation of the parables is, as we have seen, often heavily determined by hypotheses concerning the ministry of Jesus (Jesus is announcing and enacting Israel’s return from exile) and concerning the function of the parables (they (re)tell the story of Israel, including its surprising conclusion in the ministry of Jesus). These hypotheses provide the crucial interpretive signals, and in that sense dominate Wright’s parable readings. However, Wright provides one example of an alternative approach. In reading the Good Samaritan, Wright begins with the parable’s Lukan narrative context (Luke 10.25-29), the dialogue between a lawyer and Jesus that frames the parable. This context provides the crucial interpretive signals: (i) it identifies the matter to which the parable speaks, the “standard Jewish question about the conditions for having a share in the age to come”; and (ii) it signals the relationship between the parable and that subject: the parable provides an example to be followed for those who would be included in the age to come; the lawyer is to “go and do likewise”. Wright’s historical research and general reconstruction of Jesus’ ministry inform how aspects of the story, and its immediate Lukan context, are understood. But his general hypotheses are prevented from dominating the parable because primary interpretive guidance is taken from the story’s immediate Lukan context. It is notable that in reading the Good Samaritan, Wright makes no mention of Israel’s exile or return. The parable’s meaning and function are defined contextually and situationally. Once interpreted this way, the parable makes its own important

140 Wright, Victory, 305-7.

141 Wright, Victory, 305. Wright is (rightly in my view) insistent on this emphasis throughout his discussion of this parable (esp 307). My point is that this emphasis is not provided by reference to a general hypothesis, but by the highly situational circumstances that precipitated the telling of the parable in its Lukan arrangement.

142 Wright, Victory, 307. Wright sees how (in dialogue with its Lukan frame), the parable “dramatically redefines the covenant boundary of Israel, of the Torah itself, and by strong implication of the Temple cult”. This then allows Jesus to issue a “challenge” to the lawyer to “follow Jesus in finding a new and radicalised version of Torah observance”.

143 E.g. Wright draws on his historical paradigm/hypothesis to inform how the lawyer’s initial question should be understood (Wright, Victory, 305-6), and to argue that ὁ δὲ θελὼν δικαιώσαι ἐαυτὸν (10.29) refers to “the justification of the Jew, seeking to draw the boundaries of the covenant at the appropriate place, with (of course) himself inside and sundry other specifiable categories outside” (306).

144 Neither is the parable understood to be telling the story of Israel, a story finding its fulfilment in the ministry of Jesus.
contribution to Wright’s portrait of the ministry of Jesus, by anticipating the inclusion of non-Jews in
the kingdom of God.\(^{145}\)

The Synoptic arrangement of the parables argues against their literary independence (as e.g.
when parables are placed in a sayings collection or anthology). Nor are the parables situated
principally in relation to the Gospel narratives as a whole, or located in interpretive relationship to a
well defined general hypothesis. My proposal is that the NT parables are presented situationally, at
a particular point in the Gospel narratives, \textit{with an interpretive relationship intended between the
parables and the textual segments placed in immediate literary proximity to them}. These textual
segments may take the form of narrative elements, adjacent discourse, introductions, rhetorical
questions, statements or sayings. This data is generally parable-specific, or relates to a group of
parables. When this material provides the crucial interpretive signals in parable interpretation, I
expect the following outcomes:

(i) Less subjectivity in the interpretive process, as more - and more specific - interpretive direction
    is provided for each parable (than a general hypothesis can provide).

(ii) Greater variety in the meaning and function of the parables, as interpretation is directed by
    \textit{varied} parable-specific contextual data rather than the general concerns of a grand hypothesis.

(iii) The parables may be expected to make their own contribution to enriching and developing their
    NT Gospels’ narratives and theology, as they find their own situational “voice”.

These ideas will be tested in my analysis of individual parables (Chapters V and VI, with results
summarised in Chapter VII) and in my preliminary survey of the wider NT parabolic corpus,
including a discussion of possible exceptions (Chapter VII).

\textit{From Dominance to Dialogue in Parable Interpretation}

A possible concern with the above proposal is that we may move from a hypothesis dominating the
parables to contextual material dominating the parables. Surely the sayings, statements, questions
or discourse that frame a parable may dominate as easily as a hypothesis? In my view, this is not
necessary.\(^{146}\) The nature of the Synoptic parable frames suggests they were intended to make an

\(^{145}\) See Wright, \textit{Victory}, 307: since the parable anticipates “the redrawing of Israel’s boundaries, to include those normally reckoned
beyond the pale”, it “points to another vital theme within the kingdom-story… The story which Jesus was telling did not stop with
Jesus alone”. Wright then proceeds to discuss the implications of Jesus’ ministry for the Gentiles (308-11). Given the limited Synoptic
data Wright draws on here (see n242-4, n247), the importance of the Good Samaritan’s contribution (when first read contextually) for
understanding the significance of the ministry of Jesus for the Gentiles, may be greater than Wright envisaged. My point here is that
this issue is \textit{raised by the parable} (when interpreted contextually), rather than demanded by Wright’s hypothesis (which in general
recognises this issue, but only at the margins). Thus the parable enriches Wright’s hypothesis by insisting, in its own way, that this
dimension is included in our understanding of Jesus’ ministry.

\(^{146}\) Potentially contextual material \textit{may} be used to dominate the parable. E.g. where a saying that follows a parable is understood as
the summary of the parable (so that the parable says nothing more than the saying), it dominates the parable. Or where a parable is
understood as only illustrating a didactic point made immediately prior to a parable, that point dominates the parable. But the
material need not be used this way, as I will demonstrate.
essential contribution to how a parable is read, but without dominating the process of interpretation. The frames generally employ language in a direct way and thus are clear in their meaning at a basic semantic level. However, these frames are often characterised, at least partially, by literary indeterminacy and dependency, in that they are reliant on their surrounding literary context for their full meaning and significance to be established. The frames’ indeterminacy and/or dependency takes various forms as is evident in the following examples:

1. Explanatory comments that containing “gaps”, leaving central aspects of a parable unexplained.  
2. Introductions beginning with Ὅμοια ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν or similar, and subsequent sayings containing οὗτως, διὰ τοῦτο (e.g. Matt 24.44), γάρ (e.g. Matt 24.13) or similar, thus explicitly signalling their dependence on the associated parable.
3. Sayings containing metaphorical elements.
4. Introductions in the form of a question (e.g. Mark 4.30; Luke 12.41).
5. Concluding statements referring (explicitly) back to a parable (e.g. Luke 18.6).
6. Highly enigmatic sayings (e.g. Luke 16.8b).

Thus, I am suggesting that the parables’ Gospel frames are sufficiently clear to supply sufficient interpretive guidance to inform a contextual reading of the parables, and that these frames are also at least partially enigmatic, connotative and dependent, so that their full literary significance is only established by reading them in dialogue with the associated parables and their narrative context. The frames’ partial literary indeterminacy suggests they were intended to raise questions for the reader, prompting further interpretive inquiry. This inquiry will usually involve exploring a frame and related parable in light of each other, and exploring both with reference to proximate narrative elements. In this process parable, frame and associated narrative elements may each contribute to how we understand the other, and together inform how we understand the Synoptic pericope they collectively constitute, a process in which the full literary significance of a parable is established.

Further, I am proposing that the parables’ enigmatic nature and the partial indeterminacy of their frames means that both may inform and be informed by each other in a truly dialogical interpretive

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147 E.g. (i) The Synoptic “explanations” of the Sower do not explicitly disclose the identity of the parable’s main character. (ii) Matt 20.16; 22.14 do not specify the identity of the persons they refer to. (iii) The “explanation” of the Wheat and the Weeds (Matt 13.36-43) is the most extensive and clear “explanation” of a parable in the Synoptics (the Sower is close, but less comprehensive). While the Parable is dependent on this explanation, is the explanation dependent on the parable? In my view Matt 13.36-43 is not particularly indeterminate in itself (though 13.43 is enigmatic). However, indeterminacy arises because the “explanation” fails to signal a metaphorical referent for the central scene of the parable (or discuss it at all), the dialogue between the householder and the slaves (13.27-8). Thus the “explanation” prompts further reader inquiry concerning the parable.


150 E.g. Introducing a parable with Ὅμοια ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν... signals that the parable speaks of the kingdom, but we must read on to the parable, and often back to its narrative context, to find out in what way. The introductory saying combines essential content and crucial openness.
process, from which new meaning may emerge that ultimately transcends the content of both. Two examples of such an interpretive process (in brief outline only):

The Workers in the Vineyard is preceded by the saying πολλοί δὲ ἐσονται πρῶτοι ἔσχατοι καὶ ἔσχατοι πρῶτοι (Matt 19.30; cf. 20.16). This statement is clear at a semantic level, and provides essential guidance for a literary reading of the parable by focusing on the workers and their varied fortunes in the final scene. At the same time, the saying itself remains partially open, inviting interpretive inquiry. The identity of the first and the last is not specified. And the reason for the reversal is not evident from the saying alone. It is only as saying (stipulating reversal as subject), parable (illustrating reversal and stipulating envy as the reason for it), and narrative context (stipulating the anxious disciples as audience) come into dialogue with each other, that the full literary significance of the parable may be established.¹⁵¹ The partial openness of the saying allows this process to be dialogical, in that each element makes an essential contribution to how we understand the others, and the pericope as a whole.¹⁵² Similarly, the statement following the Faithful Slaves and the Homeowner (Luke 12.40: καὶ ὑμεῖς γίνεσθε ἕτοιμοι, ὅτι ἂν ὁ ὑιὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἔρχεται) plays an essential role in signalling that the preceding parables speak of the day of the coming of the Son of Man, something not clear from the parables themselves. This imperative for readiness also sets the general ethical direction of the parable. At the same time, it leaves open the meaning of readiness, which is given positive definition in the preceding parables, and negative definition in the parables that follow.¹⁵³

Irenaeus spoke of adapting the parables to a hypothesis. Hypotheses aim to give a comprehensive account of their subject, being by nature a way of making sense of the data. A reasonable level of adaption or conformity by smaller units of data is anticipated. In contrast, I am arguing that both the parables, their frames, and associated narrative elements, as arranged within the Synoptics, are each pieces of the available data, whose full literary significance is only determined as they come into an interpretive dialogue with each other. Each is a piece of the puzzle, able to be joined with other pieces to give more definition and clarity, but not the full picture (hypothesis) itself. The dependent nature of this material, and its provisional sense (in that its full significance only

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¹⁵¹ See Chapter VII for a more detailed examination of this parable.

¹⁵² Cf. Jones, Matthean, 419-20: the Workers in the Vineyard “does not illustrate a simple moral statement, as if the relation of epigram and parables were that of summary and exposition”. Rather “the one illuminates the other: the epigram the parable, the parable the epigram”.

¹⁵³ See similarly Zimmermann, Puzzling, 269, regarding the Ten Virgins. Zimmermann rightly identifies the ambiguous nature of the parable and the sayings placed alongside it in its Matthean arrangement, and how new meaning emerges as they are brought into mutually informing dialogue. The parable, concerning a wedding, is understood to be a “symbolic text” on account of its introductory formula (25.1a). “The wedding scenario is transferred… to the kingdom of heaven”. But “the reader does not know exactly what is meant to be transferred”, so that recourse to accompanying sayings (25.13) must be made. However, the call to watch (25.13) itself “remains elliptical” and “the ‘day and hour’” must be brought into interpretive dialogue with “the arrival of the groom”, and with 24.44 (on account of the “clear parallel” between them) before their significance becomes clear.
becomes clear as each textual segment interacts with those alongside it, and as the narrative comes to completion) means it need not dominate the parables, as grand hypotheses do, but must make common interpretive cause with the parables, for new meaning to emerge and for narrative momentum to be maintained. To the extent such a relationship is truly dialogical, and able to inform parable interpretation, this approach represents a genuine alternative to adapting the parables to a hypothesis, and to interpretive approaches where parables are dominated.

In Figure 2 (below) I portray diagrammatically the interpretive process I have been discussing above and that I will test throughout this thesis: Parable interpretation emerges from an interpretive dialogue between a parable and its Gospel frame (both of which will be informed - but only informed - by wider theological and historical hypotheses). The parable, having been interpreted contextually, is then able to makes its own contribution to enriching wider theological and historical hypotheses, even while gaining depth and perspective from them.

**Figure 2: Parables, Gospel Frames and Hypotheses**

![Diagram](image)

**Summary**

I have argued above that the material placed in immediate literary proximity to the parables in the NT Gospels has the potential to inform a process of interpretation that does not involve the parables being dominated by a hypothesis (as I have shown they often are in contemporary scholarship). My proposal is that the NT Gospels anticipate an interpretive relationship between the parables and the textual elements placed in literary proximity to them, and that this relationship

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154 A further objection to my proposal may be that I am now suggesting that ambiguous material be used to interpret the (ambiguous) parables, something Irenaeus rightly warned against. This objection does not hold. Firstly, I am not arguing that the Gospel frames are completely ambiguous, but only that they are partially open. The frames do provide essential interpretive guidance, and do so clearly; these interpretive signals play a crucial role in my methodology. Secondly, I am seeking to move away from adaption of the parables to an interpretive method that relies on dialogue. Irenaeus’ point was that in adapting the parables, one must have something concrete to adapt them to. Dialogue moves from ambiguity to certainty by a different route.
plays the primary role in setting interpretive direction in a literary reading of the parables. To test out this proposal I will examine:

1. The nature of individual parables and their Gospel contextual data to determine whether they are as indeterminate and/or dependent as I have argued the are (above).
2. The potential for the parables and their Gospel contextual data to mutually inform in a truly dialogical manner, so that each contributes to how we understand the other, generating new meaning that is more than what is explicit in either.
3. Whether this approach to interpretation allows a distinctive voice for individual parables to emerge, so that (together with their Gospel frames) they become more concrete and defined literary elements, able to make their own contribution to a Gospel’s broader narrative and theology.

To the extent these things can be demonstrated, the NT Gospels’ literary arrangement of the parables can be seen to provide a path for their interpretation where the necessary interpretive signals are supplied contextually, so that interpretation may occur without domination by a hypothesis. Further the function of the parables may then be seen as more than illustrating or commending what is already known; rather, the parables may be seen to contribute substantively and in their own way to how we understand the ministry and proclamation of the Jesus of the Gospels.

To begin my inquiry into reading parables contextually, I examine four parables from outside the NT (Chapter III). This constitutes a preliminary exploration of the relationship between a parable and its literary context, with a view to further informing our understanding of the nature of that relationship, and developing categories and language to describe it. Drawing on the findings of these four case studies, I develop a methodology and model for a contextual reading of parables (Chapter IV), and in Chapters V and VI I apply this methodology to six NT parables of Jesus. But before preceding to these things, it is necessary to examine one more major parable scholar, whose hypothesis is different to those considered above, and whose methodology helps further clarify the distinctive elements of my intended approach.

**Snodgrass: Parables and the General Teaching of Jesus**

Snodgrass produced the most comprehensive and substantial English language study of the parables of Jesus to appear in many years, with an extensive treatment of all the major Synoptic parables.\(^{155}\) Snodgrass recognises the importance of “context” in the process of parable interpretation. “Parables are told into a context…to quite specific contexts in the ministry of

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\(^{155}\) I am working from the first edition of Snodgrass, *Stories* (2008); a second edition was published in 2017, having an additional chapter covering recent parable studies.
Jesus…Jesus’ parables may not legitimately be torn from that context and placed elsewhere”,¹⁵⁶ Further, “context is a determiner of meaning - in the end the only determiner of meaning”.¹⁵⁷ Three different layers of “context” inform Snodgrass’ readings of the parables:


2. **The general historical context** that gave birth to the parables, the ministry of Jesus, as known to us from the NT Gospels and as informed by historical Jesus research.

3. **The precise historical settings** of individual parables, which Snodgrass suggests are available to us *in some instances* from data provided in the Synoptics.¹⁵⁸

Snodgrass is judicious in weighing the significance of general socio-cultural and other historical data, so that it informs but does not overwhelm in the interpretive process. He interacts extensively with the “general” teaching and ministry of Jesus in the interpretive process. However, he is reluctant to define a parable’s context too specifically, or to place too much weight on the parable-specific contextual data the NT Gospels provide. This reluctance reflects (at least in part) the influence of redaction criticism. For many NT scholars, to classify aspects of the Synoptic form/arrangement of a parable as redactional (and the parables’ narrative settings and “frames” are often understood this way), is also to bring into question their historical authenticity. Sensitive to this body of scholarship,¹⁵⁹ Snodgrass concludes that “the specific context for many parables has not been preserved” and thus falls back on the “general context of the ministry of Jesus in first-century Palestine”, as known through the Gospels and as informed by historical research.¹⁶⁰ This is a crucial methodological decision. The general teaching and ministry of Jesus become the hypothesis to which Snodgrass adapts the parables, and their immediate Gospel context is consequently given less prominence in the interpretive process.

The implications of this methodological decision, and the distinction between Snodgrass’ approach and the approach I have proposed above, can be demonstrated with an example. Reading the Barren Fig Tree, Snodgrass acknowledges the Lukan events (Luke 13.1-5) that feature immediately prior to the parable (13.6-9).¹⁶¹ However, being unsure as to whether 13.1-5 is the

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¹⁵⁸ Snodgrass, *Stories*, 20: For only some parables, “quite specific contexts seem to have been preserved”.

¹⁵⁹ See particularly the discussion in Snodgrass, *Stories*, 20-1, 33-4; e.g. “The redactional tendencies of each Evangelist extend, of course, to their parables” (21).

¹⁶⁰ Snodgrass, *Stories*, 20; italics original. Similarly his emphasis on “a comprehensive narrative scheme” (34), and how “we must insist upon the general context of Jesus” in interpreting the parables (26).

¹⁶¹ Snodgrass, *Stories*, 262, but he does not go on to explore the connection.
original context for the parable,¹⁶² he does not give it particular significance when reading the parable.¹⁶³ Rather Snodgrass assigns the parable to a general context (“the beginning or middle of Jesus’ ministry”),¹⁶⁴ and finds it to portray “the failure of the nation in its relation to God” and to point “to the situation of Jesus’ ministry… [that] takes place on the edge between mercy and judgment”.¹⁶⁵ Reading the parable this way, what is not fully explored is the interpretive significance of the Lukan juxtaposition of the parable, the direct speech warnings that precede it, and the narrative account of Roman brutality (13.1), which poses different (or at least additional) questions for the reader. For example, is it significant that Luke has arranged the parable as a prophetic warning to an oppressed people, the victims of violence? Are the events of 13.1 suggestive of aspects of the audience’s worldview that Jesus is seeking to subvert by telling the parable? Can these textual components mutually inform to give further specificity to interpretive outcomes?¹⁶⁶ It is my proposal that by insisting on an interpretive dialogue between the NT Gospel parables and their immediate literary context, new questions will be posed that will inform new lines of interpretive inquiry for the parables of Jesus.

The effect of situating the parables in a general context is amplified in Snodgrass’ scholarship by two further, less explicit hypotheses concerning the nature of the parables. Firstly, Snodgrass emphasises the didactic nature of the parables and their theological content,¹⁶⁷ and gives the general teaching of Jesus a prominent role in the interpretive process. The general teaching of Jesus becomes a sort of proxy “context” for the parables, with which the parables interact in the interpretive process, particularly at the crucial points of deciding what a parable is “about” and in

¹⁶² Snodgrass, Stories, 262: “Whether the parable was told originally in its present context is impossible to determine”.

¹⁶³ Even without 13.1-5, “the intent might still be clear, if people discerned easily that the fig tree was a metaphor for Israel” (Snodgrass, Stories, 262), and “the parable would still be an analogy of impending but delayed judgment”.

¹⁶⁴ Snodgrass, Stories, 264: noting the “difference between the tone of this parable and the laments over Jerusalem ([Luke] 13.34-35; 19.41-44)”.¹⁶⁵ Snodgrass, Stories, 263-4. Thus Israel stands in a perilous position because of its lack of “productivity”, facing certain judgment if it does not repent; “there is still time, but not much” (264). At this crucial point, Snodgrass brings the parable into dialogue with Luke 3.9; 13.34-5; 19.41-4; Rom 2.4; Is 5 and Gen 18 (264).

¹⁶⁶ Snodgrass’ reading is somewhat general in nature. E.g. it does not specify the precise nature of Israel’s failure, nor the form the impending judgment will take (Snodgrass, Stories, 264: the form of judgment is “not specified”). Does a contextual reading provide clues that allow us to be more specific?

¹⁶⁷ E.g. We are to “determine the theological intent and significance of the parables… They are told to teach” (Snodgrass, Stories, 30; italics mine). The parables “serve a specific teaching purpose” (20; italics mine). While the parables do not “reveal the whole of Christian theology”, they “provide material for a compelling and convincing picture of Jesus’ teaching on the kingdom, his understanding of God, and the kind of life expected of his disciples” (31; italics mine). “The theology of these stories merits our investment in them” (31; italics mine).

¹⁶⁸ E.g. What is theologically significant in a parable is determined by reference to a parable and “the whole of Jesus’ teaching” (Snodgrass, Stories, 31; italics mine). We are to “note where the teaching of the parables intersects with the teaching of Jesus elsewhere” (30; italics mine). We must “determine the function of the story in the teaching of Jesus…their general context in the teaching of Jesus” has been preserved for us (26; italics mine). Cf. Snodgrass, “Questions”, 179-80 on how the teaching of a parable must be “verified” with reference to what “is taught in non-parabolic material”.

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exploring its contemporary relevance. The prominent role of Jesus’ *general* teaching in Snodgrass’ interpretive practice, and the extent to which the parables are adapted to this, means less interpretive weight is sometimes given to the parables’ immediate Gospel contexts. Secondly, Snodgrass argues that the parables are “theocentric”; they are “about God, God’s kingdom and God’s expectations for humans”. I do not wish to question this statement in an absolute sense. My concern with this characterisation of the parables is that it opens the door for them to be “about” a range of things we know to be true about God long before we get to the parables. And, amidst the many possible ways a parable might speak of God, there is a risk of overlooking the particular way that the NT Gospel authors, in the way they arranged the parables, sought to portray God, and God at work, in a particular moment in the life and ministry of Jesus.

Recourse to these general hypotheses contributes to a loosening of the connection between the parables and their immediate Gospel contexts in Snodgrass’ scholarship. The result is that the Gospel’s contextual concerns (at the particular point where a parable is placed in the Gospel narrative) are sometimes given insufficient consideration, as the parables are, instead, brought into dialogue with general didactic and theological themes. Two examples will illustrate:

1. Reading the Two Sons, Snodgrass observes how the parable “fits well with the Matthean emphasis on actual obedience to the will of God as opposed to merely claiming to serve God” (citing Matt 7.15-27; 19.16-22), so that the parable is an “accusation that the leaders of Israel claim to serve God but do not” (citing Matt 23.3). However, in my view, reading the parable in dialogue with general Matthean teaching means insufficient inquiry is made into how the parable speaks to the contextual concern with the authority of Jesus (21.23-7). Further, the significance of believing John the Baptist (21.25,32) for reading this parable is, in my view, inadequately explored. That there is reference to John before and after the parable is suggestive of his importance in a literary reading of the parable.

2. Reading the Rich Fool, Snodgrass’ analysis of the narrative is distilled to answer the question, “What is the teaching of the parable?” To answer this question, the parable is brought into dialogue with passages from Luke (6.38; 8.3; 9.23-4; 11.41; 12.33; 16.9,13,19-31; 18.24; 23.43) and elsewhere (Ps 14.1; Tob 4.7-11). The resulting interpretive outcomes are theological and didactic in nature, emphasising the need to avoid seeing wealth as “the basis for life and

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169 Snodgrass, *Stories*, 20. Snodgrass acknowledges the tension between this statement and the extent to which “Jesus’ own life and work are reflected in his parables”.


171 Snodgrass, *Stories*, 274.

172 Snodgrass, *Stories*, 274 does say that the parable “breaks the stalemate over the question of authority (vv.23-27) by enticing the Jewish leaders to judge themselves”. But it is not clear, even if the parable is designed to help the leadership recognise their own failings, how this contributes (especially in a positive way) to the question of Jesus’ own authority.

173 Snodgrass, *Stories*, 398; see 389-401 for his entire analysis.
security”. In this process, no inquiry is made as to how the parable functioned as a reply to the man whose dispute with his brother brought him to Jesus (Luke 12.13-15), precipitating the telling of the parable. The divine interrogative with which the parable concludes (12.20b: ἄδε ἠτοίμασας, τίνι ἔσται;), points directly back to the man's request of Jesus (that similarly concerns the distribution of wealth after a person's death), suggesting the juxtaposition of the two carries interpretive significance. Does new meaning emerge as this narrative scene, the parable, and its framing sayings interact?

I do not object to the particular readings Snodgrass provides for the parables (in themselves) on theological grounds. They are comfortably situated within general NT theology and ethics. My concern is rather that something may well be lost to NT theology and ethics, as well as to our understanding of the Gospel narratives, because the parables are adapted to too great an extent, and too quickly in the interpretive process, to what is known already from elsewhere, losing in the process the opportunity for the parables to make some distinctive contribution of their own.

Concluding Comments
Snodgrass' hypothesis, to which the parables are adapted, is the general teaching and ministry of Jesus, particularly as known to us from the NT Gospels, and as informed by historical and socio-cultural data. Since this hypothesis is thoroughly grounded in Scripture, it has (for Snodgrass and other scholars taking a similar approach) the kind of certainty to it that allows it to function, in parable interpretation, in a similarly way to Irenaeus' Rule of Faith. Snodgrass' hypothesis plays a dominant role in his selection of Biblical passages that he brings alongside the parables. As discussed above, my concern with this approach is that sometimes this means less interpretive significance is given to the particular concerns of the Gospel narratives at the point (within those narratives) that the parables have been located.

Limiting the interpretive influence of the material placed in immediately proximity to the NT parables, especially because of concerns over its authenticity, is common practice in contemporary parable scholarship. Even where the material itself is considered authentic, its relationship to the parables is often called into question on historical critical grounds. As a result, far too little

174 Snodgrass, Stories, 399.
175 Snodgrass, Stories, 396: “not a great deal is at stake with vv. 13-15”.
176 Blomberg, Interpreting, has a similar interpretive method, having recourse frequently to NT/biblical theology to signal crucial interpretive direction in reading the parables. For example, at the crucial point of determining the Workers in the Vineyard's metaphorical referent, Blomberg refers to the “notion of grace” and “mercy” (both invoking general NT theology), to what Jesus had taught “earlier” in Luke 12.47-48 (222), and to the Prodigal Son (223), to argue the parable is a “striking metaphor of God’s grace” (225). The interpretive significance of the Matthean narrative circumstances that precipitated the parable’s telling is not explored, despite the grammatical link between the two and their analogous elements (other than to note that the disciples as audience argues for a relative contrast between the workers (222)).
investigation has been made into how this material might inform a reading of the parables, and of the kind of interpretive process it might facilitate. Snodgrass' cautionary approach here is in some respects surprising given his excellent discussion elsewhere on the nature of this contextual material, where he rightly argues that evidence of authorial shaping need not be linked directly to questions of authenticity:

Evidence of an Evangelist’s style is not a determiner of origin or validity… Some parables may reveal an Evangelist’s hand more than others, but that does not tell us whether or not he has faithfully rendered the content and intent of Jesus’ telling… Shaping of the material does not necessarily mean distortion of it.\textsuperscript{177}

In examining individual parables in this thesis, I will be working with the form (or forms) of a parable, and their arrangement as given by the literary texts in which they have been preserved for us. The literary arrangement of the parables will be given primary weight in their interpretation. This situates my thesis primarily as an exercise in literary criticism. However, Snodgrass’ important distinction between “shaping” and “distortion” leaves open the possibility that the literary arrangement of the Synoptic parables may well also faithfully encapsulate, for the reader, essential elements of the historical origins of these parables, and of their function in those circumstances. While I will not investigate questions of authenticity for individual parables, I will return to consider questions of historicity in general terms in Chapter IX.

\textsuperscript{177} Snodgrass, \textit{Stories}, 33; italics mine (see the discussion at 31-5). Similarly, “the theological and parenetic concerns of the Evangelists are real, of course, but no evidence shows that those concerns were dictated by the conditions of local or even regional churches”. S. Wright, \textit{Storyteller}, 44 makes a similar point: the Evangelists’ editorial work “does not mean that they have obscured their original force”; rather they have constructed their Gospels so that they are “transparent upon the original impact of the stories on Jesus’ hearers”. Similarly Allison, \textit{Constructing}, 118, n392: “to show that an interpretation is an interpretation is not to show that it is wrong” (or, I note, unoriginal).
Chapter III
FOUR ANCIENT PARABLES

A parable must be interpreted in "closest attachment to the actual conditions of its occasion", from which it gains its power; conversely when "an endeavour or controversy is forgotten or ignored, parables rooted in, and dealing with, its concrete and vital movements must grow unintelligible". - Cadoux

A proper theological assessment of literature should direct itself first of all to matters of language and rhetoric… the theological critic could well take account of the literary heritage of his faith and its special modes of language. - Wilder

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1 Cadoux, Parables, 26.
2 Wilder, Jesus', 43.
INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I examine four parables from outside the NT:

1. **The Widow and Her Fratricide** (2 Sam 13.38-14.21) belongs to the period of the monarchy. This מָשָׁל is one of several OT parables that feature in narrative texts, mainly addressed to individuals.

2. **The Eagles, the Cedar and the Vine** (Ez 17) dates to the exilic period. It is representative of how the מָשָׁל functions in OT prophetic writings, usually addressed to the nation as a whole.

3. **The Sea Captains** (1 Enoch 101.4-5) is found in a Jewish prophetic and apocalyptic text that dates to the Second Temple period.

4. **The Broken Jar** (Gospel of Thomas, 97), features in a noncanonical gospel dating to the period of the early church.

The form of all four parables is similar to that of the NT parables of Jesus. Parables 1, 2 and 3 are my attempt to be as representative as possible, within such a small sample, of the parables in ancient Jewish literature pre-dating the NT. Like the NT parables, each is embedded within a narrative or discourse and has a rhetorical, prophetic and/or didactic function within that context. Like the NT parables, these three parables speak to circumstances defined in their literary context. Adding to their “representative” character, these parables feature in different literary genres, and function within their literary contexts in different ways. The Broken Jar is also included because, unique among all the case studies in this thesis, it has a very weak connection to its immediate literary context, and thus provides a contrasting form of parable-context relationship.

In what follows I provide a literary and contextual reading of each of these four parables. I give particular attention to the relationship between each parable and its immediate literary context, seeking to understand the dynamics of this relationship and how - and to what extent - it shapes the function of each parable. I also examine the potential for each parable, once understood contextually, to contribute to the wider narrative and theology of the literary work in which it comes to us. While these four parables cannot represent all ancient parables in all respects, it is my hope that this analysis will shed sufficient light on the relationship between a parable and its literary

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3 The מָשָׁל (mashal) includes a wide range of literary forms, including short stories that speak of/to a reality other than their subject matter (commonly labelled parables), my focus in this thesis. Gerhardsson, “Narrative”, 340 identifies five OT stories as “narrative מָשָׁל”, with similarities to NT parables: Judges 9.8-15; 2 Samuel 12.1-4; 2 Kings 14.9; Isaiah 5.1-2; Ezekiel 17.3-8. Boucher, Mysterious, 25 adds 2 Samuel 14.5-7; 1 Kings 20.39-40; Snodgrass, “Prophets”, 51-53 suggests there are 22 OT “parables and parabolic sayings”; Snodgrass, “Parables”, 171-173 shows how parabolic imagery informs many prophetic discourses, and identifies the prophets’ “acted parables” as similar. Definition is difficult - it does not “belong to the nature of מָשָׁל that they should be uniform” (Gerhardsson, “Narrative”, 354). Further on the OT מָשָׁל, see Snodgrass, “Parables”, 167-8; Notley and Safrai, Parables, 3-6; Boadt, “Understanding”, 172-6; Zimmermann, “Die Gleichnisse”, 5-7; Westermann, Parables; Herbert, “Parable”; Drury, “Origins”, 174-183; Kane, Proverbs, 22-33; Gowler, Parables, 41-6; Suter, “Similitudes”, 195-202; Sider, Interpreting, 193-207, 251-2; Barton, “Parables”, 307-8; Evans, “Parables”, 52-61; Brix, “Erste Annäherung”, 128-137; Polk, “Paradigms”, emphasising “a heightened performative and reader-involving quality” (564); Schipper, Parables, 1-22; Cathcart, “Trees”; Schüle, “Mashal”; TDOT IX, 64-67.
context to inform the development of a methodology intended to guide a contextual reading of the NT parables (Chapter IV). I am, in a sense, attempting something parabolic here. I am moving away from my subject (NT parables) to an analogous subject (non-NT parables) in the hope that what is discovered there might shed light on the matter of interest, the relationship between the NT parables and their literary context, and how these parables function in that context. In this chapter I am only presenting my analysis of these four parables; an evaluation of this analysis and an assessment of its relevance to my thesis are provided in Chapter IV.

Definitions
In this and subsequent chapters, I make frequent use of the following terms:
1. “Story”: the parable itself, as understood without reference to any introduction or context. I use this term to suggest that when a parable is considered in isolation it is best characterised as a fictional narrative, since its metaphorical or parabolic significance are not explicit in the narrative itself, but are only able to be defined contextually. I will evaluate this view throughout the thesis.
2. “Plain Speech”: the introductions, statements, sayings, questions and discourse located in immediate proximity to a parable in its literary presentation.
3. “Underlying Circumstance”: the situation or circumstances to which a parable speaks, as determined by a parable’s literary context. Of interest is not only the actual circumstances, but the worldview and cultural paradigms by which the narrative audience understand these circumstances.

I also frequently use “literary context”, to refer to those textual components having a strong literary relationship to a parable, often being placed in immediate literary proximity to it. A parable’s literary context includes Plain Speech elements directly associated with it, and related narrative elements that define a parable’s Underlying Circumstance. These textual components are typically located immediately prior to or immediately following a parable, though when a parable is located within a discourse (or collation of parables), the textual segments that provide its narrative context may be located at a greater literary distance (prior to the parable).

THE WIDOW AND HER FRATRICIDE (2 Samuel 13.38-14.21)

Setting
Amnon, the king’s eldest son, rapes Absalom’s sister Tamar (13.1-19). David, despite being furious, takes no action in response (13.21). Two years later Absalom murders his brother Amnon, and then goes into exile (13.23-37a). After three years, Joab recognises David’s hostility toward
Absalom is waning (13.39-14.1), and engages the services of a wise woman from Tekoa, who is sent to persuade David to bring Absalom back from exile (14.2-3). The Tekoite dresses as a widow in mourning and speaks to David in parable.

**Story**

The Tekoite, posing as a desperate widow, petitions David for help, saying that one of her sons has killed another, and that her clan is now seeking the life of the murderer. This, she claims, will leave her destitute, and her husband without a name in Israel.

An intense exchange follows the parable (14.12-17):

1. David offers the woman protection, promising to give orders concerning her.
2. The woman assures David of her willingness to bear any guilt on account of him sparing her son’s life.
3. David commands the woman to send to him anyone causing her trouble. The woman asks David for an oath in Yahweh’s name, to protect her son from the “avenger of blood” (14.11), which he provides.
4. The woman subtly argues that David, in failing to restore Absalom, is unjust (by his own standards), out of step with the people of Israel, and out of step with God.

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4 For a reading to this effect, see Gilmour, *Representing*, 213-4, n163; Anderson, 2 Samuel, 187; McCarthur, *II Samuel*, 338, 344, noting the ambiguity of זָא (13.39 and arguing כָלָה is stronger than “yearn”, and means “to be spent”. Also see Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 488 on the ambiguity of both עלה (MT) and ἐπι (LXX) in 14.1 - this ambiguity may well reflect David’s own heart (Brown, *David’s*, 209 sees reference to “conflicted feelings”). That David is still angry, but now less so, explains why Joab saw an opportunity, but must still resort to a cunning ruse, and the fact of Absalom not being received by the king on his return.

5 The woman’s wisdom is evident in her ability to perfect disguise and the rhetorical expertise shown in her dialogue with David (e.g. Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 496; Schökel, “la mujer”, 194, 197: she is an expert in maieutics who checkmates the king in eight moves). Nicol, “Wisdom”, 97-9, surely overstates Joab’s ability to script the woman’s performance in advance; in particular David’s response at 14.8,10 (and the associated replies required) would have been hard to anticipate in advance.

6 Smith, *Fate*, 165, noting the feminine עָלָֽי, reads 14.8 as a shrewd answer, avoiding the dilemma of justice, but guaranteeing the woman’s safety (also in 14.10). But what follows suggests David is willing to protect both the mother and the son to whom her welfare is so closely tied, and these things may have been anticipated in David’s initial response.

7 If homicide was normally handled “by the local community” (Bellefontaine, “Customary”, 54), I suggest David’s “order” (14.8) will save the son, but leave a situation of injustice/guilt in the eyes of the clan. The woman is offering to bear this guilt. This reading makes sense of David’s response (14.10) - if anyone from within the clan troubles the woman, he is to be sent to the king. See e.g. McCarthur, *II Samuel*, 347; Anderson, 2 Samuel, 188; Hoftijzer, “David”, 427 for alternative readings of this difficult verse.

8 The people of Israel may have wanted restoration of a popular crown prince (Anderson, 2 Samuel, 188), or held concern over the possible effects of the heir to the throne being absent (Leonard, “La femme”, 136-138). The suggestions of McCarter, *II Samuel*, 348 and Hoftijzer, “David”, 433 are less plausible because the woman’s statement points to David’s past failure (to reinstate Absalom) rather than to the future effect of his oath.
5. The woman, with loquacious flattery, reverts to the matter of her original Story, concerning her need for the king’s help to preserve the life of her son and her family’s claim to the ancestral estate.

After making the woman admit to Joab’s involvement, the king approves Absalom’s returned from exile, though refusing a personal audience (14.18-24). Joab and the wise woman have succeeded in their aim. After bullying Joab, Absalom is admitted to the king’s presence, restored in relationship and vindicated as innocent in regard to Amnon (18.29-33).

Justice Questions

A summary of the positions held or assumed by most scholars regarding judicial issues involved in the above events:

1. While clans may have held local jurisdiction concerning homicide, David is at this point in Israel’s history increasingly accepted as having the highest judicial authority in the land.

2. OT legal requirements regarding murder may not necessarily have been formerly encoded in law at this point in Israel’s history, but may have been reflected in customary law.

3. Amnon’s rape of Tamar is recognised as incest; the penalty may have been capital punishment.

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9 Some regard 14.15-17 as out of place and belonging after 14.7 (e.g. McCarruth, II Samuel, 345-6). However, 14.17c reads naturally as an eloquent attempt to bring closure to a delicate conversation. The non-mention of Absalom’s name (14.13), the ambiguity of 14.14, the general nature of her reference to “my request” in 14.15, all suggest a skillfully designed piece that moves seamlessly from the woman’s Story to David’s circumstances and back again (and then to flattery), in a highly delicate way, to establish the woman’s point while avoiding the king’s anger at being tricked. On the importance and literary “fit” of 14.15-17 in its present position, see e.g. Campbell, 2 Samuel, 134; Hoftijzer, “David”, 443-4; Alter, David, 278.

10 Lewis, “Ancestral”, 597-603 argues on lexical grounds for נחלת אלוהים to be read as “ancestral estate” (14.16); thus execution of the widow’s remaining son would also mean her having no further claim to the family’s ancestral property (608-9).

11 Smith, Fate, 177: David’s refusal to allow Absalom an audience designated him morally unworthy. For David to see Absalom would mean either to have a guilty person in court (considered totally inappropriate in the ancient world and a serious risk to the king) or to accept Absalom as righteous, thereby vindicating his killing of Amnon. “David is not prepared to do either of these”.

12 Smith, Fate, 181: With Absalom appearing before him, the king must at last decide “the justice of Absalom exacting revenge on an incestuous rapist” (180). In the kiss, David signals that no guilt is to be assigned for Absalom’s actions; it is his moment of vindication.

13 While the nature of the justice system of the time, under which a widow might directly seek justice from the king, is not known for certain, Bellefontaine, “Customary”, 52-64 argues these events take place during a time of “transition” in Israel from an acephalous, non-centralised society, where the “clan” is guardian and enforcer of customary law, to monarchy. During this transition David acts to strengthen his judicial authority at the expense of the authority of local autonomous clans. Thus while “full integration of judicial authority” (64) to the king had yet to be achieved (hence clans retained a role in homicide cases), David’s superior judicial authority is increasingly recognised. Cf. also Barmash, “Narrative”, 11-14 on the historical value of OT narrative concerning legal matters, and on the relationship between “Deuteronomistic history” and the legal codes of Deuteronomy in regard to 2 Sam 14.

14 McCarter, II Samuel, 328 notes the use of “brother” and “sister” six times each in 13.1-14, so that the “narrator makes it unavoidably clear that incest is an issue”.

15 See the arguments in Smith, Fate 149-51, especially on the narrative significance of נבילה in 13.12.
4. David has responsibility for justice in regard to his own family and is remiss in taking no action against Amnon.  

5. Absalom acts to avenge the murder of his sister, but also to further his political ambitions. These mixed motivations make for a complicated case. Some form of response from David was necessary.

**Audience Engagement**

Using disguise and a fictional Story, the Tekoite is able to gain access to the king and to persuade him. Despite having no status at court, the Tekoite appears before the king, not to seek aid for herself, nor as a prophet, but to speak to the king concerning his own affairs. Simon observes how, in most OT “juridical parables”, the prophet makes use of a Story containing a lesser offence, as a means of disguising the true nature and purpose of the Story. But in this instance the two crimes are essentially the same (one brother kills another). It is the woman’s disguise and thespian skill that hide her Story’s artificial nature, so that she is able to tell a Story so close in nature to David’s own story.

David does not perceive the Story’s fictitious nature, but hears an appeal for him to override a clan’s legitimate application of customary law to a case of fratricide, so as to avoid further disaster to the woman’s family. This situation creates a judicial dilemma for David. Thus David engages with the Story as a request for justice, not realising how in the process a new perspective on his own very similar situation is being developed and commended to him.

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16 See Westbrook, Daughters, 157-9 on David’s neglect of justice; Brown, David’s, 208-12 on David’s “refusal to act in any decisive way” (208). McCarter, II Samuel, 319 attributes the MT omission of 13.21b (attested in LXX, 4QSam²) to scribal error; this argues for David’s failure as the narrator’s perspective.

17 While most scholars assume that Absalom is guilty of fratricide, Smith, Fate, 147-56 argues Absalom is portrayed as the “just avenger of Tamar’s rape”(156), and hence justified in putting Amnon to death. Smith’s reading gives insufficient weight to Absalom’s political ambitions, which are evident in the text. Gilmour, Representing, 220 argues Absalom’s insistence on Tamar holding her peace (13.20) was early evidence of his desire to deal with Amnon’s crime in a way that suited his own political ambitions. This is a strong argument. Smith’s other main points are important: the unresolved nature of Absalom’s situation, and David’s culpability for inaction after Amnon’s rape of Tamar (2 Sam 13.21).

18 Camp, “Wise Woman”, 24 argues she acts “in a manner associated with a prophet”. However Westbrook, Daughters, 174-5 is more convincing, arguing that despite parallels between this passage and the prophet Nathan’s confrontation of David (2 Sam 12.1-15), the Tekoite “is not, however, a prophet, and nothing in her presentation indicates that it might be considered prophecy” (174). Westbrook also rightly observes that within the wider Succession Narrative, it is clear that David is here receiving instruction from “someone other than the prophet of YHWH” (174-5).

19 See Bellefontaine, “Customary”, 52-64.

20 Smith, Fate, 165: between siding with the clan and oppressing a widow and allowing a murderer to go unpunished, both “classic justice motifs” which no king could ignore.
Significance

The Story is a single component of a multi-faceted rhetorical strategy. The Story has an essential but ultimately dependent role, functioning in collaboration with Plain Speech petition, rhetorical questions and persuasive Plain Speech argument. In what follows I describe the respective contributions of Story and Plain Speech, and then explore how they collaborate rhetorically to alter how David perceives Absalom’s exile, thus commending to David a possibility apparently previously closed to him - Absalom’s return to Israel.

Story and Plain Speech

As noted above, David does not recognise the fictitious nature of the woman’s petition, but becomes intensely engaged with the circumstances her Story describes. David listens to her Story (14.5-7), responds to it sympathetically (14.8), and then becomes increasingly concrete and emphatic in (and thus committed to) his point of view as the woman continues to press him (14.9-11). Within the world of the Story, processing a situation that is similar to his own, David is able to develop and own a point of view that he apparently has not previously been able to hold in regard to his own situation. The similarity of the two situations means David is “more involved [with] and more exposed”\(^22\) to the conclusions he comes to regarding the Story.

However the Story alone is “not sufficient to prevail upon the king”, but requires “bolstering by an extensive outside argument”.\(^23\) To ensure the success of her mission, the woman follows her Story with a subtle but persuasive rhetorical plea (14.13-17). The woman asserts that David’s decision in relation to her Story is an “indirect indictment”\(^24\) of his own behaviour, and then makes a subtle but discernible reference to Absalom and his exile (14.13b), thus reinvolving David with his own situation.

The Tekoite does not leave the matter there, but perceives the need for further argument to reinforce her case. This reflects the fact that while her Story is similar to David’s circumstances in important ways, it is also very different in others. There are strong and important parallels, in that both concern a son who has murdered his brother, and whose life is subsequently in danger according to the normal requirements of justice.\(^25\) But there are also important points of

\(^{22}\) Anderson, 2 Samuel, 186.

\(^{23}\) Simon, “Poor Man’s”, 225.

\(^{24}\) Anderson, 2 Samuel, 186; similarly Gunn, “Traditional”, 219: once the link between the Story and David’s circumstances is established, he will be unable to “escape the force of [his judgment’s] application” to his own situation. Though as I argue below, this indirect indictment of David - of itself - may not have been enough to convict David of error, given the highly material elements of difference between the two situations.

\(^{25}\) See Bellefontaine “Customary”, 62-3 for important parallels between the two situations.
difference. In particular, the economic welfare of the the royal family and their name and place within Israel are not obviously threatened if justice was enacted against Absalom. Thus the Tekoite’s subsequent argument (14.13-14), involving considerable poetic licence, deliberately exaggerates the similarities between the two situations, so as to reinforce her assertion that David has indicted himself in the decision he has reached regarding her Story. At the same time, in her Plain Speech argument, the woman is seeking to (mis)construe David’s situation in terms that demand and legitimate Absalom's return from exile (see below).

Thus Story (14.5-7), dialogue (14.8-12) and Plain Speech argument (14.13-14) all combine within this rhetorically skilful encounter, each contributing in its own way and being reliant upon the other, to argue Absalom should be allowed to return from exile. In what follows I explore further how Story and Plain Speech contribute together, in a collaborative manner, to alter David’s perception of Absalom’s exile.

**Putting a New Face on the Matter**

The woman begins her Plain Speech argument by claiming that David has done “a similar thing” to that just described in her Story, so that he is “like a guilty person” before his own judgment (14.13). To support this claim, she describes David as having acted against (על) the people of God (14.13a) by leaving Absalom in exile (14.13b), echoing her earlier account of how the clan had risen up against (หญי) her (14.7). This is a deliberate attempt to portray Absalom’s exile as having adverse consequences for a wider group (the whole nation), just as the loss of the woman's remaining son will apparently have disastrous consequences for her whole family. Immediately after referring to Absalom (14.13b), the woman speaks enigmatically of the inevitability and tragedy of death, describing it as like water irretrievably spilled on the ground (14.14), imagery conceptually similar to that of a burning coal snuffed out (14.7) used earlier to describe the (anticipated) death of her remaining son. This is a further subtle attempt to portray the “fictitious and the intended affair [as] one in the archetypal depths of water and fire, life and death”. In this way the woman strengthens her argument that the decision David has come to regarding her Story applies also to his own situation.

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26 See Anderson, 2 Samuel, 186; Westbrook, Daughters, 176, for important differences between the two situations. While both authors claim that Absalom’s life is not under threat, I have not given this matter particular emphasis in my argument. While the text is not explicit on these things, it seems likely to me that Absalom went in to exile because he felt his life was threatened, and that the course of justice at the time may have required his life for murdering Amnon.


28 Smith, Fate, 167, translating שֶׁאָכִל, arguing that this characterises David as a “moral hypocrite” rather than a “law-breaker”.

29 Fokkelman, King, 137; he comments poetically: the two metaphors “create a subterranean connection” between the Story and David’s circumstance.
In making these arguments, the Tekoite is at the same time seeking to alter David's perception of his circumstances, describing them in terms that make Absalom's return to Israel a moral and political imperative. The woman's argument is a subtle attempt to set the welfare of the nation over against the demands of justice for the individual, and to invest the former with priority over the latter. As guardian of Israel, and one having ultimate responsibility for justice within Israel, the king cannot be seen to ignore the national interest, or to fail to act (when it is within his power to do so) to preserve life and avoid the tragedy of premature death. This process of reframing Absalom's exile, so that it is seen in a new light, is intensified as the Tekoite characterises preservation of life and return from exile as consistent with the divine will and initiative (14.14), and then proceeds to flatter David by attributing to him (and implicitly to his earlier decision) discernment like that of the angel of God (14.17). At the same time, the woman consistently ignores questions of justice relating to Absalom's past behaviour, insisting instead that the demands of justice (it is David who is now guilty (14.13b)), and of the divine will, are to be satisfied in Absalom’s return to Israel. Thus the situation is described in moral, political and theological terms that legitimate and necessitate Absalom's return to Israel.

The way that Story and Plain Speech collaborate to alter David's perception of Absalom's exile means the Story's persuasive power is ultimately rhetorical rather than legal (or even reliant only on David's indirect indictment of himself). The rhetorical force of the woman's Story and Plain Speech argument is recognised in the studies of Smith and Westbrook:

1. Westbrook describes how the woman “redefines” Absalom’s situation for David, by placing it in the “fictional context of limited alternatives and dramatically increased desperation of circumstances”, so that it seems “the fate of the entire kingdom” rests on Absalom’s return. Also, in the conversation that follows, the woman introduces a “distinctive theological element” that emphasises return from exile but without “restoration of justice through judgment for one’s

For various attempts to make sense of this textually difficult verse, see Smith, Fate, 168-72; Hoftijzer, “David”, 434-38; Anderson, 2 Samuel, 184-5, 188-9; Westbrook, Daughters, 179n37; Camp, “Wise Woman”, 16n5; McCarter, Il Samuel, 340-1, 349 (following the lead of the LXX). While some translate 14.14b to the effect that “God will not take away a life...”, see Smith, Fate, 72, who reads שׁנֶ֔פֶאֱלֹהִים as “God does not lift up life” in the sense of “God does not restore life” once a person dies, thus continuing the emphasis on the “the irreversibility of human mortality”. In contrast, God does restore people from exile (and thus David should do likewise). While 14.14b is difficult, its main purpose is to claim that return from exile is very much the divine will and intent, to which David should surely align himself.

See Westbrook, Daughters, 171-2 on the deafening irony of this later claim.

Some argue the woman seeks an oath from David to create a binding legal precedent (e.g. Hoftijzer, “David”, 420-1). Against this view is the comparable lack of extenuating circumstance in Absalom's case (Anderson, 2 Samuel, 186, recognising we are dealing with a “literary device” not a “legal precedent”; Simon, “Poor Man's”, 224), the fictitious nature of the woman's case, and the fact the woman must present additional argument to persuade the king (14.12-15). Camp, “Wise Woman”, 21 rightly observes that the parable works not by “juridical trickery”, but rather through “psychological manipulation”; the parable is designed to “create the two conditions - of distancing and of re-involvement - necessary for a person blinded by proximity to a problem to achieve a new perspective on it”.

Westbrook, Daughters,177. McCarter, Il Samuel, 350-1 also highlights the crucial role of the parable and the skill of the woman in being able to “persuade the king that the exclusion of the fratricide Absalom from Israel is a danger to ‘the people of Yahweh’” (351).
action”, thus providing David with “the appearance of a justified means through which to take control of the destiny of his son”.

2. Smith describes how the woman “put[s] a crucial new ‘spin’ on the Absalom problem, in order to get the king to see it from another theological and political angle”. That “spin” consists of defining Absalom’s exile using a “twisted theology of Yahweh’s estate” that justifies excusing bloodshed, for the sake of “keeping all the people of Yahweh together in the land”, asserting that “the unity and preservation of the people of God in Yahweh’s land should be afforded a higher priority than the need to execute a fratricide”.

Despite their slightly different construals of the underlying situation to which the Story speaks, both scholars demonstrate how the Tekoite (in 14.12-17) deflects the king’s attention away from the need to deal with the justice issues that led to Absalom going into exile, and gives David a new perspective on Absalom’s continuing exile by characterising it as against the national interest and out of step with the ways of Yahweh. Story and Plain Speech both make an essential contribution, and contribute collaboratively, to establishing this new perspective on Absalom’s exile. The strong parallels between the Tekoite’s Story and David’s circumstances provide the rhetorical grounds for the woman’s Plain Speech assertion that David’s decision (developed with reference to the Story) is an indictment of himself, an assertion then reinforced by her Plain Speech exaggeration of the similarities between the two situations. Aspects of the Tekoite’s Story having no obvious parallel in David’s situation are evoked and exploited in the woman’s subsequent Plain Speech argument, so as to greatly exaggerate the nature and consequences of Absalom’s exile (thus demanding his return to Israel). Thus Story and Plain Speech combine in this rhetorically sophisticated and persuasive appeal, to “put another face on the matter” of Absalom’s exile. Seeing the situation in a new way, David is “authorised” to have Absalom return from exile.

34 Westbrook, Daughters, 178-9.
35 Smith, Fate, 175-6.
36 Smith, Fate, 202; see 167-72 for his supporting analysis. In 14.13-14 he finds a contrast between David’s “passive refusal… to have Absalom returned” and “Yahweh’ active planning to restore an exile… [implying that] none of the people of Yahweh should be excluded from his estate” (172).
37 While Westbrook, Daughters, 167-84 recognises Absalom’s guilt (for murdering Amnon) and emphasises David’s failure to carry out a central function of the monarchy (providing Israel with justice and protection), Smith, Fate, 163-77 emphasises David’s failure to deal with Amnon following the rape of Tamar, and argues Absalom was justified in taking up this matter himself. Thus Westbrook sees David rightly perceiving Absalom as guilty, while Smith sees Absalom as innocent, but wrongly perceived by David as guilty. For reasons discussed above (see “Story”) I have taken Westbrook’s view. However, I refer to Smith’s work here since the rhetorical task under either scenario is the same: the Tekoite must begin with the fact that David perceives Absalom as guilty, and then provide David with a new view of the situation that demands and authorises Absalom’s return.
38 McCarther’s translation of 14.20, from which the title of this thesis is taken. While מַלְשַׁנְחָנַיְּךָ אֶת־פְּנֵי סַבֵּב לְבַעֲב֣וּר is often translated “to change the course of affairs” (RSV) or similar, a more literal rendering is “to change the face of the matter” (Anderson, 2 Samuel, 184), a translation that recognises how a parable, in order to change the course of affairs, must first alter human perceptions.
39 Cf. Brueggemann, Samuel, 292, describing how the woman’s “theatre” causes David to “perceive life differently”, so as to “authorise David to act differently”; Smith, Fate, 202: “When David assents to [the Tekoite and Joab’s] line of reasoning the moral life of the kingdom is never the same”.

57
The woman’s skilful rhetorical appeal to David, designed to secure Absalom’s return to Israel, succeeds brilliantly. We may speculate as to David’s reasons for agreeing to Absalom’s return, though the narrative itself does not. The way the narrative unfolds, the skill of the woman and the power of her story and appeal lead directly to a change in David’s position, so that Absalom is permitted to return to Jerusalem. That the woman is successful despite her relatively weak social position, and even after her story is known to be fictitious, evidences its rhetorical power. Once David is led down a rhetorical path to a new moral and theological understanding of his situation, that new perspective is not easily changed, and from that point David does not (cannot?) turn.

The Parable and the Succession Narrative

The full significance of the Widow and Her Fratricide, as first understood with reference to its immediate literary context, becomes evident in considering its role within the Succession Narrative as a whole. This ultimately involves an assessment of how David’s consequent action (authorising Absalom’s return from exile) is understood and evaluated within the narrative. To this end, Gilmour’s historiographical study of 2 Samuel, exploring how the author/redactor provides “moral, political and theological evaluation of people and events”, is helpful. Gilmour finds conflicting ideologies and diverse viewpoints within the narrative, and argues these facilitate a more complex evaluation of events and people than is possible in single summary statements. At the same time, she observes that coherence is maintained throughout the narrative, because the narrator “guide[s] the reader through the many viewpoints” with a “controlling frame”, in this instance Nathan’s prophetic judgment (2 Sam 12.10) that portraits the events of 2 Samuel 13-19 as punishment from God for David’s sin. Giving due weight to this controlling frame and also recognising multiple viewpoints on each individual’s actions, Gilmour finds that David, Absalom and Joab are all

40 Barron, 2 Samuel, 132 suggests David feared an alliance between “an angry Absalom and a frustrated Joab” (similarly Polzin, David, 142).

41 The woman reinforces her low-status by prostrating herself before David (14.4), seeking permission to speak (14.12), flattering him (14.17,20), and portraying herself as one needing the king’s help (14.4). Zahavi-Ely, “Turn Right”, 43-53 argues the non standard spelling of וּלְהַשְׂמִ֗יל לְהֵמִ֣ין אִם־אִ֣שׁ in 14.19 indicates the woman’s use of a provincial dialect as a means of emphasising her own (low) status in order to appear less threatening to the king.

42 Gilmour, “Representing”, 155: giving particular weight to the subsequent effect of events on society, the morality of individuals or groups, and the divine viewpoint on events. Gilmour notes that while “the historiography of Samuel is laden with ideological evaluation”, most of this is “implicit” (157-8), reliant on the use of “covert commentary” rather than more explicit statements of ideological evaluation (165-6). The “very little explicit commentary or evaluation”, results in a lack of “clear ideological point of view” (199-9).

43 Similarly Keys, Wages, 179-80 identifies David’s “sin” and Yahweh’s “punishment” as the overall “theme and motivating force” of 2 Sam 10-20, with Yahweh seen to be “the prime mover in the inevitable consequences of human transgression”. At the same time, Gilmour, “Representing”, 206 rightly sees that God is also portrayed in the Succession Narrative as “allied with David against Absalom”, so that David and his kingship and kingdom are preserved; similarly Leonard, “La femme”, 140, emphasising both the fulfilment of Nathan’s word in 2 Sam 12.7-12 and how the Davidic throne is secured by the grace and mercy of God, according to Yahweh’s promise (in 2 Sam 7), a promise not cancelled by the sin of David.
portrayed as sharing responsibility for the tragic events that follow Absalom’s return from exile, even while none of the three are seen in wholly negative terms.

Within this “overall evaluation… the viewpoint of God offers no [explicit] commentary” on the individual actions of David as he handles his sons in 2 Sam 13-14. Despite this, the particular events of 2 Sam 14 are generally understood by scholars in very negative moral and theological terms, largely because they play such a direct role in precipitating further bloodshed and tragedy within David’s family and within Israel. Even in Gilmour’s even-handed analysis, there are no positive aspects to David’s conduct in 2 Sam 14. Rather, the chapter highlights David’s weakness in regard to his family, his failure to discipline his sons, his ability to be manipulated by others, and his failure to provide justice and protection for the nation. McCarter argues the return of Absalom is “a mistake”, and that this is “a major component of the message of [2 Sam 13-20] as a whole”. He explores the parallels between 2 Sam 13-14 (the “private prologue” to the section) and 2 Sam 20 (the “public epilogue”), observing that the two wise women in these passages contribute to a “dramatic inclusion”, and that David’s concern for his son over the welfare of Israel stands in contrast to the city of Abel’s willingness to sacrifice an individual to save their city. McCarter sees a clear message: Absalom should not have been allowed again in Israel.

Thus, within the Succession Narrative as a whole, the parable’s success is ultimately seen to be its failure. This Story is distinguished within the biblical corpus as the only parable to function in a wholly negative way, toward a tragic end, and without redeeming features. The woman’s wisdom, like that of Jonadab (13.3-5), but standing in contrast to the wisdom of the wise woman of Abel (20.16-19), sets in motion further bloodshed within the monarchy and within Israel.

45 Similarly Keys, Wages, 137.

46 Gilmour, “Representing”, 206. “God’s moral judgments on situations [in 2 Sam 13-20] are rare” (162). Keys, Wages, 176-8 identifies indicators of divine perspective (2 Sam 11.27; 12.1.15, 24, 25 and 17.14), though none of these speak specifically to the actions of a particular character in 2 Sam 14. Thus assessment of an individual event in 2 Sam usually requires the reader to “allow the narrative to take its course before certain characters are vindicated or proved false” (Gilmour, “Representing”, 222).

47 Gilmour, Representing, 221; similarly McCarter, II Samuel, 327.

48 Westbrook, Daughters, 183: this is a core function of the monarchy.

49 McCarter, II Samuel, 350-1.


51 McCarter, II Samuel, 351.
Excursus: Multiple Interpretive Trajectories?

An alternative (to the contextual approach outlined above) - but still literary - approach to reading this parable, is seen in Lyke’s intertextual study of 2 Sam 14.1-20. Lyke explores the parable’s various literary “topoi” with reference to similar themes and literary motifs from other parts of the OT. He argues that the parable contains various “distinct and independent elements”, pointing to “textual associations” outside their literary context. Exploring those textual associations drives “multiple interpretive trajectories”. For example, 2 Sam 14.6 functions as a “synecdoche for the topos of sibling rivalry and brings with it an accumulation of traditions [from other OT texts] that comprise an ongoing process of rumination on the notion of chosenness and its consequences”.54

The aggregate effect of Lyke’s analysis is at times to overwhelm the text with insights from elsewhere, leading to multiple and sometimes contradictory interpretive trajectories. For example, the woman’s rhetorical subtlety in 14.14 is taken as invitation to introduce themes deduced from diverse OT passages, so that her words are understood to contain three mutually exclusive options for David without guidance between them. Wanting to honour all of these options, Lyke is left unable to explain why the Story functions so effectively in its particular narrative context, achieving the explicit aim of the Tekoite and of Joab.57 For Lyke this ambiguity is an inevitable result of the communal process of textual construction, honoured here at the expense of the coherence of 2 Sam 14.1-20. In my view, Lyke has not adequately explained this lack of coherence.59

Lyke’s analysis helps identify an interpretive choice we face when reading parables, including those in the NT which also often contain motifs having a long history of use in Jewish (and sometimes other ancient)

52 Lyke, King. Lyke’s study seeks “to juxtapose postmodern reading sensibilities, with their emphasis on multiple readings, and the historical realities that produced the [biblical] texts” (19).

53 Lyke, King, 129.

54 Lyke, King, 84.

55 E.g. since 14.6 has the location of the murder “in a field”, Lyke, David, 77-79 sees an allusion to Deut 22.23-27, where “the field” is associated with sexual misconduct, thus providing a motive for the death of the woman’s son.

56 Lyke, King, 174-6, noting the ambiguity of the Hebrew. Surely this is an invitation to look to how the passage functions in its narrative, not to import meaning from unrelated texts.

57 Lyke, King, 176-181: the woman’s message gives David no clear guidance, other than that something has to be done with Absalom, which could be either to kill him, bring him home, or leave him in exile. Lyke claims that some of the messages David “simply passed over”, while the reason for his adoption of a particular “relatively narrow interpretation” is “unclear” (193).

58 Lyke, King, 192.

59 Two fundamental questions might have been addressed: (i) Even if the community played a central role in the text’s formation (Lyke, King, 12), was this community so defined by literary traditions that it was unable to combine traditional elements into a coherent text? See by way of contrast, Gilmour, Representing, as an example of an analysis of 2 Sam 14 that gives full weight to its contradictions and internal tensions, but shows how these factors reflect the ambiguities of real life and contribute a necessary “complexity and sophistication” to the final form of the text (221-2), where coherence is maintained by means of the text’s “global structures” (165-6). (ii) Might literary motifs that describe typical forms of human experience and social relations (e.g. “sibling rivalry” and a “woman with a cause”), in a narrative the length of the OT, potentially arise quite independent of each other? Lyke, King, 78 acknowledge “the disadvantage of [his approach] is that it leaves one with a vague and inexact notion of the connections between these texts and must posit an amorphous ‘tradition’ of which all partake”.

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literature. In Lyke’s approach, the main interpretive signals for reading the parable are provided by other texts sharing motifs with the parable. These connections dominate in the interpretive process. As is seen in Lyke’s reading, this approach has the potential to obscure the contextual significance of a parable, and risks introducing incoherence between a parable and its immediate literary context. A contextual reading, in contrast, must give a parable’s literary context primary weight in the interpretive process, taking the crucial interpretive signals from that context. Links between a parable and other literature (connected by shared motifs) may then be explored to enrich such a reading, its basic interpretive shape having first been defined contextually.60

Part of the rationale for Lyke’s study is that the woman’s Story is not in all respects analogous to the circumstances of David’s family to which it speaks.61 As we have seen, this is actually part of the skilful design of the parable, making a vital contribution to its rhetorical efficacy.

THE EAGLES, THE CEDAR AND THE VINE (Ezekiel 17)

Setting
In Ezekiel 1-24, the prophet speaks to the Jewish exiles in Babylon. Through colourful prophetic oracles and symbolic actions, Israel's wickedness is exposed and the judgment coming to her proclaimed. Ezekiel 17 is one such prophetic oracle. The oracle assumes Nebuchadnezzar’s subjugation of Judah (597BCE), the deportation of king Jehoiachin and the leading men of the land to Babylon, and the installation of Zedekiah as king of Jerusalem, as events in the living memory of its audience.62 Zedekiah’s sending of envoys to Egypt to secure military assistance to rebel against Babylon is “current affairs” for Israelites everywhere. In its literary form the oracle also anticipates the Babylon siege of Jerusalem (begun 588BCE), the ultimate futility of Egypt's efforts to help at that time, and the subsequent destruction of the city and death or exile for most of its inhabitants.

As arranged within Ezekiel, the oracle speaks to the exiles during a period of uncertainty over the future of Jerusalem. The power of the Babylonian empire is a present and threatening reality. Yet the exiles likely retained hope of Jerusalem’s liberation and of return to their beloved city. The grounds of their hope were theological and practical. Jerusalem was the city of Yahweh’s presence, heart of the nation that bore Yahweh’s name, and to whom Yahweh was bound in

60 As examples of how other texts may enrich - but not dominate - in the interpretive process, see (for this parable) e.g. Westbrook, Daughters, 170-2 on thematic links with 2 Sam 13, exploring the concept of ungodly wisdom; McCarter, I & II Samuel, 351 using Gen 4 to explore contrasting treatment of exiles (similarly Auld, I & II Samuel, 490); Smith, Fate, 149-51 using Gen 34 (Dinah’s rape) to argue Amnon deserved capital punishment; Westbrook, Daughters, 113-184 on structural and thematic parallels between 2 Samuel 11.1-12.31 (Bathsheba), 13.1-39 (Tamar) and 14 (Woman of Tekoa).

61 Lyke, King, 13, 25. See the critique of this viewpoint in Schipper, Parables, 11-15.

62 For general history and dates see Greenberg, Ezekiel, 8-16; Block, Ezekiel, 1-8; 80-9; Mein, Ezekiel, 50-59; for details of Zedekiah’s relationship with Egypt during that time see Block, Ezekiel, 543-4, 546n127 (and in more detail and exploring ancient sources, Greenberg, “Psammetichus”); on Jehoiachin see Block, “Tender”, 173-82 (citing biblical and non-biblical sources).
covenant relationship. At a practical level Zedekiah’s diplomatic manoeuvrings were still in play, creating the possibility of a military solution, helping keep the exiles’ hope alive.

To the exiles Ezekiel proclaims a חִידָה and a מָשָׁל, a cryptic Story, that the audience must decipher, that evokes and interprets the situation of the time.

**Story**

A great eagle took a cedar shoot to a foreign land. Then he took a native seed and planted it beside abundant water, and cared for it, establishing a lowly and dependent vine that produced branches and foliage. However, the vine turned to find water from another eagle that appeared, wanting to grow large and bear fruit.

**Audience Engagement**

Ezekiel tells a Story that the exilic community already know, but in cryptic form demanding audience engagement to decipher the Story’s imagery and determine its relevance. He tells it twice (17.3-10 and 17.12-18), with strong parallels between these two tellings, giving his audience “time” to absorb and reflect on the events narrated.

The exiles would have recognised a connection between the Story and their recent history on account of (i) the Story’s Stock Imagery; (ii) the cryptic reference to Babylon (17.4); and (iii) the obvious parallels between the Story’s central motifs and recent events. It is the story the exiles are living. The vine’s initiative (17.7-8) raises narrative tension: how are the vine's actions to be

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64 See Block, *Ezekiel*, 524, n6 on the OT use of חִידָה (“an opaque and mysterious saying”); also Kane, *Proverbs*, 267; Simian-Yofre, “enigma”, 41-3; TDOT IV, 320-3. Davis, *Swallowing*, 95, 104, observes how the חִידָה “quite deliberately exploits the ambiguous character of reality” (95), a helpful insight for Ez 17, where the “reader faces the challenge of perceiving the interrelationship and interpenetration of … different levels of [political, theological, and eschatological] reality” (104).

65 This seems the most likely sense of 17.8 (see the translation in Allen, *Ezekiel*, 2490-1; also Foster, “Note”, 376-7): the first eagle’s intention for a lowly dependent vine (17.6) is contrasted with the vine’s desire for magnificence (17.8b). It is a difficult passage. The alternative of seeing 17.8 as referring back to the initial condition and prospects of the vine (e.g. Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 312-13) means a lack of coherence between 17.8 and 17.6a, and no clear motivation for the vine’s actions.

66 See Davis, *Swallowing*, 92-95 on the use of traditional imagery by Ezekiel, his “appropriating…then complicating and deepening” that imagery (94), as part of an overall rhetorical strategy of establishing a collaborative partnership with his audience; Clements, *Ezekiel*, 75 on how the “time taken to work out the implications of a fictional story and its application are sufficient to make the acceptance of its truth all the more startling and clear”.

67 See the analysis in Block, *Ezekiel*, 536-9 demonstrating how the form and content of 17.11-18 parallel 17.3-8 very closely: the “structural symmetry” of Story and interpretation is “remarkable” (536).

68 See Block, *Ezekiel*, 539-40 for primary sources from the ancient near east where the eagle is a “symbol of…royal splendor” (539); Osbourne, “Early”, 172-4 for ancient sources demonstrating a “prevalent association between the tree and the king in the ‘cognitive cultural environment’ of the ancient world” (173-4), and for how this symbol endured through subsequent centuries (174-6); also Block, *Ezekiel*, 551, n148; Walton, *Ancient*, 175-6. Could the eagle point to Yahweh (e.g. Simian-Yofre, “enigma”, 36; Block, *Ezekiel*, 539-40; Wacholden and Bowman, “Ezechielus”, 270-3)? There is scant evidence for this. The two main OT passages cited (Ex 19.4; Deut 32.11) use eagle imagery to illustrate the actions of Yahweh without making the eagle a symbol of Yahweh.
characterised and what will come of them? A series of rhetorical questions (17.9-10) concerning the future of the vine heightens audience engagement. Even while indicating the vine is doomed, these questions press the audience to announce the final and crucial act in the Story.69

The question that follows (17.12: מָה־אֵ֑לֶּ֖ה יְדַעְתֶּ֗ם הֲלֹ֥א) indicates that, despite the audience’s familiarity with the events to which the Story alludes, there is much they have not comprehended about these things. They must listen to what follows to gain insight. After a summary of the events leading up to Zedekiah’s overtures to Egypt (17.12b-15a), rhetorical questions (17.15b) again demand a verdict from the exiles, who are pressed to acknowledge “the unacceptable”:71 that Zedekiah’s diplomatic efforts are futile. These rhetorical questions seek to obtain audience commitment to the divine perspective on Zedekiah’s diplomatic manoeuvres. No doubt the exiles listened with increasing despondency as judgment is pronounced (17.16-21), a heaviness of heart being only mildly tempered by promises of future hope (17.22-24).

Significance
Ezekiel 17 contains a single prophetic oracle72 divided up into a series of clearly defined sections,73 each beginning with a standard prophetic formula signifying its divine origin. These formulae mean the oracle is understood to disclose the divine perspective on “the key question of the time; what will become of Zedekiah’s political flirtation with Egypt?”74 The divine perspective is disclosed in the collaboration of Story and Plain Speech, on which the oracle as a whole depends for its prophetic and rhetorical force.

The Story, despite having the characteristics of a fable, enters “fully...into the service of prophetic preaching”,75 and plays a central role within the oracle. Ezekiel speaks to a “rebellious household” (17.12),76 unable to hear Yahweh’s word. His cryptic Story is one of many rhetorical

69 Renz, Rhetorical, 141: the audience are being called to “take a specific stance toward events around 587 BC” (141). Block, Ezekiel, 532-3 sees הָיָה (“Behold!”) in 17.10 as “an accurate reflection of the original rhetorical situation” (the rhetorical הָיָה in 17.12b functions similarly (541,n101)).

70 See Allen, Ezekiel, 12 for the sense of the question as “You don’t know what all this means, do you?”

71 Gowan, Theology, 124.

72 See the arguments in favour of the passages’ unity in Block, Ezekiel, 536 and Greenberg, Ezekiel, 323-4.

73 17.3-8; 9-10; 11-18; 19-21; 22-24.

74 Joyce, Ezekiel, 137.

75 Hals, Ezekiel, 116; Klein, Ezekiel, 114: it evidences characteristic elements of riddle, parable, fable and allegory (also Stewart, “Parable”, 140).

76 Cf. this characterisation of Israel in Ez 2.5-7; 3.9,16,27; 12.1-3,9,25; 17.12; 24.3; 44.6. Cf. 12.2, where Israel’s rebellion is linked causally to the nation’s inability to see and hear.
and dramatic strategies\textsuperscript{77} used by the prophet to “penetrate the hardened minds” of his audience in a situation where plain speech alone must fail.\textsuperscript{78} Extraordinary means of communication are needed for this most challenging of audiences. The Story begins with the familiar, alluding fairly transparently to contemporary events of great importance. However, the Story itself adds little to the audience’s understanding of the events it describes. While the audience will recognise a correspondence with contemporary events, the \textit{purpose} of that correspondence is not initially clear. Nor is the Story highly persuasive - it lacks a compelling internal logic.\textsuperscript{79} And the Story is unfinished, the narrative concluding at a crucial, pregnant point (17.7). Thus the full prophetic significance and rhetorical force of the Story only emerges as it is brought into dialogue with the rhetorical questions and Plain Speech discourse that accompany it. At the same time, the Story makes its own essential contribution, informing the other segments of the oracle, and giving the whole oracle thematic and rhetorical coherence. The oracle is complex, moving between different “literary planes”: narrative (1-10); history (11-18); theology (19-21); eschatology (22-24),\textsuperscript{80} and also from sin and judgment to promise and hope, and all in a seamless fashion. What facilitates this movement within a single literary piece, without loss of coherence, is the narrative structure and essential imagery of the initial Story. The interplay of Story’s imagery and the “theocentrism” of 17.19-24 serve “to bind together all the chief elements of the oracle”.\textsuperscript{81}

Putting a New Face on the Matter

Story and Plain Speech collaborate within the oracle to open a new perspective for the exiles on the present situation and future outlook for Jerusalem and for themselves. Firstly, both Story and Plain Speech portray/describe Zedekiah’s diplomatic overtures to Egypt, no doubt seen at a popular level as something of a diplomatic coup having the potential to secure a future for Israel. The oracle provides an alternative perspective, not merely recounting these events, but interpreting them practically and theologically. Zedekiah’s diplomacy with Egypt means he has broken his oath with Yahweh, and broken his covenant with Israel’s God (17.18-19).\textsuperscript{82} He will not go unpunished

\textsuperscript{77} See Renz, \textit{Rhetorical}, 140-160; Block, \textit{Ezekiel}, 15-17 on the various forms of rhetorical speech employed in Ezekiel; also Schöpflin, “Composition”, 101-118 on “metaphorical oracles” in Ez 15-24.


\textsuperscript{79} \textit{Contra} Schüle, “Mashal”, 210, the fantastical nature of the Story’s plot makes it difficult to argue it has a persuasive function (e.g. by highlight the disloyalty or foolishness of the vine). What exactly is foolishness or disloyalty when it comes to vines looking for water from eagles? Ez 17.3-8 is not drawing on established patterns of activity in nature but represents the world of fantasy (cf. similarly Hamilton, “Riddles”, 250).

\textsuperscript{80} The terminology is mine, though drawn from the analytical schemes proposed by Block, \textit{Ezekiel}, 526 and Greenberg, \textit{Ezekiel}, 320.

\textsuperscript{81} Greeberg, \textit{Ezekiel}, 319-20.

\textsuperscript{82} For “my oath…my covenant” in 17.19, as a reference to an oath “sworn to Yahweh” during the events of 2 Chron 36.13, see Allen, \textit{Ezekiel}, 259: that 17.19 begins with הֲלָכֵן (“therefore”) makes this verse an “immediate conclusion from the accusations made in v 18” (258; similarly Cogan, “Judah”, 408-9). This is a strong argument. See Greenberg, \textit{Ezekiel}, 321-2 on the primary sources, though his reading of 17.18-21 seems remote from the context.
The sending of envoys to Egypt (17.15), corresponding to how the vine sends out its branches toward the second eagle (17.7), will lead directly to the destruction of Jerusalem. Ezekiel’s rhetorical questions (17.9-10,15), located directly after descriptions of Zedekiah’s recent actions, demand that the exiles denounce these actions (in reply) and thus align themselves with the divine perspective.

Secondly, Story and Plain Speech collaborate to portray the exiles as the future of Israel. The oracle makes a surprising return to the world of the Story in its closing word of hope (17.22-24). Reading the cedar imagery of 17.22 in dialogue with the similar imagery of 17.3-4 suggests a reference to the exilic community is intended in 17.22, as the prophet speaks of the future redemption of Israel. In contrast, the vine does not feature in the promised future. It is through the exilic community, rather than the present inhabitants of Jerusalem, that God will establish a future for Israel.

Thirdly, Story and Plain Speech collaborate to reveal the sovereign hand of Yahweh in Israel’s history and over Israel’s future. The rhetorical questions of 17.9 draw the Story to a close in a message of judgment, while leaving ambiguous the agent of judgment, an ambiguity which the oracle later exploits so that the king of Babylon (17.11-18) is ultimately seen as doing the work of Yahweh (17.19-21). Yahweh’s promise of divine restoration (17.22) shares similar terminology (cedar sprig broken off and planted elsewhere) and a similar chiastic structure with 17.3-4 (depicting exile), suggesting the divine hand behind both Israel’s exile and Israel’s restoration. Thus the universal sovereignty of Yahweh, and his faithfulness to Israel, are seen in Israel’s past defeat and partial exile, and will be made known in the coming destruction of Jerusalem, and in the restoration of the exiles to the land of Israel. It is God (and not foreign kings) who is the major player in Israel’s past and future.

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83 See the use of שָׁלַח (to send”) in 17.7 and again in 17.15.
84 So Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 368; Renz, Rhetorical, 79.
85 Block, Ezekiel, 546.
86 Also Yahweh’s word of promise (17.24) repeats key terms from 17.6 (ךֹרָשׁ - “low”) and 17.9-10 (שָׁפָל - “wither”), suggesting God’s hand in Jerusalem’s subjugation and coming destruction as well as in securing a future for the exiles. See further Allen, Ezekiel, 261 on how 17.22-4 draws extensively on imagery from the Story.
87 Allen, Ezekiel, 260. See also Block, “God”, 180-1; Block, River, 60-2; similarly Davis, Swallowing, 97-8 on the exile (portrayed in 17.3-4) as God’s gracious preservation of a remnant, so that Nebuchadnezzar is the divine agent of punishment and preservation.
88 That the hope if Israel is grounded in divine initiative and the divine word is given emphasis by the recurring use of אני throughout 17.22-4.
89 See also the proposal of Strine and Couch, “YHWH’s”, 890-6 that the Babylonian king is the agent of Yahweh in his “battle against the forces of chaos” (890), which Egypt represents (891-2) and which Zedekiah has joined in his alliance with Egypt. They argue that “great waters” (17.5) refers symbolically to “the chaos waters manifest: the threatening power of Egypt” (895). While this probably reads more into the imagery than the contexts suggests is intended (surely Egypt is the eagle of 17.7, not the waters?), their reading (895-6) again illustrates how the Story’s imagery informs and integrates the oracle as a whole.
Thus Story and Plain Speech mutually inform and collaborate within this oracle to put a new face on the present situation and future outlook of the exiles. Contrary to popular hopes, Israel’s future does not lie in the liberation of Jerusalem, nor with its present inhabitants. Zedekiah’s treachery is not shrewd political manoeuvring, but constitutes disloyalty to Yahweh and so will bring destruction on Jerusalem. But Yahweh will raise up a king from among the exilic community, securing a great future for Israel, bringing blessing to the nations, and making His own name known throughout the world (17.22-4). The hope is eschatological and messianic,90 guaranteed by Yahweh’s own word.

The Parable and Ezekiel 1-24

The above contextual reading of the Eagles, the Cedar and the Vine makes an important contribution to Ezekiel’s initial phase of ministry among the exilic community (Ez 1-24).91 Renz has provided an “account of how [Ez 1-24] functioned in the life situation which gave it its original form”.92 He sees Ezekiel speaking to one nation, living in two locations,93 facing a threat to its very existence.94 Ezekiel announces that, on account of Israel's rebelliousness and idolatry, destruction hangs over the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the exiles alike.95 This destruction, Yahweh’s just judgment, is inevitable for those in Jerusalem, its population having no future.96 However, the exiles are offered the chance to escape annihilation if they will, in repentance,97 break with the

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90 For the messianic significance of 17.22-4, see Allen, Ezekiel, 261; Osbourne, “Messianic”, 174, 183-6; Block, Ezekiel, 550-2; Joyce, Ezekiel, 138.

91 On the structure of Ezekiel and chs 1-24 as a well defined section see e.g. Allen, Ezekiel, xxvi-xxxvi.

92 Renz, Rhetorical, 3: this must involve taking into account “the purpose of an author and the reception of an audience, as well as the literary design of the communication”. In the form it comes to us, Ez 17 presupposes a date after 597BCE, but before Nebuchadnezzar’s destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. If addressed to Zedekiah it could be seen as a call to abandon his alliance with Egypt and submit to Babylonian rule (cf. similarly Lang, Kein, 53-4). But the oracle is addressed to the Jewish exiles in Babylon (so Renz, Rhetorical, 27-55; Block, Ezekiel, 1-8; Mein, Ezekiel, 44-50), and from here we must begin in determining its prophetic function. For other proposals on the oracle’s function within Ezekiel, see Allen, Ezekiel, 260; Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 366 and Block, Ezekiel, 7-9, 538: a critique of Israel’s presumption on Yahweh’s covenant faithfulness; Fishbane, “Sin”, 135-6. In my view Renz’s proposal (below) has particular theological depth, and depth of insight into the prophetic and pastoral significance of the oracle.

93 See Renz, Rhetorical, 59-60; Mein, Ezekiel, 258: the idea of “Jerusalemites in two different places at once is crucial for understanding the moral world of Ezekiel and the exiles” (258); Greenberg, Ezekiel, 17: the exiles were “Jerusalemites who identified themselves with their fellow citizens in every way”. Rom-Shiloni, “Ezekiel”, arguing for a conflict between the two communities (9), for which Ezekiel provides ideological support (10) is less persuasive. Ezekiel’s polemics against Jerusalem can be understood differently (as demonstrated in this chapter).

94 See Renz, Rhetorical, 232. The “most pressing question is in what form, if at all”, the nation of Israel would survive.

95 See Kutsko, Between, 25-53 on idolatry as a “main cause” of the Jewish exile, and a dominant theme in Ezekiel’s addresses to the exiles; Block, Ezekiel, 7: the exiles “brought all their apostasizing baggage with them, including their tendency toward idolatry and all kinds of social evils”; Mein, Ezekiel, 90-2: the exiles, many of the Jerusalem elite among them, would have identified strongly with the decisions being made in Jerusalem, and thus in that sense were a party to Jerusalem’s rebellion. Similarly Renz, Rhetorical, 72-9; Gowan, Theology, 122-3.

96 Renz, Rhetorical, 69. Likewise Fishbane, “Sin”, 142; Gowan, Theology, 121.

97 See Fishbane, “Sin”, 133-4,140-142 on repentance in Ezekiel, noting his distinction between Ezekiel’s message concerning Jerusalem (for whom there is no hope) and his message for the exiles. He emphasises the importance of Ez 18.30-32, the “climax… [and] the motivation for Ezekiel’s entire argument to the exiles” (141); similarly Mein, Ezekiel 212. Contra Joyce, Divine, 55-60 who gives inadequate attention to questions of audience.
disloyalty to Yahweh that has defined Israel, past and present. The exiles have a choice: they must distance themselves from Jerusalem or from Yahweh. Thus Ezekiel calls the exiles, in an act of repentance, to “identify with Yahweh’s judgment over Jerusalem”, affirming its rightness. This would also mean “a readiness to accept the same judgment for the same rebelliousness” of their own, thus requiring “the exilic community to abandon its rebelliousness against Yahweh” in order to participate in Israel’s future.

The Eagles, the Cedar and the Vine, understood contextually (above), coheres with Renz’s view of Ezekiel’s wider message, even while making its also own unique contribution to that message. While being one of many oracles of judgment against Jerusalem, the parable (within Ez 1-24) is unique in its particular concern with Zedekiah’s diplomatic manoeuvres (the present focus of the exiles’ hopes), exposing these actions as futile and wicked, and thus further reinforcing the “rightness” of Yahweh’s judgment against Jerusalem and insisting the exiles must look elsewhere for a future. The parable and wider oracle affirm the distinction made earlier in Ezekiel between the Jerusalemites (the vine) who are doomed, and the exiles (the cedar) for whom there is hope. However the oracle makes this distinction with particular rhetorical force on account of its direct plea for the exiles to articulate, and thus own for themselves, the prophet’s vision (and thus the divine perspective) of the future, thus aligning themselves with God and against Jerusalem and the way of life of its inhabitants. The prophet’s demanding rhetorical questions (Ez 17.9-10,15), pressing the exiles to proclaim the inevitable death of the old Israel, represent a particularly intense rhetorical moment, even within Ez 1-24! After hearing (and at times watching) many oracles of judgment on Jerusalem, in Ez 17 the exiles are called to join the prophet in proclaiming the inevitability and justice of Yahweh’s coming judgment on the city that is their city and whose way of life is theirs also. This is an attempt to create psychological and spiritual distance between the exiles and Jerusalem (and the way of life of those living there). To do so is to

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98 Renz, *Rhetorical*, 69-74, 83; similarly Fishbane “Sin”, 142-3: given Israel’s long history of idolatry the exiles are called to disassociate themselves from current and previous generations.

99 Renz, *Rhetorical*, 77.


102 Earlier in Ezekiel, this is argued on other grounds.

103 See similarly on hope for those scattered among the nations in 6.8-10; 11.14-21.
open the way for the exiles’ repentance, securing them a place in the new future God promises for Israel.  

THE SEA CAPTAINS (1 Enoch 101.4-5)

Setting
The Epistle of Enoch (1 Enoch 91-108; “Epistle” hereafter) speaks to a community divided along socio-economic lines, where a group lacking wealth and influence (the “righteous”) suffer oppression and injustice at the hands of a rich and powerful elite. The divisions are also theological. Those opposing the righteous are called “sinners”, and accused of heresy, idolatry, and injustice. They are aligned with religious teachers who (in teaching and writing) make a “false claim that they are divinely appointed and inspired”, and thus lead others astray. In contrast, the author and the “righteous” of his audience regard themselves as faithful to “the great traditions of Israel in which he includes Enochic revelation”.

The Epistle primarily addresses a “socially and religiously disenfranchised” audience, the righteous of the latter days. There is a moving picture in 103.9-15 of an oppressed community who have grown discouraged and disillusioned waiting for relief from their trouble, their faithfulness unrewarded while the wicked prosper. They face the problem of theodicy as they live with “the...
temporal inversion of the Deuteronomic symmetry”. The Sea Captains speaks to this Underlying Circumstance.

The Epistle is shaped by an apocalyptic eschatology, in the sense that it is “grounded” in the apocalyptic material of earlier parts of Enoch and contains its own revelation of the justice and final judgment of God. The Epistle is designed to provoke a “confrontation between human perception and divine revelation”, primarily to sustain the righteous, but also as we shall see, to call sinners to repentance. The Sea Captains makes its own important contribution to these ends.

The parable features within a prophetic oracle (100.7-101.9) that begins with declarations of “woe” upon sinners for their persecution of the righteous (100.7-9). Because of this God will make inquiry of the angels and the celestial bodies who will testify against these sinners (100.10-11a) and divine punishment will come in the form of natural disasters (100.11-13; 101.2), before which the wicked will be powerless (100.11b-13). In view of these things, the author issues a prophetic call to all humanity to fear God (101.1-9):

1. Sinners are “summoned to observe” the Most High’s powerful deeds in nature, and “drawing inference” from what they see, fear to do evil (101.1).

2. Two conditional questions, anticipating God’s punishment of sinners, emphasise their powerlessness before God (101.2-3a), and the inappropriateness of their “proud and hard” words against God (101.3b).

3. The Sea Captains (101.4-5) summons the audience to consider what they know so as to perceive anew what they have thus far been reluctant to understand or accept (as set out in the discourse immediately prior).

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113 See Argall, Enoch, 49 on the “foundational significance” of 81.5-82.3 for the Epistle; Nickelsburg, 1 Enoch, 41 on the Epistle’s “apocalyptic character” through its appeal to earlier visionary material, particularly in the Book of Watchers (see esp. 93.2; 103.2); Nickelsburg, “Apocalyptic”, 326: the “centrality of revelation… makes the adjective ‘apocalyptic’ altogether appropriate as a description of the author’s message”. Linebaugh, “Debating”, 114 notes the claim to “divine revelation” in the repeat use of “oath formula” and “revelatory prefaces” (“I know”; “I have seen”).

114 Linebaugh, “Debating”, 114. An example of the two contrasting perspectives is 96.4: “Woe to you, sinners, for your riches make you appear to be righteous, but, your heart convicts you of being sinners”. Similarly Nickelsburg, 1 Enoch, 423, finding a contrast throughout the Epistle between the “perception of an unjust world with the reality of divine justice which will be enacted in the judgment” (italics mine).

115 See Coughenenour, “Oracles” for an analysis of the “woe-oracle as a specific gattung” in 1 Enoch.

116 See the argument in Stuckenbruck, Enoch, 458 for why, even though God is not mentioned in 100.10-13, he is the initiator of the “juridical” processes described (see also 99.3 as background).

117 Stuckenbruck, Enoch, 473. While EE emphasises fear as reverence before God, GE sees fear as a natural sentiment in the face of the dangers outlined in the following verses (474).

118 See Nickelsburg, 1 Enoch, 508: “If the sinners are not impressed by the scenario anticipated in 100.11,13, and 101.2,3, they should consider an experience of which they have knowledge”.

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4. The sea, created and directed by God, and the sailors who fear the sea both stand in contrast to sinners who do not fear God and his judgments (101.6-9).

**Story**
Sea captains,\(^{119}\) beaten by a violent storm at sea and their ships shaken by wave and storm, throw their possessions overboard, fearing for their lives.

**Audience Engagement**
The Story (101.4-5), beginning with “Look”, summons the audience to listen carefully and discover meaning in a fictional narrative describing maritime distress. This imperative invests the audience’s response with urgency and importance. While likely familiar with the events the Story portrays, the audience will wonder at its precise relationship to the subject of the wider oracle.

**Significance**
The Story takes the audience away for a moment from the subject of the oracle - an appeal to sinners to fear God - to a fictional account of maritime distress. The Story’s central imagery, of sailors in a storm, is used metaphorically in various ways in the ancient world,\(^{120}\) so that its particular significance within the oracle must be determined contextually. The Story is tightly interwoven with its immediate literary context (101.1-9), and it is in dialogical interaction with this context that its rhetorical purpose is established. This oracle repeatedly juxtaposes the deeds of the Most High, evident in the created order, and the fear of God (or not) in response. This is shown in the following chiastic arrangement:

1a: The **deeds** of the Most High  
1b: All people, seeing these deeds, should **fear** to do evil  
   2-3a: Most High sends drought and “wrath” (**deeds**)  
   3b: Sinners do not **fear** God but speak against Him  
   4-5: Maritime storm (**deeds**)  
      Sea captains’ **fear** in storm  
   6: Sea is God’s obedient creation (**deeds**)  
   7: Sea **fears** God - sinners do not **fear** God  
8: God’s creation endowed with wisdom and knowledge (**deeds**)  
9: Sea captains **fear** God - sinners do not **fear** God

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\(^{119}\) See Stuckenbruck, *Enoch*, 465, esp. n810; Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch*, 505 for the difference between EE (“kings”, thought to be a misreading of the Aramaic) and GE (τοὺς ναυκλήρους).

\(^{120}\) The creation imagery of 101.6 is common in the OT (e.g. Job 38.8; Ps 104.5-9; Prov 8.29; Jer 5.22), but it is not generally used in a symbolic way. Other symbolic imagery (e.g. sailors in a storm) has flexible symbolic meaning in ancient literature (see Appendix I for details).
The Story is positioned at the centre of this literary arrangement, reinforcing the preceding warning and opening the way for an appeal to sinners to be developed in a new way. Two similarly structured passages follow the Story (101.6-7 and 101.8-9), each beginning with a rhetorical question concerning the created order. These passages take up and develop two motifs of the Story - the sea and the sailors - to emphasise how sinners, in contrast to both, have no fear of the Most High. The contrasts are developed as follows:

1. **Reference to the sea as God’s obedient creation (101.6-7a)** develops a motif from the Story (the sea) to depict the elements of nature as the “works” of the Most High, operating under his direction. Creation’s obedience is then set in contrast to sinners, who in having no such fear of the Most High, are out of step with the created order. The unstated logic of the contrast is that as Lord of creation, Yahweh is to be feared by all creation, but sinners (part of the created order) have no such fear.

2. **God is then portrayed as creator of all, giver of knowledge and wisdom to all (101.8), particularly in this instance to humanity (the sea captains).** This wisdom is seen in the captains’ fear of the sea and efforts to preserve their lives (101.9a), in stark contrast to the sinners who have rejected this God-given wisdom and do not fear God (101.9b). Sinners, part of God’s creation, are out of step with the God-given order and wisdom of creation.

The complex interaction here, between Story and subsequent Plain Speech, in which the function of the parable is established, demonstrates a creative and flexible use of a parabolic Story. Rather than returning immediately (following the Story) to discuss the judgment coming sinners (as per 101.2-3), the author takes up the Story’s central image - the sea - to segue into a theological reflection grounded in creation that opens additional perspectives on why sinners should fear God. The natural world is God’s ordered and obedient creation, and the inhabitants of land and sea are endowed with wisdom and knowledge from God. Rather than drawing simple comparisons between Story and audience (e.g. sinners = sailors; storm = coming judgment), the Story is used to

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121 The use of τὸ ἔργον in GE 101.6 evokes the τὰ ἔργα in 101.1 where the “deeds” of the Most High are the meteorological elements that execute divine punishment (101.2).

122 This coheres with how creation is portrayed elsewhere in the oracle. See Nickelburg, 1 Enoch, 508 for how the subject of the passive verb in 100.11 is seen to be God in 101.2; Stuckenbruck, Enoch, 475 for how in 101.2 (GE: τὰς θυρίδες τοῦ υἱοῦ) the rain is portrayed as under God’s control; Nickelburg, 1 Enoch, 507: the inferential particle (GE: τοίνυν (“so”)) with which 101.1 opens means that Enoch 100.1-9 is grammatically linked to what precedes it, so that the events of 100.7-13 are understood to be the deeds of the most high (101.1).

123 See Nickelburg, 1 Enoch, 508-9 for how “all that move on the earth and all that are in the sea”, while normally being a reference to animals (in the OT), is here a reference to human beings.

124 Notice the emphasis on the sea throughout 101.6-8. It is possible that 101.6-7 evokes any or all of (i) the OT creation account; (ii) creation’s obedience to God in the Exodus (celebrated in similar terms in Ps 105.29; 106.9; Is 50.2); and (iii) the ancient myth of God subduing the chaos monster (see the discussions in Nickelburg, 1 Enoch, 508; Stuckenbruck, Enoch, 480). However, the strongest links are with Jer 5.20-25 (esp. 5.22), where there is a similar appeal to creation theology and a similar contrast between obedient creation and disobedient persons who do not fear God.
set up two *contrasts*: (i) between sinners and the sea/creation; and (ii) between sinners and the sea captains. What holds both interpretive trajectories together is the supporting creation imagery (drawing on motifs of the Story) and the fact that both trajectories reinforce the main theological concern of the oracle: sinners’ lack of fear of the Most High.

In this collaboration of Story and Plain Speech, the oracle provides the reader of the *Epistle* with a divine perspective on the standing and situation of wealthy “sinners”. The rich may be socially and economically powerful, secure and righteous in their own eyes. As such it would be easy to view the rich, in all their “success”, as enjoying divine favour and embodying wisdom in their way of life. Story and prophetic oracle give a different perspective. Failing to fear the Most High, sinners are actually out of step with the created order in its obedience to its creator, and living in defiance of the wisdom of God evident throughout the created order. This divine perspective has implications for both the righteous and for sinners, which I will now explore.

**Reading the Sea Captains Within the Epistle of Enoch**

My contextual reading (above), recognises the *particular* way this parable functions within the oracle in which it is set. This is to emphasise one - contextual - interpretive trajectory, to the neglect of other possible trajectories. For example, by bringing the parable into dialogue with other parts of the wider *Epistle*, the following trajectories might have been pursued: (i) The Story might have been used to emphasise the helplessness of sinners when confronted by the deeds and judgments of the Most High, a prominent theme in this section of the *Epistle*; and (ii) The motif of the sea captains, casting their wealth overboard, might have linked the Story to the *Epistle’s* wider condemnation of the rich, so as to emphasise the powerlessness of wealth to save. However

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125 See e.g. the portraits of sinners in 94.6-8; 96.4-6; 97.8-9; 98.2. While a polemic view, certain aspects of the critique, e.g. that of opulence and exploitation, are less subjective and more difficult to sustain if they are not grounded in reality.

126 For a range of views on the purpose of 1 Enoch in addition to the major commentaries see e.g. Milik, *Enoch*, 49-50; Horsley, “Social”, 111-5; Collins, “Apocalypticism”, 140-1; Nickelsburg, “Response”, 240-1; Heger, “Enoch”; Jackson, *Judaism*, 100. See Collins, “Apocalyptic Material”, 5-6 on the difficulty in describing the function of apocalyptic texts generically; A Y Collins, “Introduction”, 7 on how apocalyptic literature is “intended to interpret present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behaviour of the audience by means of divine authority”. This definition, deliberately general, is apt for the *Epistle*.

127 Sinners are afraid and having no one to help them at the time of eschatological judgment (100.8), powerless despite their money to alleviate drought (100.12), powerless to endure the scourges of the cold (100.13), hiding from the presence of God in fear and trembling (102.3). A series of rhetorical questions expose sinners’ helplessness in the face of God’s punishment and coming judgment: “What will you do?” (101.2); “Will you not be entreating him?” (101.3); “Where will you flee and be saved?” (102.1); “Will you not be shaken and frightened?” (102.1).

128 See Stuckenbruck, *Enoch*, 478 on the textual variations of 101.5a. GE portrays the sailors as afraid of the storm, and taking action to save their lives; EE suggests the sailors are fearful of loss of their possessions. My reading of the parable is supported most strongly by GE (and coheres with 101.6-9, which emphasises the captains’ fear of the sea, not a fear of losing their possessions), but would work with either variant since either way I am working with how the imagery is developed in 101.6-9.

129 E.g. Stuckenbruck, *Enoch*, 478 sees the parable depicting the “utter uselessness of wealth in such a time of peril”. I note that this idea is implicit in many of the *Epistle’s* woes against the rich, and such a reading might have been developed by bringing the parable into dialogue with 94.7-8; 98.3; 100.6: sinners “wealth cannot save them”.

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neither of these interpretive trajectories, despite their coherence with the theology of the Epistle as a whole, are pursued as the Story is developed in 101.6-9. I suggest that this is deliberate, and that to emphasise either of these trajectories would have been to obscure (or even undermine) the purpose of the parable’s contextual emphasis on sinners’ failure to fear God. To recognise this particular contextual emphasis, I argue below, is to allow the parable to make its own singular contribution to the theology and purpose of the Epistle as a whole.

The Epistle addresses a generation living in the final stages of history. Its primary audience is the righteous, who walk in paths of righteousness and wisdom, holding to the teachings of Enoch and probably to the Torah.130 For the most part, the Epistle’s author writes pastorally,131 encouraging and exhorting his audience to persevere in righteousness, even amidst persecution and suffering, anxious that they do not “lapse into the evil way or despair of divine vindication”.132 Providing they persevere in obedience, the righteous are promised salvation from the coming judgment, together with vindication and reward. The Epistle’s many proclamations of woe and judgment coming to sinners133 appear in the most part designed to “reinforce the self-understanding of the righteous”,134 and to provide assurance that - despite present suffering and trouble - the righteous will be vindicated in the coming eschatological judgment, where “the temporal inversion of the Deuteronomic symmetry will give way to an eschatological balance”.135 The oracle within which our Story features (100.7-101.9) contributes to this encouragement of the righteous. Sinners, in their disobedience and failure to fear God, will be punished accordingly, and are not to be envied or emulated.

However, it is my view that this oracle was designed primarily to speak to sinners. The oracle is unique within the Epistle in that it addresses only sinners and makes no reference to the


131 Nickelsburg, “Apocalyptic”, notes the book’s “explicit concern with the effect of this book on its recipients and audience” (325) and how despite the “fundamentally exhortative” nature of the work there is little by way of “ethical admonition” but rather a message of good news, encouragement and assurance (326). E.g. see the assurances of 92.2; 94.1-5; 95.3; 96.1-3; 97.1; 102.4; 103.4; 104.2-6.

132 Nickelsburg, 1 Enoch, 28.

133 The evil deeds of sinners are known and recorded (e.g. 97.6; 98.6-8; 103.7-8) and a day of great judgment and destruction awaits them (e.g. 94.9-10; 96.8; 98.3,10; 100.1-4.9; 102.1-3; 103.7-8).

134 Nickelsburg, 1 Enoch, 429.

135 Linebaugh, “Debating”, 116. See 109-114 on the Epistle’s interaction with Deuteronomic theology. The Epistle insists that reality “cannot be separated from eschatology” (109); the “symmetrical justice of Deuteronomic theology” is not dispensed with in Enoch, but “preserved by being postponed” (110-1). Cf. similarly Stuckenbruck, “Epistle”, 410-14; Nickelsburg, “Apocalyptic”, 310-24. Central to this eschatological balancing of the scales of justice is that death is at best “penultimate” (Linebaugh, “Debating”, 113), and so “cannot frustrate divine justice” (Nickelsburg, “Apocalyptic”, 324); sinners after death will suffer torment (103.5-8), while the righteous will be vindicated (104.5) and enjoy every good thing (104.3-4).
eschatological lot of the righteous. Various features of 101.1-9 suggest this part of the Epistle was
designed to function as a call for sinners to repent:136

1. The oracle begins with a typical series of woes. But then, in an abrupt turn, without parallel in the
Epistle, the author directly addresses the “sons of men” (101.1) calling them to refrain from
evil. This implies an audience of those who presently do evil, and the possibility of repentance.

2. The explicit (101.1) and implicit (101.5-9) call to fear God refers to a fear that comes from “wise
contemplation” and in practical terms means obedience.137 It stands in contrast to the “terror” of
100.8 and 102.1-3, which “responds too late to the inescapable judgment”.138 There is still time
for contemplation and fear, leading to repentant obedience and wise living.

3. It is possible that natural disasters (100.10-13, 101.2), featuring only here in the Epistle,
represent divine punishment in advance of the final judgment of sinners. The language of
101.10-13 refers to events in the natural course of history, thus distinct from the more
eschatological language the author uses elsewhere for the final judgment. If so, it seems
possible that this punishment serves a corrective purpose, being designed so that sinners will
turn from their sins before the opportunity is lost (101.1).139

That the Oracle is addressed to sinners and functions as a call to repentance coheres with my
reading of the Story above. The author refuses to interpret the Story as a simple analogy
illustrating the eschatological judgment hanging over sinners, together with their powerlessness
and fear at that time. Judgment is not explicit in this oracle. Instead, in interpreting the Story as a
contrast, highlighting sinners’ failure to fear God, the aim seems less predictive and more
corrective, less to do with the helplessness of sinners in the face of future judgment and more to do

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136 Stuckenbruck, Enoch, 482 acknowledges the unique nature of this section: “Unlike most passages within the Epistle, 101:1-9
does not speak explicitly to the eschatological judgement of sinners”. However, he regards sinners’ fate as sealed and sees 101.7b,
9b as only indicating sinners’ indifference to the author’s message (472). Thus, the function of the oracles of woe is not to summon
sinners to repentance but only to contrast the righteous with sinners (479). What follows challenges that view.

137 See Stuckenbruck, Enoch, 472, n818 on the strong connection between fear of God and obedience in OT and Second Temple
literature.

138 Nickelsburg, 1 Enoch, 507.

139 The many OT passages evoked in 101.1-9 affirm in different ways the faithfulness of God, even to a disobedient people, and thus
may signal a theology behind the oracle that recognises how divine faithfulness creates opportunity for sinners’ salvation. See e.g.:
Ps 77, recalling the faithfulness of God amidst a time of trial, is alluded to in 101.1 (Ps 77.12-15) and 101.2,6-8 (Ps 77.16-19). Jer
5.22-25, alluded to in 100.11-12; 101.2; 101.4-9, comes immediately after the declaration that God will preserve a remnant despite
the unfaithfulness and rebellion of his people. Jonah 1.1-6, alluded to in the parable (101.4-5) portrays the mercy of God to
disobedient prophet and sailor, and their repentance and reverence. Ps 106.9, alluded to in 101.7, celebrates and appeals to the
faithfulness of God despite the recurrent sin of the nation. See Jassen, “Scriptural”, 74 on “allusive anthologising” in 101.1-9, as a
means by which scriptural imagery is “reoriented to the eschatological future” (75).
with a present opportunity for repentance. There is still time for the fear of God, exemplified in creation and by the sailors, to be embraced by sinners.\(^{140}\)

Thus a contextual reading of the parable avoids it being reduced to a mere illustration of themes established elsewhere in the *Epistle*, and enables the parable to make its own unique contribution to the *Epistle*. The parable, read in dialogue with the Plain Speech discourse that accompanies it, holds open a door of repentance to wealthy sinners, and as such represents an important qualification to the theme of certain and imminent judgment coming to the rich that otherwise dominates throughout the *Epistle*.

THE BROKEN JAR (Gospel of Thomas 97)

Setting

The Gospel of Thomas (*Thomas* hereafter) has at least 14 parables attributed to Jesus,\(^{141}\) of which 10 have Synoptic parallels, one Synoptic similarities,\(^{142}\) and three are unique to *Thomas* (21,97,98). Parables having Synoptic parallels generally evidence conflation of Synoptic material and abbreviation,\(^{143}\) and in some cases redaction reflecting *Thomas*' theological concerns.\(^{144}\) Many

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\(^{140}\) There are several factors that suggest the *Epistle* - as a whole - was intended to call sinners to repentance, even if as a secondary purpose. (i) The direct form of address, which gives the reader a sense of “being spoken to” (Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch*, 33) makes it difficult to read the *Epistle* without imagining sinners as one of two intended audiences. Davidson, *Angels*, 114-5 notes the “numerous examples of abrupt transition from direct address to the sinners to direct address to the afflicted righteous, and vice versa”, suggesting a dual audience. Sinners are directly addressed, “with a view to their repentance”. (ii) The *Epistle* at various points refers to “sons of men” or “the sons of the earth/whole earth” (see 91.14; 93.11-14; 100.6; 101.1; 102.3; 105.1). These phrases refer to all of humanity, and mainly occur in contexts where the possibility of repentance is implied or even explicitly anticipated. See Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch*, who finds reference to “conversion of the human race” in 91.14; argues the “evident function” of 100.6 “is not simply to comfort the righteous victims of the sinners, but to call the ‘sons of earth’ to repentance” (502); and sees reference to the “conversion of the Gentiles” in 105.1 (535). (iii) The “motif of worldwide dissemination” in 105.1-2 suggests *Enoch* is “not ultimately sectarian in outlook...[but that] the ultimate vision of the *Epistle* is universal in scope” (Stuckenbruck, *Enoch*, 601-2; also “eschatological conversion or the dissemination of revelation to humanity” is anticipated in the Book of Watchers (10:21) and the Animal Apocalypse (90:30, 37)). The *Epistle* holds out hope that “all humanity will look to the path of everlasting righteousness” (91.14). While all the precise details of what is anticipated (and its timing) may not always be clear, these factors argue for us to understand the *Epistle* as directly concerned with the repentance of sinners. Cf. Boccaccini, “Forgiveness”, 158-62, finding evidence of anticipated repentance in 1 Enoch as a whole (in 1 Enoch 50.1-5).

\(^{141}\) See 8,9,20,21,57,63,64,65,76,96,97,98,107,109. Others (e.g. Cameron, Crossan) add 31. Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 364-5 using his broad definition, finds 29 parables. Much of *Thomas*’ language is metaphorical, so drawing clear boundaries is difficult.

\(^{142}\) *Thomas* 8 uses similar imagery to Matt 13.47-50 (net, fishing, division of catch), but the storyline is different. They are two separate parables (Meier, *Marginal V*, 188n171).


\(^{145}\) Note reference to knowing in 65 and 109, the anti-commerce bias in 64, the focus on one large animal in 8, 107, perhaps pointing to the solitary, elect, undivided one (e.g. 49).
of these parables reference the kingdom, the theology of which is developed in the wider Gospel.

In arranging the parables Thomas provides few textual signals to inform interpretation. Individual parables are placed alongside other parables and sayings, but generally without literary signals to suggest an interpretive relationship between them. There is no overarching narrative structure in Thomas (to which the parables might be seen to correspond in some way), and only minimal narrative and Plain Speech elements accompanying individual parables. OT imagery (that might be suggestive of a parable’s metaphorical referent) features infrequently. As “secret sayings” (Prologue), the parables remain highly enigmatic at a literary level, consistent with the author’s “express intention to present esoteric sayings of Jesus with hidden meanings”. The interpretive task is also made difficult because of our inability to confidently assign Thomas to a geographical, religious or socio-cultural setting, even in general terms.

146 See 8,20,57,76,96,97,98,107,109.

147 See e.g. King, “Kingdom”; Gathercole, Thomas, 145-6 for Thomas’ theology of the Kingdom.

148 So e.g. Schröter, “Thomasevangelium”, 500: “Das Thomasevangelium hat Sammelcharakter. Übergreifende Zusammenhänge werden nicht hergestellt, die Konzentration liegt auf dem einzelnen Wort bzw. der kleineren Rede oder geschilderten Situation”. Gathercole, Thomas, 131-6, notes the abundance of “catchwords” (131) and potential thematic links that scholars identify between sayings, but recognises the uncertainty of such links (especially catchwords when dealing with a translation (131)), and takes a measured approach to their interpretive significance, seeking to avoid “dogmatic assertion about what a ‘Sayings Gospel’ may or may not entail, while also attempting to steer clear of a kind of contextual parallelomania” (136).

149 Schröter, “Thomasevangelium”, 496: “Eine narrative Präsentation der Jesusüberlieferung wird vermieden, zugunsten einer Konzentration auf die einzelnen Worte und Gleichnisse, die in ihrer je eigenen Bedeutung erkannt werden sollen”.

150 Six (8, 21, 24, 63, 65) have a brief exhortation to listen well (providing little interpretive insight). Three (21, 64, 76) have a specific application/exhortation that sends one immediately and confidently down an interpretive path.

151 On the extent and effect of this see Hays, Backwards, 9-12; Meier, Marginal V, 119-123, and his comparison of 20, 57, 63, 72, with their Synoptic parallels (111-145). OT imagery is not totally suppressed (see reference to vineyards and their owners (65); “birds of the sky” (2); “day of harvest…burned” (57); shepherd (107)), but is minimised.

152 Meier, Marginal V, 115; similarly Schröter, “Thomasevangelium”, 497. The sense in which Thomas’ sayings may be regarded as “secret” (Prologue: €ΘΗΠ) is that their meaning is obscure at a literary level, even while it is intended that this meaning may be discovered somehow by the reader (1) (e.g. Gathercole, Thomas, 192: “it is the meaning of the sayings which is secret… [the sayings] often have a hidden sense, which needs to be uncovered). See further the discussion in Watson, Gospel, 230-2; Lincoln, Thomas, 68-9: Thomas’ knowledge was secret to outsiders but able to be obtained by insiders; Blessing, “Woman”, 166: “the knowledge is not secret, but only hidden”; Bockmuehl, Ancient, 182; Luttikhouten, “Hidden”, 539. See Watson, Gospel, 227-30 on how total secrecy in Thomas only applies to three “concealed” unwritten sayings that are not disclosed (13).

153 See Gathercole, Thomas, 103-111 on Thomas’ (uncertain) provenance and dating (112-127, arguing Thomas was written sometime in 135-200CE), and lack of “geographical and cultural references” (181-2). Thomas’ sayings appear deliberately removed from any historical narrative and its theology is “so difficult to pin down in terms of… any genuine close alignment with other known works and movements”, that would otherwise inform interpretation to an extent (175). Thomas “does not fit neatly (or even approximately) into any previous known haeresis” (144) and thus “cannot be assigned to any particular group” (167). On why it is “hard to make a case for Thomas as gnostic” (173) see esp. Watson, Gospel, 224-249; DeConick, Seek, 3-27 (“gnostic use does not predicate gnostic origins”); Davies, Thomas, 18-35. Schröter, “Thomasevangelium”, 506 argues for “Jesusüberlieferung auf dem Weg zur Gnosis”. Thomas’ critique of Judaism (a position that now “attracts very wide support”) and of other forms of Christianity suggest divergence from these groups rather than affiliation (Gathercole, Thomas, 164-5). See Watson, Gospel, 219 on how Thomas is distinct from the wisdom tradition.
The Broken Jar (97) is the second in a sequence of three parables, all of which speak in some way of the kingdom. I have chosen the Broken Jar in order to explore the interpretive possibilities and limitations when reading a parable having no narrative context and no strong literary relationship to the textual segments that precede or follow it. The Broken Jar is also a helpful case study since it lacks a parallel in other literature, so that we do not come to it already knowing what it meant elsewhere.

**Story**
A woman carrying a jar of meal loses that meal gradually over a long journey because the handle of the jar breaks. The woman does not notice the loss and arrives home to find her jar empty.

**Significance**
As arranged within *Thomas*, the Broken Jar has no narrative context and no specified audience. The parable uses no stock imagery. Its introduction (“The kingdom of the [Father] is like…”) identifies it as a parable that speaks in some way of the kingdom, most likely in a comparative way. However, there is no further contextual guidance to signal that the parable was intended to inform our understanding of the kingdom in any particular way. The precise relationship between the Story and the Kingdom is not explicit, implied, or even subtly signalled at a literary level, so that the confident pursuit of a contextual reading appears frustrated.

Given the difficulty in producing a contextual reading of the Broken Jar, scholars usually have reference to other material to complete the interpretive process. The parable is frequently brought into dialogue with: (i) the adjacent parables (96, 98); (ii) wider theological themes in *Thomas*; and/or (iii) other literature having similar motifs or plot elements. Scott’s scholarship illustrates all three approaches:

**Immediate Literary Setting (96-98)**
Scott sees a “contrast” within each of these three parables, and argues the Broken Jar, with its full-empty contrast, depicts failure, so that “the kingdom is identified with loss, with accident, with emptiness, with barrenness”. But there are difficulties with this reading. Even if “contrast” is the

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154 Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 375-379, argues that we can “expand the term jar to include clay vessels in general” and then makes much of the way vessels symbolise the human body in OT, NT and Nag Hammadi texts. What counts strongly against the Broken Jar evoking this imagery is that the jar features in the parable alongside the woman, so that it is unlikely the jar would also be a reference to human persons. Where an inanimate object is understood as metaphor for persons in NT parables, the associated object or living thing *within the parable* represents a non-human figure. This is also quite clearly the case in the passage Zimmermann (377) quotes from the Nag Hammadi text *Evangelium Veritatus* where it is the Word/Christ/the Father who is dealing with the jars. See also the assessment of Petersen, “Die Frau”, 918, who finds it “fraglich” that this general imagery should carry interpretive significance for the Broken jar. Zimmermann’s argument for understanding “the way” as metaphor for “the way of life/lifestyle” (379) is more convincing.

155 Scott, “Empty”, 78 (see 77-80 for the full reading).
key to interpreting these three parables, there is no obvious reason (looking at the three parables together) to argue the Broken Jar equates the kingdom with loss and emptiness, rather than for example, with the “full-ness” with which the parable begins. Further, the “contrast” element is not as strong or obvious as Scott claims, especially in 98. I suggest the three parables have very little conceptual similarity. However, even if elements of similarity (or contrast) can be identified, it is still unclear what interpretive significance these elements - and the relationships between them - might have for how we understand the kingdom. The highly enigmatic nature of all three parables means that their significance for the kingdom is not resolved by reading them together.

Theological Themes in *Thomas*

The Broken Jar may also be read in dialogue with other passages from *Thomas*. For example, Scott identifies a “structural similarity” between the Broken Jar and “the Rich Investor” (63), with both depicting a movement from “bounty (full jar, great harvest) to loss (empty jar, death)”, so that “in some way loss must be a fundamental part of the interpretation”. Given the importance of “knowing” throughout *Thomas*, some scholars read the parable as a warning of loss of knowledge, thus interpreting the loss of meal motif negatively. The diverse theological themes in *Thomas*, and the potential to make many connections between the Broken Jar's various motifs and comparable motifs elsewhere in *Thomas*, means this approach to interpretation will inevitably

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156 Allowing the three parables to mutually interpret each other does not in itself suggest a positive view of the loss of meal. E.g. Doran, “Complex”, 350-1 argues the Broken Jar stands in tension to 96 and 98, which “emphasise the individual’s ability to succeed”.

157 I find nothing to suggest the first man in 98 is weak (Scott, “Empty”, 78, finding a weak-strong contrast). The parable seems to portray both a strong man and a stronger man who is able to kill him.

158 As another example, Ford, “Body”, 295-9 also sees the grouping of the three parables as a “strategy for interpretation... allowing each to enter into dialogue” (295), but finds the common element to be “the inserting of something inside a container” raising questions “about how securely that container holds” (296). This motif is explicit only in 96.

159 The reading provided in Ford, “Body”, 296-9 illustrates that even where common and contrasting elements may be identified between the three parables, when it comes to the significance of these elements and connections many imaginative interpretive leaps are required for which there are no signals within the text (e.g. Ford’s finding in the Broken Jar a “metaphor... for a woman’s inability to bear a child” and for society’s response to that failure (296)). Also, I observe that while Gathercole, *Thomas*, 134 recognises that 96,97,98 are connected by “catchword”, “thematic connection” and “common form” (making them the only set of sayings in *Thomas* that can be confidently connected on all three grounds in Gathercole’s analysis (132-4)), yet such connections have no material bearing on his actual readings of these parables (545-58) and a good deal of uncertainty is acknowledged over the meaning of the two parables without Synoptic parallels (97, 98). This is evidence that the contextual connections Gathercole identifies are insufficient to adequately inform interpretation.

160 As Irenaeus observed, one cannot resolve one enigma by appealing to another.


162 Gathercole, *Thomas*, 152 notes the “extraordinary density” of knowledge language in *Thomas*, making knowledge a “central theme” (152); in particular, use of COOYN 25x; and of ΕΙΥΕ 6x.

generate a range of interpretive trajectories. While this offers avenues to complete the interpretive process, it inevitably involves highly subjective interpretive choices and tends to limit the role of the parable to illustrating what can be established from the less enigmatic elements of *Thomas*.

**Wider Literature**

The parable may also be interpreted in dialogue with other literature. Scott suggests the Broken Jar “echoes in reverse” the story of the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17.8-16), so that “the kingdom is not identified with divine intervention but divine emptiness”. The Story’s multiple motifs and the ease with which similar motifs/themes can be located in other literature means many connections between the two - and associated interpretive trajectories - may be generated. But the interpretive significance of such connections is not always obvious. For example, even if the parable evokes the Elijah-widow story, it is not certain that it echoes it “in reverse”. Perhaps the relationship is a *comparative* one, so that emptiness represents preparedness for divine intervention? There is little to guide us at this crucial interpretive point.

**Evaluation**

Gathercole provides a helpful critique of the above and other interpretations of the Broken Jar, noting particularly their lack of coherence with *Thomas*’ otherwise positive portrayal of the kingdom. Gathercole’s own suggestion, drawing on a similar 4th century Macarian parable, and proposing an alternative translation of 97.3, is that the parable portrays the stripping off of

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164 See e.g. the eight different ways Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 381-9 brings the parable into dialogue with other parts of *Thomas*; also the various examples in Valantasis, *Thomas*, 178-9. Mostly the different interpretive trajectories arise through selection of different motifs of the parable which then form the point of dialogue with other parables/sayings. Some of the interpretive trajectories relate to themes that are more important within *Thomas* than others, but it is otherwise difficult to adjudicate between the suggestions.


166 E.g. woman, jar, flour, journey, full-ness, brokenness, emptiness, ignorance, home.

167 For example, consider the wide range of NT Gospel texts to which the parable has been linked. In a selection of the scholarship cited above, interpretive connections have been made between the Broken Jar and: the Leaven, the Seed, the Rich Fool, the Good Samaritan, Jesus’ association with outcasts, the Prodigal Son, the Lost Coin, the Judge and the Widow, the Lilies and Ravens, the Homeowner, John 4, John 16.21, Luke 10.38-42, and Luke 17.20.

168 Scott, “Empty”, 79.


170 Gathercole, *Thomas*, 552-4: [2ICÆ] can mean both labour and its effect, weariness. He proposes for 97.3: “She did not realise it. She did not feel tired” (cf. Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 369; Petersen, “Die Frau”, 917 on the meaning of [2ICÆ]).
sin and passion\textsuperscript{172} over the long journey of life, so that the soul eventually finds rest. Gathercole’s explanation depicts the kingdom in positive terms and coheres well with the importance of finding throughout \textit{Thomas}.\textsuperscript{173} That the woman “found” the jar empty (97.4) evokes other parts of \textit{Thomas} where salvific finding is associated with loss or renunciation of other things.\textsuperscript{174} The woman becomes a positive figure, on a long journey of loss (“emptying”), that allows her to gain the kingdom. While Gathercole’s reading have much to commend it in my view, on account of its coherence with \textit{Thomas}' wider theology (as expressed in non-parabolic sayings and statements), we must also recognise that others have proposed different readings using the same methodology.\textsuperscript{175}

Thus Gathercole rightly acknowledges that “any interpretation of this enigmatic parable… must remain tentative”,\textsuperscript{176} a recognition of the somewhat speculative nature of the interpretive task where a parable, preserved in literary form, lacks clear textual signals to guide interpretation. Possible interpretations of such a parable are many, but precise literary intentions are elusive. In the end the reader is left unable to speak confidently of the Broken Jar having a particular literary meaning or a precise literary function.

\textbf{The Salvific Function of the Parables of Thomas}

Zimmermann notes the many possible interpretive trajectories associated with the Broken Jar, but finds no need to feel “uneasy”, unless one is “looking for one single, unambiguous interpretation”.\textsuperscript{177} As we have seen, the literary arrangement of the parable does not provide any certainty around a single unambiguous interpretation. But we may still legitimately ask whether the kind of analysis profiled above is consistent with a sensitive literary approach to \textit{Thomas}. Was the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[172] Cf. Zimmermann, \textit{Puzzling}, 384-6: the emptying signifies the woman as “carefree”, not “burdened by her daily task” (386); Petersen, “Die Frau”, 918: loss of “Alltagsarbeit, Vorratshaltung und Verpflichtungen”, and (at death) the complete “Befreiung von irdischer Mühsal” (919). It is difficult to adjudicate between these proposals for what is “lost” during the journey; each coheres with wider themes in \textit{Thomas}.
\item[173] See the repeated reference to finding in the introductory sayings (1-2), and then throughout: 8,27,38,49,58,77,80,90,92,97,107, 109,110,111.
\item[174] E.g. “finding” a large fish among many small fish which are thrown back (8); finding the kingdom through fasting to the world (27); coming to repentance in the shaking off of wine: “empty” they will return to their primal state and leave the world (28); escaping the world through finding a corpse (56); finding life through suffering (58); finding the kingdom through loss of career (76); finding the largest sheep through leaving ninety nine (107).
\item[175] E.g. Zimmermann, \textit{Puzzling}, 388-90, making reference to \textit{Thomas} 113, argues for a reading of the Broken Jar in which the trickle of flour, unnoticed by the woman, portrays how the kingdom comes very gradually, even imperceptibly into the world. In this reading - as with Gathercole’s - the kingdom is portrayed positively.
\item[177] Zimmermann, \textit{Puzzling}, 380-1. Elliot, “Empty”, 140 goes further to suggest this reflects the function of the parable in the ministry of the historical Jesus, where it was used “creatively to pose an unusual situation as a parable for discussion”. That \textit{Thomas} is not purporting to speak of the historical Jesus cautions against this view.
\end{footnotes}
Broken Jar intended to facilitate the “playful”\textsuperscript{178} approach to interpretation evident in some modern scholarship? Was the parable’s literary arrangement designed to encourage multiple interpretive trajectories for the reader, especially those developed with reference to biblical texts? Two points may be made in response to these questions:

**Some Internal Clues**

The author of *Thomas* invests his collection of sayings with an express purpose: in seeking and finding their interpretation a person may escape death, participate in the rule of the kingdom (1-2), and partake of rest (2\textsuperscript{179}). *Thomas* is “salvific in theme”,\textsuperscript{180} and obtaining the true meaning of its sayings is the way to salvation. The concept of “finding” that features so prominently in the programmatic introduction, and in the Broken Jar, can rightly be regarded as a “soteriological good”.\textsuperscript{181} Thus the parables are given a soteriological function within *Thomas*. The precise means by which the parables of *Thomas* were expected to contribute to readers’ salvation may ultimately be obscured in history. But there are clues. Where similar versions of a parable exist in *Thomas* and the Synoptics, we can observe how *Thomas*’ versions have been deliberately altered in ways that obscure their meaning, particularly by removing narrative context, stock symbols and introductions/conclusions.\textsuperscript{182} The enigmatic parable form is made doubly enigmatic by these changes, suggesting obscurity was valued by the author. Cryptic sayings may have been important as a means of avoiding persecution,\textsuperscript{183} with explanations given in private contexts. But an alternative (possibly complementary?) suggestion is that the cryptic nature of *Thomas*’ parables actually facilitated the process of seeking and finding called for throughout *Thomas*. The parables’ enigmatic literary form and arrangement may be deliberately designed to facilitate their salvific function.

There are internal clues as to what is involved for adherents of *Thomas* wishing to obtain the knowledge that leads to salvation. The process involves “labour” and “emotional turbulence” (2).\textsuperscript{184} “Finding” involves a practical spirituality: fasting and sabbath keeping (27), suffering (58), accepting Jesus’ yoke/ lordship (90), renouncing this world (110) and its view of wealth (76). Finding is a

\textsuperscript{178} Valantasis, *Thomas*, 179 uses this term to describe his exegesis of this parable.

\textsuperscript{179} Greek text only. See Gathercole, *Thomas*, 205 for the soteriological meaning of “rest” in *Thomas*.

\textsuperscript{180} Gathercole, *Thomas*, 195.


\textsuperscript{182} See the examples in Meier, *Marginal V*, 111-45. In this Chapter I have assumed *Thomas*’ dependency (to some extent) on the Synoptics (see n160 above), but my argument stands even if all drew on a common tradition. The important point is that obscurity is deliberate in *Thomas* (including in his arrangement of the parables).


\textsuperscript{184} Gathercole, *Thomas*, 200.
spiritual, perhaps mystical and ascetic (and long?) journey, which the reader must take personally, with much to lose along the way (without noticing?), but always with the assurance that finding is possible (92, 94). The Broken Jar may be paradigmatic of the soteriological process *Thomas* was designed to facilitate, an interpretative journey involving the spiritual discipline and self-denial of a mystical pursuit.  

Whether this process of seeking and finding was a communal process under the guidance of community leaders, or a mystical process of individual endeavour and spiritual discovery, I am suggesting the cryptic nature of *Thomas*’ sayings and parables was deliberately designed to facilitate the journey. It is a journey that is difficult (impossible?) to replicate for those only willing or able to interact with *Thomas* in an academic way.

*Thomas* and the OT and the NT

If, as concluded in recent scholarship, *Thomas* is located among the “rich and varied production of many Christian writings in the 2d century A.D”, the question naturally arises as to the author’s attitude toward the NT Gospels, which recent scholarship suggests he/she knew, and which were increasingly recognised as authoritative at that time. Was the NT (and similarly the OT) anticipated as a source of interpretive guidance when reading *Thomas*’ parables, as much contemporary analysis of the Broken Jar suggests?

As noted above, a central purpose of *Thomas* was to facilitate a soteriological journey for readers. This soteriology is inherently distinct from and incompatible with, both Jewish and NT soteriology. I note in particular:

(i) The reference to “secret sayings” in the prologue characterises *Thomas* as conveying private knowledge not otherwise known, but essential to salvation, and thus available only to those who learn to interpret this particular Gospel;

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185 See e.g. DeConick, Seek, for mystical soteriology in *Thomas*, “where it is necessary for each individual to seek his own salvation” (180), through encratism, mystical encounter with God, and self-knowledge; Bockmuehl, Ancient, 163: *Thomas*’ Jesus provides for a “discipleship of visionary ascent”; Watson, Gospel, 272: *Thomas* is a “script for performance” preserved “with a view to practices of interpretation occurring within Christian discourse…pointing to the world of praxis within which they seek their own reinscription”; Kloppenborg, Formation, 301: the interpretation required for the sayings to become “efficacious” might have been provided communally, or depended on “individual ‘research’ and insight”. Cf. Meier, Marginal V, 93 on how a spiritual elite “by trial and error” navigate their own way through *Thomas* “and so reach eternal life”.

186 E.g. Lincoln, *Thomas*, 69-76, recognising the hypothetical nature of his proposal; cf Bockmuehl, Ancient, 165: “it is vital that the sayings of Jesus are not self-interpreting but require the sort of secret knowledge and understanding that belong to an initiated elite”.

187 Suggested by the focus on being “solitary” in 16, 49 and the “single one” in 11, 22, 23, 106 (see Nicholas Perrin, *Thomas*, 123 who explores the use of the terms in other ancient literature).

188 Hence the concluding comment in Goodacre, *Thomas*, 191 - “Ultimately, though, the modern scholar’s search is a frustrating one”.

189 Meier, Marginal V, 90.
(ii) *Thomas* deliberately sets his teaching in contrast to that of other leaders, who represent emerging proto-orthodoxy in the early church. Notably, *Thomas*’ portrayal of Peter and Matthew (13), ultimately pointing beyond these leaders to the NT Gospels for which they were seen as responsible (Mark and Matthew), was probably intended to position *Thomas* as superior to Mark and Matthew;

(iii) Distinctive elements of *Thomas*’ soteriology diverge markedly from the soteriology of the NT Gospels;

(iv) Other aspects of *Thomas* diverge sharply from the theology and practice of Judaism and NT Christianity.

Because *Thomas* is set over against both NT Christianity and Judaism on the crucial issue of soteriology and because it takes such an “uncompromising stance toward its rivals”, it seems highly unlikely that its author intended his/her readers to understand its cryptic sayings/parables through reference to these rivals’ scriptures. The author of *Thomas* regarded his Gospel as distinct and superior to the NT Gospels in soteriological value, and so when drawing on them deliberately alters and obscures their central message, seeking to point away from the biblical texts (rather than to them), to an alternative soteriological path. In view of this, it seems to me that

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190 See Nicholas Perrin, *Thomas*, 107-124: *Thomas* seeks to “undermine the proto-orthodox…claim to ecclesiological and hermeneutical authority”. Even allowing for Perrin’s thesis being in part reliant on Syrian origins for *Thomas*, his general point is well substantiated. Similarly Meier, *Marginal V*, 92: those who would experience the kingdom must reject the teaching of these leaders.


193 This includes *Thomas*: (a) “straightforward disdain” for the OT, and with that for any form of fulfillment or salvation history (e.g. Goodacre, *Thomas*, 188-91; Meier, *Marginal V*, 122; Plish, *Thomas*, 32: lack of OT reference signals that alongside the words of Jesus that *Thomas* records, “no other authoritative testimony can be tolerated”); (b) lack of reference to or concern for, the land, people and history of Israel; (c) lack of reference to “Christ” (e.g. Plish, *Thomas*, 30; Davies, *Thomas*, 81, noting how such references are common even in gnostic literature) and a portrayal of Jesus as a living revealer of truth, without mention of cross or resurrection; and (d) attitude toward fasting, prayer, alms, and sabbath.

194 Gathercole, *Thomas*, 166; similarly Bockmuehl, *Ancient*, 182: *Thomas* “sets out deliberately to present an alternative and in some sense rival account” of the Jesus tradition (italics original). Similarly Gagné, “Structure”, explains how “erotapokritic teaching” in *Thomas* (esp in 49-54) functions to build/reinforce the identity of the elect, while simultaneously “constructing another category: that of the false or non-elect” (536-7).

195 See the similar critique in Luttikhutzen, “Hidden”, 542-3, of scholarship claiming to find allusion to Gen 1 in *Thomas*.

196 *Thomas* includes a significant amount of material with parallels in the Synoptics (roughly 50% of *Thomas*), most likely as an “authenticating device” (Goodacre, *Thomas*, 172). The use of Synoptic material served to legitimise and commend new material that was interwoven with the familiar to provide a “quite different voice for Jesus” that was at the same time “plausible enough to sound authentic” (180). Similarly Dunn, *Neither*, 403; Blomberg, “Tradition”, 195.
reference to the OT/NT to interpret Thomas' obscure sayings and parables, leading inevitably to OT/NT concerns and content being imported into Thomas, is unlikely to have been intended.

CONCLUSION

The first three parables examined in this chapter are thoroughly integrated into a narrative or discourse, and speak to circumstances defined in that narrative/discourse. In producing a contextual reading of these parables, I have given particular attention to the interpretive relationship between the Stories and the Plain Speech accompanying them, finding that they collaborate with persuasive intent within a unified dialogue or discourse. Both Story and Plain Speech make an essential but dependent contribution, being reliant on each other for the actualisation of a shared rhetorical purpose. I have shown that this relationship can be a dialogical one, where Story and Plain Speech mutually inform, and in doing so generate new meaning in order to alter an audience’s perception of the Underlying Circumstance. The Broken Jar, a parable located in relative literary isolation, also illustrates the dependency of the genre, since the absence of accompanying textual signals frustrates the quest for a contextual reading.

In this chapter I have also shown how a parable, as first interpreted contextually, may then makes its own contribution to the wider theology and/or narrative of the text in which it is situated. This is in contrast to a parable only illustrating or commending what is already known, as may easily occur when a parable is read without reference to contextual signals.

In the following chapter I evaluate my readings of these four parables in more detail and this analysis informs the development of a proposed methodology for reading the NT parables contextually.
Chapter IV
METHODOLOGY IN PARABLE INTERPRETATION

People set their defences against direct communication and learn to conform its message to the channels of their understanding of reality. Indirect communication finds a way in a back window and confronts what one thinks is reality. Parables are indirect communication… that enable us (or force us) to see in a fresh manner… - Snodgrass

When you’re telling a story, you can suggest things that would get you in trouble if you were just stating your own opinion… inside the [story] you can put the most provoking and mutinous truths. Because the tale is far removed from you… [The narrator wraps] up morsels of truth in a confection of tales… hoping that in time those truths wouldn’t seem mutinous anymore - just true.

- Fletcher

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1 Snodgrass, Stories, 8.

2 Fletcher, Shadow, 4; italics original. Cf. her example of stories told to a Sultan, involving various female characters, in an attempt to renew his view of women following betrayal by his wife (111-112). Through these stories, the narrator was “enlarging his view of the world. Giving his bitter, cramped soul room to grow. Making him… human again” (112; italics original).
Introduction

In Chapter III, I examined four parables from outside the NT. One had only weak links to its literary context (the Broken Jar). The other three - the Widow and her Fratricide; the Eagles, the Cedar and the Vine; the Sea Captains - were thoroughly integrated into their immediate literary contexts, suggesting a contextual reading was anticipated. The literary arrangement of these three parables combines three textual elements:

1. A parabolic Story: of a widow and her two sons; of two eagles, a cedar and a vine; of sea captains amidst a great storm.
2. Accompanying Plain Speech: dialogue and shrewd appeal (the Widow and her Fratricide); prophetic interrogation and proclamation (the Eagles, the Cedar and the Vine); rhetorical questions and theological reflection (the Sea Captains).
3. The Underlying Circumstance to which the Story speaks: Absalom’s exile; Zedekiah’s treachery and associated events in Israel’s history; wealthy and powerful sinners, secure and righteous in their own eyes.

A contextual reading of these parables involved an exploration of the literary relationship between the three textual elements, to establish the interpretive significance of their having been placed in literary proximity to each other.

In this chapter I propose a methodology for reading parables contextually. In developing this methodology I draw on insights from Chapter III. I also dialogue with ancient and modern parable scholarship, and with literature on ancient fables (see Excursus below), as a means of testing and refining the conclusions drawn from my analysis in the prior chapter. My methodology includes a model that seeks to illuminate the rhetorical dynamics associated with the use of a parable within a particular set of circumstances, with the aim of further understanding the rhetorical efficacy of the parables (Section I). In this chapter I also discuss structure and sequence in interpretive practice, and outline my intended approach in regard to various methodological issues that inevitably arise when reading parables contextually (Section II). And I provide definitions of some key terms, giving further shape to my interpretive objectives and proposed methodology (Section III).

These three parables will be my main focus in this chapter given my interest in reading parables contextually. I refer to the Broken Jar at times by way of comparison, given its relatively weak links to its literary context.
Section I: MODELLING THE PARABOLIC PROCESS

Introduction

A contextual reading of a parable must typically recognise that it is told in relation to particular circumstances (described in the parable’s immediately literary context), has associated rhetorical aims, and employs particular rhetorical strategies to achieve those aims. In modelling what I have called the "Parabolic Process" (Figure 1 below), I am seeking to identify the rhetorical purpose of individual parables of Jesus, with reference to the circumstances of their telling (as described by the NT Gospels) and the Plain Speech elements that accompany them (in their Gospel arrangement). I am also seeking to illuminate the rhetorical strategies by which the parables seek to achieve their intended aims (in relation to their Gospel narrative circumstances and audience), and that give the parables their heightened persuasive force and affective power.

Figure I: The Parabolic Process

Significant features of the model are discussed in detail below. To summarise. The model recognises that a parable may speak to a particular situation (the Underlying Circumstance). The Story moves the audience away from the Underlying Circumstance and into the world of the Story (creating Distance), even while a connection between the two is signalled by corresponding elements in Story and Underlying Circumstance and often by accompanying Plain Speech (retaining Proximity). The purpose of this movement is to create opportunity, within the familiar and unthreatening world of the Story, for an audience to perceive the Underlying Circumstance in new ways (a New Perspective). This New Perspective is formed through an interpretive dialogue between Story and accompanying Plain Speech. The Story typically commends itself to an audience as a valid means of understanding the Underlying Circumstance on account of analogous motifs, linguistic parallels and stock imagery (giving Connectedness), while unexpected
and unfamiliar elements of the Story (creating “Difference” between Story and Underlying Circumstance) come to bear to alter audience perceptions concerning the Underlying Circumstance. Plain Speech further informs and develops this imagery (even while being informed by it) in relation to the Underlying Circumstance, and may explicitly bring this New Perspective to bear on the Underlying Circumstance in particular ways (Reinvolvement).

**Excursus: Parables and Fables**

In developing my model of the Parabitalic Process (below), I engage at times with literature on fables. My concern in doing so is not with literary/historical dependency, or with how the fables might inform interpretation of individual NT parables. Rather, I recognise that parable and fable are literary forms having many similarities and able to function in a similar way when used in a particular literary or rhetorical context.

Comparison of parables and fables has been hampered by the difficulty of formulating precise definitions for each, though in general a high level of similarity is recognised. Van Dijk makes important distinctions between fables and other related forms of literature, having regard to fables’ (past) tense, metaphorical and fictitious nature, and their “graphical” nature, but finds that “a fundamental difference between fable and parable does not exist”. Aristotle sees both parables and fables as forms of rhetorical proof, designating them παράδειγμα (examples), and noting their distinction from historical παράδειγμα in that they are both fictitious. Vouga argued parable and fable both concern “menschliche Existenz als existentiale Wirklichkeit: die vita ipsa”, have an “aufklärerischen und didaktischen” function, and aim bring about a “Veränderung des Lebens”. Zimmermann argues that “parables and fables are fictional and metaphorical, appeal for response (rhetorical function), and are contextual”. Distinguishing fables from parables on the grounds of the subject to which they ultimately speak is difficult as the subjects of both vary considerably. Van Dijk’s comprehensive study of the function of fables in ancient literature (but outside the anthologies), demonstrates how fables, like the NT parables, make a rhetorical or

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4 The Synoptic authors may well have known the fables (e.g. Reece, “Aesop”; noting several sayings Matt/Luke share with Aesop), though this is not necessary to justify my examination of the dynamics of a similar genre. Reece rightly critiques other studies positing connections between the fables and the Synoptics, where similarities in vocabulary are slight, and reliance is placed on “common themes, situations, customs etc, that are universal in nature and do not require an assumption of a genetic connection between the texts” (370).

5 van Dijk, *Fables*, 36.

6 van Dijk, *Fables*, 36.


8 Vouga, “Formgeschichtliche”, 187 (see the discussion at 175-9).

9 Zimmermann, “Fable”, 650.

10 See e.g. Beavis, “Parable”, 478-81.
didactic contribution within their literary contexts. Snodgrass observes that Greco-Roman fables “closest to Jesus’ parables are from Philosophers or others confronting people for their failures, an obvious kinship with the prophetic use of parables in the OT and by Jesus”.

Despite these similarities, there are differences between the two. Aristotle’s examples suggest parables in general contain a higher level of verisimilitude than the fables. Parables generally involve known, typical, often realistic, and at least possible, actions of persons, while fables narrate behaviour of people, animals and plants that may be unusual or naturally impossible. Also, the Distance between narrative world and Underlying Circumstance is generally greater for fables than for parables. This means that fables may be more obviously analogous to the Underlying Circumstance and yet still retain Distance as the Parabolic Process requires.

What is important for my study is that parable and fable are both fictitious narratives, both forms of indirect communication able to serve rhetorical or didactic aims, and that both contribute to these aims through similar communicative strategies. Both may create Distance for an audience from circumstances, so as to develop a new perspective on those circumstances, with a view to altering audience behaviour. Thus my interest in fables is limited to the *modus operandi* of this similar literary/rhetorical form, the essential process by which fables achieve their literary or rhetorical aims.

**Distance**

All four parables in the previous chapter speak to an Underlying Circumstance, but from a Distance and indirectly. Distance is signalled by the Stories’ placement in contexts having a particular

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11 On the rhetorical/literary function of ancient fables (in summary) see van Dijk, *Fables*, 376-8; also similarly Steiner, “Fables”: some of the earliest Greek fables functioned as “competitive devices deployed by performers within agonistic situations: they are rhetorical strategies…” with definable rhetorical aims (1-2).


13 See the assessment of Aristotle’s definitions in Kurke, *Aesopic*, 196, 257, who argues Aristotle also saw fables as an inferior form of rhetorical proof to other ἐπιθέσεις.

14 So Zimmermann, “Fable”, 650: “fables present anthropomorphised animals, plants and objects”.

15 Cf. Gerhardsson, “Frames”, 332 on how the predominance of humans and human relations in parables means “the distance between picture and matter” is [comparatively] very small.

16 There are two reasons for this: (i) in general animals and plants stand at a greater Distance from the subject to which a fable speaks (than is possible with parables), so that compensating factors giving Proximity, such as analogous elements, can be greater without frustrating the Parabolic Process; and (ii) because the fables have less concern with verisimilitude (compared to fables), their plots can be designed to fit more closely the reality to which they speak.

17 See further, Berger, “Hellenistische”, 1116-20 on similarities and differences between fables and parables. The important differences he identifies (1118-9) have mostly to do with form, content and ultimate meaning, rather than with the rhetorical function of the two (my main concern here).

18 Zimmermann “Rhetoric”, 255 rightly warns against looking for “monolinear historical dependencies” and against a “simple transferral of rhetorical classifications” to the NT texts (258). One of the points of difference between some classical uses of παράβολή and NT use is that the NT applies the term to a wide range of literary forms (similar to - and perhaps following the lead of - the OT use of מָשָׁל). Thus Schipper, *Parables*, 14, understanding παράβολή to have a similar meaning to מָשָׁל, regards the fable as a subset of παράβολή.
narrative/rhetorical concern (the Underlying Circumstance) that differs from the subject matter of the Stories themselves. While the Tekoite’s story concerns fratricide, she speaks of herself and her own sons, not of David, Absalom and Amnon. Ezekiel’s eagles, cedar and vines are a world away from the historical situation of the Babylonian exiles.\textsuperscript{19} Enoch’s audience are not sea captains and are not in the midst of a literal storm. The Jesus of the gospel of \textit{Thomas} is not ultimately concerned with the fictitious experience of a woman carrying meal (judging by the purpose of the wider gospel). The Stories represent a departure from the Underlying Circumstance, a movement away from speaking directly to the situation at hand, so as to address it indirectly.

Distance contributes to the parabolic process by drawing the audience away from the (often rigidly held) paradigms and perceptions by which they understand the Underlying Circumstance. The world of the Story facilitates an intellectual departure to narrative terrain where intellectual inquiry is possible without the immediacy of the circumstances at hand (with their social dynamics, risks and tensions) and the associated paradigms and commitments (in regard to those circumstances), that constrain an audience’s judgment and place limits on thought and speech. The comparative intellectual and emotional freedom of Story means an audience may explore ideas and contemplate perspectives that would be unacceptable if presented directly, thus triggering well rehearsed defensive thought patterns. For example, David is able to contemplate possibilities for the fictitious widow and her son that he has evidently not been able to fully reconcile himself to in relation to Absalom. Distance is the crucial beginning of the Parabolic Process, in which the Story “gets past the garrison of resident assumptions, the mind’s defences… [it] is a tactical manoeuvre to prompt new thinking”\textsuperscript{20}.

The concept of Distance is recognised in scholarship. Aristotle recommends use of parables because “people will more readily admit what is proposed for some other purpose and is not useful for its own sake”.\textsuperscript{21} Quintilian, exploring the mechanics of judicial argument writes of how proof can be provided for a case “from without” (\textit{extrinsecus}),\textsuperscript{22} or we might say, from a Distance. It is the magnitude of the parables’ Distance from the subjects to which they relate that distinguishes the genre from other forms of \textit{παράδειγμα}; it is “apt to compare things whose resemblance is far

\textsuperscript{19} See Blackham, \textit{Fables}, 202-5, surveying ancient and modern fables, on how “extraction of behaviour from the human context by the use of animal agents has been one main method of abstraction practised in the fable” (205). His concept of “abstraction” coheres with my concept of Distance.

\textsuperscript{20} Blackham, \textit{Fables}, xi, regarding fables, but apt for parables as well. Discussing the Widow and her Fratricide, see similarly Camp, “Wise Woman”, 21-2 on the importance of “distancing” for a person to come to a new perspective on a situation close to them; Schökel, “la mujer”, 200: the story facilitates a view from outside, at a suitable distance (“a la distancia conveniente”); also Kruschitz, “2 Samuel”, 255: a parable “disarmingly draws the listener’s attention away from himself even as it lures him into the story”.


\textsuperscript{22} Quintilian, \textit{Institution}, V.xi.1.
from obvious”. The use of animals in the ancient Indian fables of Bidpai “has the effect of distancing the story from history and from contemporary life”; so as to “set up another point of view and frame of reference”. The “distancing metaphorical language” of fables means they “can be more direct, more persuasive than other more literal modes of speech”. Iser observes how in literary fiction, a reader can “step out of his own world and get into another”, where he can “experience things that would be otherwise inaccessible” because of the freedom to do so “without being involved in any consequences whatsoever”. Brock and Green demonstrate through psychological experimentation that a narrative’s effect on readers’ beliefs is greatest where readers experience high levels of “transportation” or “absorption into a Story”, resulting in a “subjective distancing from reality”. Snodgrass observes how a “good parable creates distance...by creating distance it gives the hearer/reader space to reconsider; one has no sense of needing to defend one’s turf.”

The extent of Distance between Story and Underlying Circumstance varies between parables. For example, in Snodgrass’ classification system, “Juridical Parables” work by “hiding their referent”, while in contrast “Single Indirect Parables” are “about the subjects they narrate”. Having regard to Distance alone, I suggest we do not so much find distinct categories of parable, so much as a “Spectrum of Distance” (my term), with parables at various places along that spectrum. The Widow and Her Fratricide is (by Snodgrass’ classification system) a Single Indirect

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23 Quintilian, *Institutio*, V.xi.23; παράδειγμα is his generic term for comparative exemplum (see V.xi.1-2 ).
26 Irwin, “Review”, 172.
27 Iser, “Indeterminacy”, 44.
28 Brock and Green, “Role”, 701: “transportation” is defined as “a convergent process, where all mental systems and capacities become focused on events occurring in the narrative” (701).
29 Brock and Green, “Role”, 702; the “traveler goes some distance from his or her world of origin” (701; citing Gerrig, R.J. *Experiencing Narrative Worlds*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993, 10-11). The rhetorical power of transportation is a function of the following: (i) a reader “may be less aware of real-world facts that contradict assertions made in the narrative”, so that “negative cognitive responding” is reduced (702); (ii) for the reader, “narrative experience [may] seem more like real experience”, which may for example “enable mimicry of [narrative] experience” (702); (iii) a reader may experience “strong feelings toward story characters” so that the “experiences or beliefs of those characters may then have enhanced influence on readers' beliefs” (702).
31 Snodgrass, *Stories*, 21-2 provides the important insight that parables “have varying levels of opacity”, with some being “diaphanous”, where the audience “knows easily a story is a lens, and the reality it shows is obvious from the first”, while others are “surreptitious; they do not reveal their target until self-incriminating judgments have been made”. See also Gerhardsson, “Frames”, 333 on how “the distance between picture and matter” varies between various motifs of a parable.
Narrative parable, concerned with the same underlying subject (fratricide and its consequences).\textsuperscript{33} The Eagles, the Cedar and the Vine is at the other end of the spectrum, its fable-like world of animals and plants creating considerable Distance from the historical circumstances of the Jewish exiles.\textsuperscript{34}

**Proximity and Connectedness**

Where a Story is situated on the Spectrum of Distance partially depends on the presence or absence of factors which mitigate Distance. In the Parabolic Process, Distance is tempered by what I call “Proximity”. Proximity is established by factors that point to a relationship between Story and Underlying Circumstance, including:\textsuperscript{35} (i) Story and Underlying Circumstance being placed in literary proximity; (ii) the interpretive signals provided by accompanying Plain Speech; (iii) Imagery having an established symbolic referent;\textsuperscript{36} (iv) the presence of conceptual parallels or analogous elements between Story and Underlying Circumstance;\textsuperscript{37} (v) elements of thematic coherence (especially when the Story is set in a discourse) between Story and Underlying Circumstance; and (v) linguistic parallels between Story and Underlying Circumstance.\textsuperscript{38} To illustrate:

1. The Widow and Her Fratricide contains motifs obviously analogous to David’s situation. The woman’s description of the death of her son (14.6) uses the terms נכה (“strike”) and מות. That the Story can act as a parable despite it’s minimal Distance from David’s circumstances is due to the woman’s disguise and drama. This also means only a brief and indirect allusion to Absalom (2 Sam 14.13: as the one David has not brought back) is required to bring the story to bear on David’s own affairs. See the observation of Polzin, David, 142: Nathan’s story in 2 Sam 12 is “further removed from David’s adultery than the [Tekoite] woman’s situation of mourning is from David’s”.

34 Similarly the Rich Fool is (at least in part) concerned directly with the subject it narrates - the abundance of wealth. At the other end of the spectrum, the narrative world of the Wheat and the Weeds is clearly at some Distance from those aspects of the kingdom of God to which it speaks.

On how fables are related to their contexts see van Dijk, “Lion”, 378n15: verbal parallels, explicit comparison, continuity of imagery, and word-play; similarly van Dijk, Fables, 370-1: analogy may be signalled by explicit indication; linguistic signals (assonance, alliteration), promythium or epimythium, or by verbal parallels.

Cf. similarly how in the fables some characters are automatically associated with the gods, persons or professions (van Dijk, Fables, 372).

For a NT example, consider the literary arrangement of the Unrighteous Manager Who Acted Wisely. There is no obvious literary break between the parable and the sayings that follow (Luke 16.8b-13), suggesting a literary and interpretive relationship between the two. I suggest that these sayings play an important role in giving definition to the subject(s) to which this parable speaks (its Underlying Circumstance). What points strongly in this direction is that central elements of the sayings are analogous to central motifs of the parable: (i) 16.12: ἐν τῷ ἀλλοτρίῳ πιστός evokes the duty of the steward for his master’s affairs; (ii) 16.12: the link between present behaviour and future lot (if [now]…then [later]) is also central to the story’s plot, and evokes the steward’s inner dialogue concerning the need for present action to secure a good future for himself (16.3-4); (iii) 16.13: conflicting loyalties evoke how the steward must choose between his master’s financial interests and his own plan for the future; (iv) 16.9: ἐξουσίας ποιήσας φίλους ἐκ τοῦ μαμωνά τῆς δόξιας, ἵνα ὅσιον ἐκλίπη δέξωνται ὑμᾶς εἰς τὸς οἰωνίου σκηνῆς evokes the steward’s discounting his master’s bills to secure a future for himself in others’ homes. These parallels suggest the parable concerns the use of wealth in the present time, in light of the dawning of the eschatological age. Cf. van Dijk, Fables, 270-3; van Dijk, “Function”, 527, 534 for examples of parallels between various fables and the narratives in which they feature.

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38 See van Dijk, “Lion”, 377-8 on the fable of the Lion and the Goat, in Procopius’ account of how Eusebius successfully persuades the Persian king Perozes to cease pursuing the Huns (Procopius, History of the Wars, 1.1.13). ‘Obvious verbal parallels’ connect motifs of the fable to persons and events within the surrounding narrative, so that “the message of the fable is clear”. See van Dijk, “Function”, 528, 535 for other examples of verbal parallels.
terms that also feature in Absalom’s command to his servants regarding Amnon (2 Sam 13.28), a striking linguistic parallel connecting the two events. Following the Story’s conclusion, the Tekoite refers directly to David’s banished son (2 Sam 14.13).

2. Tightly integrated into a unified prophetic oracle concerning Israel’s present situation, Ezekiel’s parable is linked to Israel’s recent history and present circumstances by a combination of: (i) the Story’s Stock Imagery (cedar; eagle; vine); (ii) elements of the Story being analogous to aspects of Israel’s recent history; (iii) the allusion to Babylon (Ez 17.4); (iv) the use of שלח to describe both the vine sending out roots (Ez 17.7) and the sending of envoys (17.15); and (v) the similar rhetorical questions that follow the parable (17.10a: הֲתִצְלָח and the historical account (17.15b: הֲיִצְלָח).

3. The Sea Captains is linked to the surrounding discourse by: (i) the vulnerability and trouble experienced by the sailors is analogous to the vulnerability of sinners before the judgment anticipated for them, a connection strengthened by the fact that this judgment will at times involve the hand of nature (e.g. 100.11-12; 101.1-3); (ii) the linguistic/conceptual parallel between the fear of the sailors and references to fear (or not) throughout the discourse (100.1,3,7,9; 102.2,4); and (iii) the way subsequent Plain Speech explicitly connects the Story to the conduct and lot of sinners.

Proximity helps establish the identity of the Underlying Circumstance to which a Story speaks. Proximity includes elements of “Connectedness” between the Story itself and the Underlying Circumstance. The Story is in some way like, or similar to, or coherent with, or opposite to, or lesser/greater than, or otherwise stands in some discernible relationship to, the Underlying Circumstance. This Connectedness plays an important role in commending the Story to the audience as a valid interpretation, or representation, of the Underlying Circumstance.

My proposal is that similar dynamics of Distance and Proximity may be identified when reading the NT parables in relation to the (Gospel) narrative circumstances to which they speak. For example, the Wedding Banquet stands at some Distance from Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem and his subsequent interaction with the Jerusalem elite, the narrative context of the parable (no banquet fit for a king has been organised in Jerusalem). However, Distance is mitigated by factors that link the Story to its surrounding narrative: (i) the introductory formula (Matt 22.2) signals that this parable speaks in some way of the reign of God, with which the Matthean Jesus’ ministry is closely associated; (ii) the Story concerns a king’s son (22.2), linking it to one hailed as “Son of David” in

39 The terms feature again in the clan’s words to the woman (14.7).

40 On the judgment coming upon the wicked in the discourse in which the parable is set, see 99.1-7; 99.11-100.3; 100.7-9; 102.1-3.

41 In my terminology, “Connectedness” refers to correspondences or other links between the Story itself and the Underlying Circumstances, while “Proximity” is a term referring to a wider range of factors that connect the two, including Plain Speech signals. Thus Connectedness is constituted by a subset of the factors giving Proximity.
the prior narrative (21.9,15); (iii) the Story’s “king” motif (given its established Jewish symbolism\(^{42}\)), suggests the parable in some way concerns God (or God’s Messiah) and his people;\(^{43}\) and (iv) there are linguistic and thematic parallels between this parable and the Wicked Tenants, which we are explicitly told concerns the (loss of) place of the Jerusalem elite in the kingdom of God (21.43-45);\(^{44}\)

**Difference**

Distance between Story and Underlying Circumstance is (in part only) created by elements of “Difference”. Difference arises where motifs of a Story have no analogous counterpart in the Underlying Circumstance or differ from aspects of the underlying Circumstance (especially as it is understood by the audience). These elements of Difference often make an essential contribution in the process of a Story developing a new perspective on the Underlying Circumstance. In the previous chapter I argued that the Tekoite exploits elements of Difference between her Story and David’s own situation to theologically reframe Absalom’s exile. The (potential) tragic consequences of clan justice for the fratricide’s family (a widow without sons, her husband without a name in Israel, the family with no claim to the ancestral estate) have no real parallel in David’s situation (he has other sons). These elements of Difference help the Tekoite portray Absalom’s exile as detrimental to Israel and out of step with the divine will, thus arguing strongly for Absalom’s return.\(^{45}\)

Examination of the role of Difference will inform my analysis of NT parables. Apparent discrepancies between a Story and Underlying Circumstance have been seen (by some) to bring into question the authenticity and literary coherence of the NT Gospels’ literary arrangement of

\(^{42}\) On God as King imagery in the OT see e.g. Stovell, *Mapping*, 73-133; also Payne, “Jesus”, 17: “King’ is one of the most common symbols for God in the OT and is probably the major figure for God in rabbinc parables” (see 23 for references); “it is also a common symbol for the Messiah” (see 17n26 for references). On royal messianic expectations, see N.T. Wright, *New*, 310-20.

\(^{43}\) Also, this imagery further links the Story to the royal imagery of the prior narrative (21.5,9,15).

\(^{44}\) On the interpretive significance of the Wedding Banquet being placed immediately after the Murderous Tenants in Matthew, see the discussion of parables in collations, in Chapter VII.

\(^{45}\) A further OT example: in Nathan’s parable (2 Sam 12.1-12), elements of Difference between the Story and David’s situation (for details see e.g. Berman, “Double”, 2-3; Coats, “Parable”, 369) make a similar contribution. The Story includes the motif of ancient hospitality; the lamb is killed and prepared to entertain a visitor (2 Sam 12.4), an element having no parallel in David’s circumstance. This Difference may be merely narrative detail, providing a rationale for why the rich man required a lamb. But in my view it is more likely a deliberate point of Difference, designed to highlight, by arguing from the lesser to the greater (cf. Simon, “Poor Man’s”, 224), the even more heinous nature of David’s crime, for which there was no rationale beyond his own covetousness. Also the rich man does not kill a person. This feature may be part of what gives the story sufficient Distance from David’s recent actions to act as a parable. But it is also a point of substantial Difference, so that David’s angry response to the rich man’s comparatively minor (fictitious) crime makes Nathan’s indictment of David all the more devastating.
their parables. My proposal is that elements of Difference are actually a crucial element in a parable's design, sometimes picked up and explored by accompanying Plain Speech, to shape a new perspective or theological understanding for the audience. For example, the Great Banquet (Luke 14.15-24) follows a guest's statement that describes those who eat in the kingdom of God as μακάριος (14.15), so that entry to the kingdom is characterised as highly desirable. Jesus' parable uses imagery that evokes eschatological feasting, but then portrays invitations being rejected, and people being compelled to enter (14.23). Joining the feast appears far from desirable, and those who do enter - the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame (14.21) - are not considered "blessed" by the values of this age (14.21). This Difference helps reframe the readers' perspective of what it means to enter the kingdom in the present age, of who are most likely to do so, and of what it truly means to be blessed.

**Story and Plain Speech: Putting a New Face on the Matter**

At the heart of the Parabolic Process is an interpretive relationship between Story and associated Plain Speech. My proposal is that Story and Plain Speech have the potential to collaborate, in a dialogical and mutually informing way, to establish a new perspective for the audience on the Underlying Circumstance. This potential is evident in the parables considered in the previous chapter:

46 See e.g. Tolbert, *Perspectives*, 54: "These very discrepancies [between parables stories and Gospel settings and summaries], in fact, were one of the reasons scholars began to suspect that the gospel settings of the parables were secondary additions"; also 57. Similarly some scholarship on OT parables identifies elements of Story without analogous elements in the Underlying Circumstance as a rationale for pursuing readings that point away from the circumstances at hand. E.g. Simian-Yofre, "Enigma", 32 identifies several elements in Ezekiel's fable (roots, water, soil, planting) which are not picked up in the subsequent explanation, argues that 17.12-24 does not therefore exhaust the meaning of the story, and on this basis goes on to explore the meaning of these motifs quite independent of their setting. A similar argument is made by Berman, "Double", 1 in relation to 2 Sam 12.1-4, who then proposes an ingenious (but unnecessary) double reading of the parable that connects all its major features of the story to David's murder and adultery. Lyke, *King David*, 13, 25 uses the same point (disparities between the woman's story and the "court narrative") to explain the need for his particular reading of 2 Sam 14.1-20, which imports meaning from other OT passages connected to 2 Sam 14 via use of similar motifs, but at the expense of coherence of 2 Sam 14 (see Chapter III). My argument is that these differences are part of the parable's design, helping alter the way circumstances are seen, and are not intended to open up alternative trajectories of meaning.

47 Cf. similarly van Dijk, *Fables*, 122, on the importance in reading ancient fables of understanding the “function of possible incongruities between fable and context”; Kreglinger, *Storied*, 21-2 (for a related genre) on how metaphors rely on “a certain amount of dissimilarity in order to be able to advance meaning and not collapse into mere comparison”.

48 Another example: Central motifs of the parables of Luke 15 correspond strongly to aspects of their narrative setting (15.1-2), commending the parables to the reader as a valid interpretation of the events described there. However, there is also a crucial point of Difference that helps reframe those circumstances. The singular lost sheep, coin and son of the Luke 15 parables (note ἕν (15.4); μία (15.8)) do not correspond precisely to the plural οἱ ταλάντας καὶ οἱ δύομπρολογοι coming to Jesus (15.1), understood in a collective sense by the religious leaders as “sinners” (15.2; on οἱ δύομπρολογοι within the first century Jewish worldview, see Trebilco, *Outsider*, 118-25: οἱ δύομπρολογοι represents a group whose persistent disobedience of the law mean they were regarded as “outsiders in the opinion of all” (124); the label had become a term associated with a “process of social categorisation and... stereotyping” (125)). This important point of Difference, picked up - and thus given emphasis - in accompanying Plain Speech (see 15.7,10: Εἴς άδημπρολογο); is, I suggest, designed to reframe how Jesus' audience perceive Jesus' table companions. The parables seek to point the religious elite away from the fixed and damning socio-religious category of "sinners", to the open and unfolding journeys of individuals finding forgiveness and redemption in the ministry of Jesus.
1. The Tekoite woman portrays David, in leaving Absalom in exile, as out of step with Yahweh and no longer acting in the interests of Israel. Her Story plays a crucial role in developing this perspective by setting the demands of “justice” (the death of the fratricide) and the need to maintain a family’s name within Israel, over against each other. However, the Tekoite is unwilling to rest her case on the strength of her Story. In subsequent Plain Speech she insists that David’s situation is analogous to her own (fictitious) circumstances, so as to argue that David has acted against the national interest. Evoking imagery from the Story she also argues that Yahweh desires Absalom’s return from exile, thus attributing divine sanction to her request.

2. Ezekiel portrays Zedekiah’s alliance with Egypt as rebellion against Yahweh and directly responsible for the city’s coming destruction. The Story’s metaphorical world, with its rich imagery, facilitates and informs a reading of Zedekiah’s actions (developed in the Plain Speech that follows) that combines history and theology and explores the relationship between the two. Plain Speech makes its own essential contribution, explicitly connecting the Story to past (and anticipated) events; its denunciation of Zedekiah’s rebellion as a rebellion against Yahweh is a point the Story reinforces but cannot make explicit of itself. Story and Plain Speech are then interwoven poetically to anticipate a future for the exiles.

3. Enoch’s oracle portrays sinners as out of synch with the order and obedience creation displays toward God, and having departed from the wisdom God has given to all creatures (including humans). The Story makes its own contribution to the oracle, with its dramatic and rhetorically affective portrayal of sea captains terrified amidst a storm. Plain Speech draws heavily on this imagery, but develops it beyond the world of the Story to establish a creation theology depicting the sea and the sea captains as examples of the obedient fear of God, that sinners are called to practice.

These examples illustrate the potential for Story and Plain Speech to interact in a dialogical fashion characterised by mutual dependency and collaboration, so as to provide a new perspective on the Underlying Circumstance. The Story brings its characters, imagery, concepts, events and narrative dynamics alongside the Underlying Situation, but cannot usually bring these to bear on the situation in a particular way. It is here that accompanying Plain Speech usually plays a complementary role. It is notable that none of the Stories in Chapter III, by themselves, are able to give full effect to their (contextual) rhetorical aims. Similarly, accompanying Plain Speech - to varying degrees - evidences dependency on Story. The rhetorical questions that follow Ezekiel and the Tekoite’s Stories are explicitly reliant on the preceding parable for their content and force (and make no sense in isolation). Plain Speech elements following the first three Stories in chapter III

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49 The Widow and her Fratricide is commonly regarded as a “Juridical Parable”, a particular type of parable that calls for the audience to make a judgment which is then readily transferable to their own (analogous) circumstances (see further e.g. Simon, “Poor Man’s”). I have argued in Chapter III that this parable does not function primarily by transfer of judgment from Story to Underlying Circumstance. Rather, the Story’s rhetorical force is grounded in the way it alters David’s perspective on his son’s exile. This is the important link between this parable and other parables, which operate on a similar basis.
incorporate motifs from the Stories, even while developing them beyond the world of the Story. This gives Plain Speech added depth and conceptual sophistication, as well as enhanced rhetorical effectiveness. Also, as Blackham has observed in regard to fables, Story is able to “generate and store new meaning in the conception it represents” (whereas “a general statement relies mainly on established meanings”), so that Story plays an indispensable role in how parables open new horizons of understanding and perception. Thus I am proposing that Story and Plain Speech are dependent upon each other for their full contextual significance, and that a parable’s prophetic or didactic purpose is realised through a dialogical collaboration between the two, in which new meaning and perspective emerge.

The NT parables, as arranged by the Gospel authors, are typically accompanied by Plain Speech. This may take the form of introductory comments, rhetorical questions, dialogue, and/or discourse located in proximity to the parable. The placement of Story and Plain Speech in literary proximity suggests an interpretive relationship was anticipated between the two. In applying my model of the Parabolic Process to NT parables, I will similarly explore the extent to which there can be meaningful and dialogical collaboration between Story and the Plain Speech, so as to open a new perspective on the associated Underlying Circumstance.

Connectedness and Difference
Within the Parabolic Process, a creative tension between Difference and Connectedness informs the interpretive process through which a new perspective is formed and commended to the audience. While the Story is presented, by virtue of its Connectedness, as similar (or in some other way related) to the Underlying Circumstance, it is at the same time importing Difference into the audience’s perception of the Underlying Circumstance, so that it comes to be seen in a new light. The new perspective so developed is commended to the audience on account of the Story’s

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50 Blackham, *Fables*, xii.

51 Contra Gerhardsson, “Narrative”, 348, who described OT narrative mēšālīm as “preceding fanfare” to a prophetic oracle, having only a “temporal and instrumental function”, engaging the listener and illuminating the issue, before the speaker conveys the message in plain language. My analysis suggests a more complex and interdependent relationship between mēšāl and accompanying Plain Speech, and a more important and integral role for the mēšāl itself.

52 The importance of the Story-Plain Speech relationship is also a reflection of the versatility of the genre. Parables are a flexible rhetorical tool, able to contribute to prophetic proclamation, dialogue and discourse in a variety of ways (as shown in the previous section), making it difficult to generalise as to their function. The situation-specific rhetorical function of a parable usually only becomes clear as Story and Plain Speech are brought into interpretive dialogue. I illustrate this point in some detail in Appendix 1.

53 In Chapter VII I will discuss apparent exceptions to this norm, including parables without frames and parables in collations.
Connectedness, even while altering their perception on account of the Story’s Difference. The Tekoite’s parable shares a central motif (fratricide) with David’s circumstances, but also features other non-analogous motifs that are exploited to alter David’s perception of his circumstances. Ezekiel’s parable begins by depicting the exiles’ recent (hi)story in familiar terms, but then insists that the exiles recognise a conclusion to his (and thus their) story that they have previously been unwilling to contemplate. While the full significance of this creative tension (caused by Connectedness and Difference in the relationship between Story and Underlying Circumstance) is only realised in the collaboration of Story and Plain Speech, the creative interplay of Connectedness and Difference makes its own vital contribution to the formation of new ways of seeing the Underlying Circumstance.

Kreglinger describes a similar dynamic. Parables make use of an “allegorical mode” (connecting Story to Underlying Circumstance) which “creates both familiarity for the reader as well as a structural anchor and imaginative catalyst for the exploration of new territory… [The allegorical mode] establishes the story amidst that which is known to the reader in order then to explore or introduce that which is unknown.” However, at some point the relationship between Story and Underlying Circumstance (thus far at least partially allegorical or comparative) starts “breaking down” unexpectedly. This point of disorientation and surprise is a function of: (i) a “twist or turn in the story that is surprising and breaks in to challenge the norm and say the unexpected”; and/or (ii) a movement from the “allegorical mode” to the “metaphorical mode”, in which elements of the Story (vehicle) and Underlying Circumstance (tenor) are juxtaposed in unexpected ways,

54 See similarly N.T. Wright, Victory, 175 on how Jesus’ parables “are not totally new; their message sounds in some way familiar; yet they tend to have new twists” so that they replace Israel’s prevailing worldview with “one that was closely related but significantly adjusted at every point”; Simon, “Poor Man’s”, 223: “Every parable… is based on a delicate relationship of closeness and remoteness towards the object of its application” (221). Cf. (for related genres) Whitman, Allegory, 2-3 on the interplay between “correspondence” and “divergence” within allegory; TeSelle, Speaking, 48 on the “metaphorical dialectic” where “the familiar… is used to evoke the unfamiliar” and where “the unfamiliar context… in which the familiar is set allows us to see the ordinary in a new way”; Eco, Semiotics, 94 on the importance of “both ‘similarity’ and ‘opposition’, or identity and difference” in Aristotelian metaphor (also Kreglinger, Storied, 21-22; Jüngel, “Metaphorical”, 39, 43). 55 Kreglinger, Storied, 49: “The allegorical mode serves as a bridge to untrodden paths. It is crucial for setting the stage”. 56 Kreglinger, Storied, 50. 57 For what follows see Kreglinger, Storied, 51-4. 58 Kreglinger, Storied, 51. 59 Kreglinger, Storied, 54, Kreglinger understands “metaphor” in parables to refer not only to words but also to “a sentence or a whole narrative structure” (51). What defines them as metaphorical elements is that vehicle (elements of Story) and tenor (Underlying Circumstance) are juxtaposed in surprising ways that lead to the creation of new meaning. In this way the metaphorical is distinguished from the allegorical where the juxtaposition of vehicle and tenor occurs in ways that are familiar and conventional, so that the “points of reference are straightforward and clear” (50-1).
disturbing established paradigms of thought and generating new meaning and perspective.\textsuperscript{60} In this shift from “the allegorical mode to the metaphorical mode… similars and dissimilars are brought into interaction with one another” so that “the parables of Jesus are active in the extension of one’s understanding of the kingdom of God” and can be said to have a “revelatory capacity”.\textsuperscript{61}

Eco makes similar observations concerning Aristotelian metaphor. Metaphors should “be drawn from objects that are related to the object in question” (which is to say there must be Connectedness), “but not obviously related” (which is to say there must be Difference).\textsuperscript{62} He cites as an example pirates having the “gall to call themselves purveyors” on the grounds that they “transport merchandise by seas, as do commercial purveyors” (the point of Connectedness), which is “to select only that one out of all the other properties that were characteristic of pirates” (a statement recognising Difference between vehicle and tenor).\textsuperscript{63} The pirates’ purpose in this “manipulatory” metaphor is to “put themselves before others’ eyes in this perspective and under that particular description” (or to supply others with a new perspective on themselves).\textsuperscript{64}

Excursus: Literary Juxtaposition and the Creation of Meaning in Metaphor and Parable

In Chapter II, I argued that the full didactic and prophetic significance of the parables of Jesus is not established if we regard them only as illustrations of that which is already known (for example, by interpreting them with reference to a theological or historical hypothesis). Rather, I am arguing throughout this thesis for the interpretive potential of reading parables in dialogue with the narrative elements and Plain Speech located in immediate literary proximity to them in their NT Gospel arrangement, and that new meaning and new perspective may emerge from that dialogue. I have found metaphor theory (below) helpful for: (i) explaining how parables not only illustrate what is known but may also create new meaning/perspective; and (ii) illustrating how the grounds of this meaning-generative process is the juxtaposition of ideas, events, symbols and images, so as to create a new and unexpected interpretive relationship between them.

\textsuperscript{60} See Kreglinger, Storied, 51-4. Kreglinger rightly observes that most parables work on the basis of (ii) only, or (i) and (ii) together; that is, they are “parables where the story as such is not surprising but the interaction of the vehicle with the tenor of the metaphor is surprising”, or parables where “the story as such is surprising, but the interaction of the vehicle with the tenor of the metaphor used is surprising as well” (52). She rightly sees that only a small number of “example stories” (51) are parables that are largely non-metaphorical and rely on surprise within the Story alone, as in (i) only. Similarly Funk, Language, 152-62 draws on metaphor theory to argue that Jesus’ parables involve the juxtaposition of the familiar and “vividness or strangeness” (159), “realism” and “hyperbolic aspects” (160). This may take the form of “a surprising development in the narrative, an extravagant exaggeration, a paradox” or it may arise in the “transference of judgment for which the parable calls” (161). However in his interpretive practice Funk is concerned mainly with what occurs within the world of the parabolic narrative. Similar to Funk is McFague, Metaphorical, 43-8, regarding parables as “extended metaphors” (49) and finding “indirection, extravagance, and ordinariness” (44) within the narratives.

\textsuperscript{61} Kreglinger, Storied, 54; italics mine.

\textsuperscript{62} Eco, Semiotics, 103, citing Aristotle, Rhetoric, 1412a11-12. Bracketed phrases are my additions, linking his analysis to the terminology I have used in this chapter.

\textsuperscript{63} Eco, Semiotics, 103; italics original; citing Aristotle, Rhetoric, 1405a25-27.

\textsuperscript{64} Eco, Semiotics, 103; italics original.
The “metaphoric process” according to Wheelwright involves “the double imaginative act” of “outreaching” (epiphor) and “combining” (diaphor). Epiphor is “the outreach and extension of meaning through comparison”, involving “transference” between semantic domains. Diaphor refers to “the creation of new meaning by juxtaposition and synthesis” alone. In the “combination of elements, and by their combination alone”, metaphor conveys “what is not expressed by either of the parts”. “The essential possibility of diaphor lies in the broad ontological fact that new qualities and new meanings can emerge, simply come into being, out of some hitherto ungrouped combination of elements”. Similarly Soskice rejects “Substitution” and “Comparison” theories as inadequate accounts of metaphor, since they fail to recognise “that good metaphor does not merely compare two antecedently similar entities, but enables one to see similarities in what previously had been regarded as dissimilarities”. She proposes an “‘Interanimation’ theory of metaphor”, in which both vehicle and tenor (each having their own “networks of associations”), “conjointly depict and illumine” a single subject. In the “cooperation” of tenor and vehicle (their interanimation), metaphors create “a meaning of more varied powers than can be ascribed to either [tenor or vehicle]”. The benefit of metaphor is not that it provides “a new description of a previously
discerned human condition", but that what is "identified or described is identified and described uniquely by this metaphor". Similarly, Jüngel rejects a traditional understanding of metaphor, where it served only a rhetorical purpose but had "nothing to add" concerning "the 'what' of things". Instead he argues that metaphor involves "a strange word coming up against the word normally used", so that there is a joining together of "distinct and dissimilar horizons of meaning" leading to new insight and a "broadening of perception", to an "expansion of knowledge". The combining of distinct "worlds" within metaphor creates a "hermeneutical tension" in which "linguistic communication between the two worlds" becomes possible. The hearer of the metaphor seeks to "unite" the two worlds, even while "retaining the distinction between them", creating a tension in which "something new is gained". Thus "metaphorical language harmonises in the most exact way the creative potential of language and strict conceptual necessity, bringing together the surprise of linguistic novelty and the familiarity of that which is already known. In this way a gain is always made through metaphor".

These scholars share the view that while metaphor involves a comparative aspect, it also operates by juxtaposing and combining ideas and images in unfamiliar or unexpected ways, and that new meaning emerges in the synthesis of these ideas and images. I am arguing for parables to be understood to function in a conceptually similar way, involving more than comparison and doing more than illustrate what is already known.

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78 Soskice, Metaphor, 48.
79 Soskice, Metaphor, 48. Similarly, Kreglinger recognises that "comparative elements are present" in metaphor, but argues that "the relationship between [tenor and vehicle] must not be reduced to a mere comparison", but will contain elements of both "similarity and dissimilarity" (Kreglinger, Storied, 21). Similarity must be able to be discerned and without it "communication breaks down and the metaphor will not work" (21). Metaphors also rely on "a certain amount of dissimilarity in order to be able to advance meaning"; without dissimilarity they easily "collapse into mere comparison" (21-2). Metaphor "brings into interaction two ideas in a surprising and even subversive way" so that the hearer is 'forced to make new connections and is thereby pressed toward new understanding' (30). (Kreglinger observes that in this way metaphor differs from analogy, which works on 'the basis of convention' (41), involving a "natural and appropriate extension of a word's domain of application" (30); similarly Soskice, Metaphor, 65-6: analogy "from its inception... seems appropriate... a legitimate extension of a word's domain of application" (65), whereas metaphor has to do with 'a figurative 'speaking about' that generates new perspectives' (66)). See further the similar discussion of metaphor in Ricoeur, 'Biblical', 75-80; Crossan, Parables, 10-15; Stovell, Mapping, 44-9, rejecting Lakoff's "conceptual metaphor theory" where "one maps elements from the source domain to the target domain" (45), and proposing instead a "conceptual blending" metaphor theory, where "often something new is created" when two metaphorical domains join "which is not inherent in either... but rather a conceptual projection that extends, elaborates, or completes the existing connection between the two" (45).
80 The understanding associated with the "traditional theory of language" (Jüngel, "Metaphorical", 21).
81 Jüngel, "Metaphorical", 25.
82 Jüngel, "Metaphorical", 43.
83 Jüngel, "Metaphorical", 43.
84 Jüngel, "Metaphorical", 44.
85 Jüngel, "Metaphorical", 42. This may take the form of a "recognition of what is common in different things or similar in dissimilar things... [this is] the real increase in knowledge which metaphor mediates" (44).
86 Jüngel, "Metaphorical", 61.
87 Jüngel, "Metaphorical", 61.
88 Jüngel, "Metaphorical", 40; "the horizon of being is expanded in language".
known. While the Parabolic Process typically involves comparative or analogous elements between Story and Underlying Circumstance, it also recognises contrasting elements between the two and the combining (through literary juxtaposition) of ideas, symbols, imagery and events (from Story, Underlying Circumstance and Plain Speech) in new and unexpected ways. In this juxtaposition and combining new meaning and new perceptions may be created, so that parables - read contextually - may mean more than Story, Underlying Circumstance or Plain Speech mean in themselves. My proposal (to be tested in the following chapters) is that the grounds for this interpretive approach in regard to the parables of Jesus is the literary juxtaposition - within carefully structured units of the NT Gospels - of Story, Plain Speech and narrative elements, signalling the potential for an interpretive approach having similar dynamics to the metaphoric process described above.

A Parable and its Wider Literary Context

I suggested in chapter II that once a parable has been interpreted contextually it may then contribute in its own way to the narrative and/or theology of the wider literary piece of which it is a part. I also suggested that a contextual reading may gain depth and perspective from reference to a text's wider narrative and theological themes. There is some evidence of these things in the parables considered in chapter III. Firstly, a contextual reading gaining depth and perspective. The full consequences of the Widow and Her Fratricide are only seen as the tragic events unleashed by Absalom's return unfold in the subsequent narrative. The Sea Captains' call to sinners to fear God is given added urgency and import by the warnings of imminent eschatological judgment throughout the Epistle. The judgment coming to Jerusalem, explained in Ez 17 with reference to Zedekiah rebellion, is given broader justification with reference to the wider catalogue of Israel's sins profiled in Ez 1-24.

Secondly, the parable's own contribution. The Eagles, the Cedar and the Vine, understood contextually, makes a unique contribution within Ezekiel's early ministry among the exiles in its exploration of the historical and theological realities associated with Zedekiah's rebellion (as the basis for the judgment coming upon Jerusalem). The parable also contains the most rhetorically forceful appeal to the exiles (in Ez 1-24) to stand apart from Jerusalem and the wickedness it symbolises in order to secure a future for Israel. The Sea Captains, understood contextually as a direct appeal to sinners, qualifies the many proclamations of judgment throughout the Epistle, holding open a door for sinners' repentance that otherwise largely appears closed.

In the chapters that follow I will examine whether a contextual reading of Synoptic parables, bringing Story, Plain Speech and Underlying Circumstance into interpretive dialogue, similarly

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89 Equally importantly, the role of the parable, as precipitating events associated with divine punishment of David's sin, is more fully understood with reference to 2 Sam 12.10.
enables these parables to subsequently enrich and develop their Gospels’ wider theology and narrative, and to gain depth and perspective in return.

The Broken Jar, comparatively isolated at a literary level, provides a helpful contrast, illustrating what happens when parables are not, or cannot be, read contextually. In contemporary scholarship the parable adds little to the theology of Thomas, often functioning only to illustrate what is known from elsewhere in Thomas, or as a conduit for ideas from other literature. I have argued that this approach may also undermine or obscure the contextual significance of a parable. For example, reading the Broken Jar with reference to Biblical passages may well invest it with soteriology that is foreign to Thomas. My methodology is sequenced to avoid this occurring (see further below).

Section II: OTHER ASPECTS OF THEORY AND PRACTICE

In this section I discuss some important theoretical and practical issues in parable interpretation that have not been addressed so far, seeking to be as comprehensive and as transparent as possible concerning the methodological choices that will inform my interpretive practice. Throughout this section I dialogue with various parable scholars, seeking to further situate my methodology in relation to wider scholarship.

A Narrative-Critical Approach

My readings of six NT parables (Chapters V and VI) examine these parables in their literary form, as components of the individual Gospels in which they have come to us, and with reference to their literary arrangement within those Gospels. As such, my methodology is situated within the board category of Literary Criticism. While recognising the importance of inquiry into the origins and historical authenticity of individual parables and their contextual data, these questions are not considered in these chapters.

Further examples discussed in detail in the previous chapter: (i) The Sea Captains, considered only in reference to the wider Epistle, might easily have been seen to illustrate the imminent destruction/judgment said to be coming to wealthy sinners. Such a reading not only limits the parable to an illustrative role, but also has the potential to obscure the Sea Captain’s contextual importance; (ii) As shown in Lyke’s study of the Widow and Her Fratricide, reading this parable primarily with reference to OT passages having similar motifs can obscure the contextual function of the parable, and even introduce dissonance between the parable and its literary context.

For similar limitations to other Literary Critical studies of the parables, see e.g. Tolbert, Sowing, 81; Tannehill, Narrative, 6; Oppong-Kumi, Matthew, 13; Zimmermann, Puzzling, 189 (see 76-98 for his wider discussion of the “Memory Paradigm”). I discuss historical questions in general terms in Chapter IX.
More specifically, my readings may be situated within the sub-discipline of Narrative Criticism. I am working on the assumption that the Gospels are carefully structured literary pieces, telling a coherent and unified story. I assume that the parables are deliberately arranged within that story, in relation to narrative settings, events and characters, and that this arrangement is intended to be significant for how the parables are understood by readers. I assume that the parables are intended to contribute in their own way to developing the story each Gospel tells, and to how the whole story is ultimately understood by readers. Further, my assumption is that the parables contribute to a Gospel’s overall rhetorical strategy. In Chapters V and VI, I explore the rhetorical strategies associated within the situational use of individual parables as described in the Gospel narratives, having regard to precipitating narrative circumstances and narrative audiences. In Chapter IX, I make a new proposal concerning the intended rhetorical significance of the Synoptic arrangement of the parables, for ancient and contemporary readers of the Synoptics.

While adopting a Narrative Critical approach, my analysis is thoroughly informed by historical and socio-cultural research, as is the case within some (particularly more recent) Narrative Critical approaches. Socio-historical research informs how I understand the characters and events portrayed in the parable narratives themselves, as well as the narrative circumstances of their telling, and the identity and worldview of their narrative audiences. The case for including socio-historical data in Literary/Narrative Criticism has been made by Merenlahti and Hakola, who rightly argue that in applying these disciplines to non-fictional, biographical narratives, historical data cannot be ignored. Reading conventions mean that in approaching the NT Gospels (recognising their non-fictional nature), “the readers’ questions are by no means restricted to the internal world of the narrative... [readers] will take into account all they know about the relationship of the work to the ‘real’ world... making use of all available information about the events and circumstances of

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92 See Rhoads, “Gospel of Mark”, 411 on Literary Criticism as “a broad field encompassing many approaches to a text” and Narrative Criticism as a “branch of literary criticism” (also Klein, et.al., Introduction, 118-19). Regarding Narrative Criticism, see e.g. Rhoads, “Practices and Prospects”: Narrative Criticism is “(1) the analysis of the storyworld of a narrative and (2) the analysis of its implied rhetorical impact on readers”. Rhoads credits the discipline with having “recovered the text as a story to be experienced” and with the “establishment of the surface narrative of the text as a legitimate object of study” (265). For an overview of Narrative Criticism (concepts, technique and scholarship) as it is applied to NT studies, see e.g. Merenlahti, Poetics (esp 1-111); Merenlahti and Hakola, “Reconceiving”, 13-48; Powell, Narrative; Rhoads, “Practices and Prospects”, 264-85; Rhoads, Reading (esp 1-43); Rhoads, “Gospel of Mark”, 411-34; Rhoads et. al., Mark; Culpepper, Anatomy (esp 1-49); Resseguie, Narrative; Malbon, “Narrative”, 29-57; Klein et. al., Introduction, 118-26; Dinkler, “New”, 203-28.

93 On Rhetorical Criticism and the NT, see e.g. Mitchell, “Rhetorical”, 1-20; Zulick, “Rhetoric”, 125-31; Black, “Rhetorical”, 166-88; Witherington, New, 6-43; Dinkler, “New”, 203-28 (on integrating Rhetorical Critical insights into Narrative Criticism); Lambrecht, “Rhetorical”, 239-253; Watson, “Influence”, 41-61; Kennedy, New (esp 3-38, 97-113); Black, “Kennedy”, 63-80; Robbins, “Rhetorography”, 81-108; Robbins, “Argumentative”, 27-65; Stamps, “Rhetorical”, 219-27; Berger, “Rhetorical”, 390-6; Crafton, “Dancing”, 429-42; Watson, Rhetoric (bibliography to 2005); the essays in Martin, Genealogies (evaluating foundational contributions to the discipline). Rhetorical Criticism includes diverse approaches, and as applied to the NT generally concerns the structure and intended rhetorical effect of longer literary pieces (especially Pauline letters). In general terms I understand the discipline to recognise that authors (and similarly speakers) seek “to convince their readers or change their readers’ perspectives”, and thus to be concerned with “how [authors] encode that persuasive purpose and how readers (from varying contexts) participate in that reality as they read a text” (Mitchell, “Rhetorical”, 3). I see myself drawing discerningly on the insights of Rhetorical Criticism to enrich a more comprehensive Literary-Critical method (cf. the similar point in Lambrecht, “Rhetorical”, 248), rather than seeing the discipline as a complete interpretive approach on its own.

Thus a literary/narrative approach to the NT Gospels need not be “an exclusively text-centred one”, but may take account of “any relevant sociological or historical information that helps to understand the complexity of narrative communication in the Gospels”. However, my methodology departs from conventional Narrative Criticism in one significant way. Conventional Narrative Criticism regards the Gospel narratives as a unified whole, emphasising a Gospel’s total plot, together with broad, narrative-length themes, literary structures and rhetorical design. These things are typically given interpretive priority in Narrative Critical studies, including for reading the parables. Tolbert for example, taking a “literary approach to the Gospel of Mark” adopts “literary procedures that preserve the integrity of the text and use its overall structure as as guide to emphasis and meaning”. Tolbert begins with a “delineation of the rhetorical structure of the Gospel as a whole to determine how the parables… are integrated together into one story”. Her concern is then to demonstrate how “the various parts of the narrative merge together to present a unified, consistent and peculiarly Markan story”. Similarly, Oppong-Kumi, applying Narrative Criticism and Rhetorical Criticism to the Matthean parable collations, regards the Gospel as a “unified whole” so that the interpretive task involves “connecting the parts to the large narrative scheme”. Tannehill’s Narrative Critical study of Luke-Acts has an over-riding concern with “Luke-Acts as a unified narrative”; thus he is “concerned with a text not as an isolated datum but as a functional member of the total narrative”. Thus Narrative Criticism “tends to look for the unifying patterns of a text as the basis for interpretation. Each line is interpreted in the context

95 Merenlahti and Hakola, “Reconceiving”, 39-40. Thus “in order to make sense, non-fictional works need to be seen in [historical] context”.

96 Merenlahti and Hakola, “Reconceiving”, 48. See similarly Schröter, Jesus, 97 on the need to combine the literary presentation of Jesus (in the NT Gospels) with what is otherwise known of the “cultural, religious and social conditions of Palestine” into “an overall picture”; Crafton, “Dancing”, 442 on how “historical criticism” can be put “in the service of the rhetorical approach”; Klein et. al., Introduction, 134-40 (see also the discussion on the application of social-science theories to NT study (140-44)); Zimmermann, Puzzling, 99-103 rightly arguing for the essential contribution of socio-historical research to understanding the parable narratives; Green, Luke, 12 noting the limitations of viewing the Lukan narrative as a “closed system” and insisting on the complementary importance of “an historical method deeply rooted in socio-scientific or culture-critical sensitivities”; Rhoads, “Practices and Prospects”, 268: Narrative Criticism is increasingly drawing on “knowledge of the history, society and cultures of the first century Mediterranean world as a means to help us understand the story better” (italics original). Contra Thurén, Parables, who adopts a "literary and rhetorical" approach (48) but argues that the “information provided by the author suffices for understanding [the parables in their literary context]” (26).

97 Tolbert, Sowing, 81.

98 Tolbert, Sowing, 82; italics added.

99 Tolbert, Sowing, 106; italics added.

100 Tolbert, Sowing, 125; italics added.

101 Oppong-Kumi, Matthean, 18; italics added. Of particular importance in Oppong-Kumi’s larger narrative scheme is his Matthean “Parable Theory” (see 37-68), his argument that the Matthean parables constitute a reaction to people’s varied responses to Jesus’ ministry, depicting those responses and warning the crowds of the consequences of rejecting him (65-6). This theory applies to all the Matthean parables (46). The three main parable collations are “to be seen as one rhetorical unit with a single rhetorical situation; namely, to demonstrate who accepts or rejects Jesus and his message of the dawning Kingdom of Heaven” (30; italics added).

102 Tannehill, Narrative, 3.
of the whole”. Accordingly, in conventional Narrative Criticism, the significance of smaller textual units, such as the parables, is typically established with reference to what can be said about a Gospel as a whole. Typically a range of individual textual elements, including one or more parables, is appealed to in support of a broad theme or to discuss major narrative aspects. The emphasis is on how individual textual elements relate to the whole, and substantiate the whole, rather than on how they relate to each other. A direct consequence of the above approach is that the data placed in immediate literary proximity to the parables makes a less substantial (and often totally inconsequential) contribution to reading the parables.

My methodology in contrast allows the textual segments in immediate literary proximity to a parable to supply the crucial interpretive signals, before discussing the relationship between the parable (as interpreted situationally) and broad, whole-Gospel themes and narrative elements. Ultimately I am still interested in the contribution of individual parables to their Synoptic narratives as a whole. However a contextual reading is the initial interpretive step within my methodology, preceding discussions of the relationship between a parable and the Gospel as a whole. In Chapters V and VI, I test this approach to establish whether it contributes constructively and distinctively to how we understand the function of individual parables and the contribution they may make to their Gospel narratives. Based on my analysis in previous chapters, I would expect my interpretive outcomes to diverge from those of conventional Narrative Criticism in two significant ways.

Finally, there is a tendency in Narrative Criticism for parables to function allegorically. For example, this is explicit in Rhoads’ Narrative Critical study of Mark, where he argues that “a narrative

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103 Rhoads, “Practices and Prospects”, 270. See further Rhoads, “Gospel of Mark”, 412-13: Narrative Criticism involves a shift from the “fragmentation” of “redaction criticism, form criticism, source criticism” to “wholeness” in reading the Gospels, and an “emphasis on the unity of the narrative”.

104 For example, Tannehill, Narrative, 246-8, concerning the Rich Fool, argues the parable speaks to the general circumstances of the disciples as they travel with Jesus toward Jerusalem (246) and discusses its significance with reference to wider Lukan teaching concerning wealth and possessions. The man whose demand prompted the telling of the parable (Luke 12.13) and Jesus’ reply (12.14) are not explored beyond saying that this exchange “permits a shift of topic” within the wider discourse (246). The warning that immediately precedes the parable (Luke 12.15) does not feature in his analysis at all. Oppong-Kumi, Matthean, considering the parables of Matt 13, finds that “Narratively, Mt 13 is the story about the story of its macro context [11.2-16.20] … the story of Israel’s repudiation of Jesus” (131; italics added). There is a “brighter side” regarding the positive response of some to Jesus, which is “clearly seen in the macro context” (131; italics added). The parables’ “micro-context” (72: Matt 12.46-50; 13.54-58), is mentioned only briefly (72-3). The interpretive significance of Jesus’ biological family (who feature in both pericopes) for how we read the parables are noted but ultimately left unexplored (the insightful comments in 73n22 for example are not developed in his subsequent reading of the parable).

105 Significantly, my focus on individual parables’ immediate narrative contexts means that the audience(s) to whom the parables are addressed within the Synoptic narratives become a material factor in how the parables are understood by an Ideal Reader (see below for further explanation). The importance of the narrative audience in my readings is consistent with the emphasis in Narrative Criticism on Characterisation (see further below), but a departure from forms of Narrative Criticism which tend to focus on a more direct relationship between the parables and the Ideal Reader without giving particular attention to narrative audiences. An example is Kingsbury, Matthew, a “literary-critical” study, arguing that the “great speeches” in Matthew (including the parables in Matt 13) contain material that is “without relevance for the characters in the story to whom they are addressed… touch[ing] on matters alien to the immediate situation of the crowds or the disciples” (107). His argument is that these speeches address the IMPLIED Reader directly (109-111), being “well-suited indeed to address the situation of the implied reader” (110). While other Narrative Critical scholars may not go quite so far in dismissing narrative audiences, this audience is given more interpretive significance in my study than is general within conventional Narrative Criticism.
analysis of all the parables in Mark suggests that they are allegories that refer to actions and people and happenings in the past, present and/or future of the story-world”. Tolbert similarly argues that “whatever the parables may or may not have been on the lips of the historical Jesus, for Mark they are primarily allegories”; they are “mimetic narratives... designed to show in concise format the general principles organising the story as a whole”. This approach tends to constrain the parables’ literary function to depicting what is known more concretely from elsewhere in the Gospels. In my interpretive practice I will explore the potential for a contextual reading to afford the parables a more substantive literary role, so that they are not merely portraying analogously what is happening elsewhere, but contributing substantively to the actual development of a Gospel's narrative and theology. As we have seen in this and the previous chapter, parables seldom relate only in an analogous way to their Underlying Circumstance (as that is defined contextually). There is also - as in metaphor - the juxtaposition of elements having no analogous relationship, and sometimes no conventional relationship at all. Thus in reading a parable contextually I recognise a combination of familiar (allegorical) representation and the juxtaposition of the unfamiliar, a combination that is essentially forced by literary proximity of textual elements. It is my proposal that this combination of analogous and unconventional textual elements has the potential to be generative of meaning, so that the parables - having been first read contextually - may contribute in a more substantive way than allegories typically do to enriching and developing a Gospel's wider theology and narrative.

Similarly, I note the tendency within Narrative Criticism to focus on “one or more dominant purposes” as “a principal way of unifying a story”. In practice this means that the parables are

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106 Rhoads, Reading, 21. Similarly Rhoads, et. al., Mark, 56: almost all the parables in Mark “are allegories about the dynamics of the rule of God in the larger story world”.

107 Tolbert, Sowing, 103.

108 Tolbert, Sowing, 125. See similarly dynamics in Tannehill, Narrative, 109-110, where several Lukan parables are understood to portray analogously the "reversal" he sees taking place in Jesus' ministry as depicted throughout the Lukan narrative. The important point is that in this discussion the value of these parables lies in how they depict (allegorically) events from the Lukan narrative; hence they are grouped under a single theme of reversal. I suggest an allegorical understanding of the parables accounts for the lack of attention in Kingsbury, Matthew to parables (especially those with an eschatological focus) that don't obviously have an analogous relationship to either events within the Matthean narrative or the situation and circumstances of Kingsbury's Matthean community (e.g., A Faithful or Unfaithful Slave?, the Ten Virgins or the Hidden Talent do not feature in any material way in Kingsbury's study).

109 In using the word “constrain” I refer to how in general allegories function as illustrations and are less effective in illumination or meaning creation (on the limitations of allegory, see e.g. Kreglinger, Storied, 39-45).

110 The metaphorical dimension of parable interpretation (as discussed earlier in the chapter) depends to a large extent on literary proximity of textual elements. While possible analogous aspects between parable and narrative can be identified without literary proximity between the two (the link is made and substantiated purely on the grounds the two textual elements are analogous), it is less likely for metaphor to inform parable interpretation when a parable is read with reference to a wider narrative, since there is usually nothing to signal the connection between unfamiliar elements of the two. The proximity of textual segments created by literary juxtaposition provides the practical conditions for the metaphorical dimension of parable interpretation.

111 On the literary function of allegory see e.g. Kreglinger, Storied, 40-5, emphasising how it “helps us remember” (43) and also grounds and orients the reader; also Tolbert, Sowing, on the Markan Sower and Murderous Tenants as “plot synopses” (125) and as “guides” for the reader (122); also her argument that their brevity and thus “especially memorable forms” allow an audience to "easily keep them in mind as the overall plot develops and use them to follow the unfolding story” (122).

112 Tannehill, Narrative, 2.
often appealed to (together with other textual elements) as supporting material substantiating broad themes and general narrative aspects. These broad themes play the dominant interpretive role (to use Tannehill’s apt term), especially in relation to an open literary form such as the parables, so that they typically function to illustrate or commend what can be known most concretely with reference to narrative events and direct speech elements. My proposed methodology does not wish to deny the importance of broad themes and whole Gospel narratives for the study of the parables, but qualifies the conventional Narrative Critical approach by suggesting that before the parables are appealed to in support of broad themes and dominant purposes, there is merit in first reading them with reference to their Gospel frames. As discussed in Chapter II, my proposal is that the frames’ often indeterminate and dependent nature allows them to inform a more dialogical interpretive process, not dominating the parables but rather collaborating with them, to establish the significance of a parable within the pericope in which it features. In this initial interpretive step, a parable takes on a more concrete and defined literary form, before I turn to explore its broader narrative significance and contribution to a Gospel as a whole. This initial (contextual) interpretive step is legitimised within a Narrative Critical approach by the strong literary connections between the parables and their Synoptic frames (connections that are linguistic, grammatical and analogous in nature). My proposal is that this approach will allow the parables to contribute more substantively and variously to how we understand wider Gospel themes and narrative developments than is typical where they are put directly in the service of “dominant purposes”.

Sequence and Structure of Interpretive Practice
The application of my model to individual parables requires a certain sequencing to the interpretive process. My analysis of individual parables, as outlined in Table 1, is structured to facilitate this sequencing:

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113 See e.g. the brief appeal to a range of Matthean parables (along with other texts) in support of general themes in Kingsbury, Matthew, 82-3, 151; also Tannehill, Narrative, 109-110; 209; 218-19.

114 For a methodologically typical example of how a chosen theme can dominate in the treatment of an individual parable, see Thomas’ reading of the Matthean Wheat and the Weeds (Thomas, “Wheat”, 149-76; in a festschrift to Robert Tannehill). Thomas regards the parable as “part of the finished form of the Gospel, a unity that cannot be disregarded in the interpretation of any part of the whole” (150). Her understanding of the “whole” centres around the “wisdom Christology” that that she argues is “persuasive” in Matthew and that acts as a “Christological web, the underpinning that holds together the role and identity of Jesus and holds Matthew’s story together” (152). Thus Wisdom language and concepts dominate her reading of the Wheat and the Weeds (163-67).

115 I have modelled this interpretive sequence for the first three case studies in the previous chapter, and will adopt a similar approach in the NT case studies that follow.

116 On this point see Chapters V and VI for individual parables, and Chapter VII for Synoptic parables in general.

117 Closer to my approach is Joel Green’s commentary on Luke, giving interpretive importance to “co-texts”, though this term is defined to mean both “the immediate preceding material” (the “local co-text”) and “the horizons of the narrative as a whole” (Green, Luke, 13). When it comes to reading the parables Green alternates fairly freely between immediate contextual material and wider narrative concerns in deciding the interpretive direction to take. Also, Green is typically concerned to demonstrate how a coherent line of thought is developed between proximate textual elements, rather than to bring textual elements into interpretive dialogue as I have proposed. A similar approach to mine is seen in some “Horizons of Interpretation” in Zimmermann’s recent treatment of the Good Samaritan (Zimmermann, Puzzling, 322-26, which begins “Within the context of Luke 10…” (322)) and the Ten Virgins (382-88, emphasising the literary context of the parable), but he has not treated the parables that feature in Chapters V and VI, and there are other points of difference between Zimmermann’s overall approach and mine which I discuss in Chapter VIII.
Table 1: Structure and Sequence of Interpretive Practice

| Step I: Setting | Analysis of a parable's immediate literary context, usually a mix of narrative and discourse elements:  
|                | - Identify the closest narrative textual segment prior to the parable, informing such things as location, audience(s), precipitating circumstance, etc.  
|                | - Identify thematic concerns immediately prior to the parable.  
|                | - Identify any future circumstances outlined or alluded to in the wider discourse within which a parable is set.  
|                | The above will often be suggestive of a parable's Underlying Circumstance. |

| Step II: Story | Analysis of the Story, identifying and exploring:  
|               | - Socio-historical data informing the world of the Story.  
|               | - Stock Imagery within the Story.  
|               | - Narrative features and structure, and their potential for audience engagement and interaction.  
|               | - Features of a Story that relate in some way (often analogously) to elements of its literary context.  
|               | - Linguistic or thematic links between the Story and other ancient literature. |

| Step III: Significance | The Parabolic Process:  
|                       | - Confirming the Underlying Circumstance, drawing on Steps I and II, and also with reference to Plain Speech.  
|                       | - Defining the relationship between Story and Underlying Circumstance (usually with reference to Plain Speech), including identifying aspects that create Distance, Difference and Proximity.  
|                       | - Identifying the textual signals Plain Speech provides and the questions it poses but leaves unanswered.  
|                       | - Establishing an interpretive dialogue between Story and Plain Speech to identify how the parable opens a new perspective for the audience on the Underlying Circumstance. |

| Step IV: Parable and Gospel | A dialogue between the parable, as first understood contextually (Steps I-III), and the wider narrative and theological themes of the Gospel in which the parable is set. This dialogue may bring depth and perspective to the contextual reading of the parable; it may also identify how the parable - as understood contextually - enriches the Gospel's narrative and theology. |

In beginning with a parable’s literary context (Step I), I am recognising that the parables come to us as embedded texts, deliberately and carefully arranged within a wider literary work, and standing in interpretive relationship to the events/discourse located in immediate literary proximity to them. The focus on “Story” (Step II) recognises the narrative form of parabolic stories, and hence their power to engage an audience, and initiate their journey down a rhetorical path even before the full significance of the Story is perceived. It also recognises how any Stock Imagery within the Story may hint at its parabolic significance, providing impetus for further interpretation. Story and literary context are given as much definition as possible before exploring the interpretive relationship between the two, usually with reference to Plain Speech (Step III). Exploring connections between a parable and the wider narrative and theology of its Gospel (Step IV) is the final step, and takes place only after the contextual significance of a parable has been established.
Two Crucial Interpretive Decisions

Within my methodology, the two crucial interpretive decisions, that set the direction of the entire interpretive process, are determined as follows:

1. **Defining the Underlying Circumstance**

   In many cases, the Underlying Circumstance (the subject to which a parable speaks) will be defined in the analysis of a parable’s literary context (Step I). It may be a prominent or central feature of the narrative at the point the parable features, or a (present or future) situation described in the wider discourse in which a parable is set. Stock Imagery may also signal or help confirm the identity of the Underlying Circumstance, as will the identification of elements in both Story and literary context that are analogous in nature (Step II). Accompanying Plain Speech may sometimes explicitly signal the Underlying Circumstance, and is often needed to confirm or give further definition to, the Underlying Circumstance (Step III).

   For parables that feature in a collation, the narrative/discourse that precedes the first parable in the collation may give initial definition to the Underlying Circumstance to which all the parables in the collation speak (even if they speak to it in various ways). The nature of the Underlying Circumstance may then be confirmed or refined by Plain Speech specific to the parables that follow.

2. **Defining the Relationship Between Story and Underlying Circumstance**

   It is not enough to know that a parable speaks to a particular Underlying Circumstance; it is also essential to define the nature of the relationship between the two. Examining how parables operate in a range of different contexts suggests this relationship is both complex and varied in nature. Snodgrass rightly identifies “unevenness between parable and reality” and how “parables only partially overlap the realities they seek to reveal”, so that they should not be regarded as “one-for-one analogies”. Equally, as we have seen in Chapter III, the relationship between parable and Underlying Circumstance will not always be comparative, but may take other forms, making

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118 By “collation” I refer to those instances in the Synoptics where two or more parables are located together, with limited narrative or Plain Speech between them, often having common themes and shared motifs. Examples are the groups of parables that make up Luke 15 and Matthew 13.1-50. I discuss the application of my methodology to parables in collations in Chapter VII.

generalisations problematic. Zimmermann rightly observes “complexity and individuality” in the “process of comparison and transfer”, so that “the various ways in which the metaphoricity of the parables functions must be described individually”.

When reading parables contextually, the textual signals that give definition to the relationship between parable and Underlying Circumstance are generally parable-specific, and tend to be provided by a parable's literary context and especially by associated Plain Speech. From among the many possible ways that the versatile parable may contribute to a given discourse/narrative, Plain Speech often provides the crucial interpretive guidance as to the particular way that the Story is being brought alongside the Underlying Circumstance, and the purpose of bringing the two into interpretive relationship. The latter is seldom clear from the Story alone, as was seen with the Broken Jar, which references the kingdom but without contextual guidance as to how or why. Generic guidelines tend to be elusive, given the complexity and variability involved.

Zimmermann: An “Integrative and Open” Methodology

As a means of further clarifying my methodology, and situating it in relation to modern parable scholarship, it is helpful to compare and contrast my methodology to that of Reuben Zimmermann. I have chosen Zimmermann because his scholarship is highly influential at the present time, and because his methodology commends itself on account of its integration of practices and insights drawn from a range of critical approaches to NT interpretation. Zimmermann’s methodology includes the kind of literary and narrative critical approach that I have described above (also thoroughly informed by socio-historical analysis), and also incorporates

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120 Story may correspond closely, even allegorically to the Underlying Circumstance (the Eagles, the Cedar and the Vine); it may correspond only partially (the Widow and Her Fratricide), it may establish a contrast (the Sea Captains), it may support an argument from the lesser to the greater, or it may supply motifs or imagery that are then given further emphasis and theological depth in subsequent discourse (the Sea Captains). Whilst parables often function comparatively, this cannot simply be assumed, and even then the comparison may only be partial, and/or the point of the comparison may not be obvious, so that signals external to the parable are required for interpretation to occur. Cf. similarly Baasland, *Parables*, 609, in his study on the parabolic material in the Sermon on the Mount, finding five different ways this parabolic material may be used: direct application to the audience; *a minore ad malum* or *a maiore ad minus*; *ad hominem*; generalising; authoritative pronouncement. Cf. similarly Lewison, “Metaphors”, 4 on how the use of metaphor in legal reasoning so often leads to arguments “not about the underlying principles, but about what the metaphor itself means”.

121 See similarly Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 195: “often... the meaning comes across only through the context and the reader is directed to it through external transfer signals, such as introduction... or conclusions”; in other instances “the transfer impulse is limited to the implicit clues of the context as a whole”. Cf. Blackham, *Fables*, 245: in regard to a fable, there are “three forms of uncertainty: about the image that has been created, about what it refers to, and what follows (what? what for? so what?)”. Determining the “so what?” often relies on Plain Speech signals, and is not usually evident even if the first two questions have been answered. In fact it is here, regarding the purpose of the connection between Story and Underlying Circumstance, that ambiguity is often greatest.

122 Especially as reflected in Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, though also with reference to Zimmermann’s wider parable scholarship.
reader-oriented approaches. His “integrative method of parable analysis” is sequenced as follows: 124

1. **Text: Analysing Narrative Elements and Context.** An analysis of a parable’s (i) language, narrative structure, literary features, plot, and characterisation; and (ii) literary context, including narrative placement and associated issues and themes.

2. **Reality: Mapping the Socio-Historical Background.** Because the parables “acquire their power from the transfer of real experiences and concrete, real life contexts into the religious domain”, a “connection to history” is required in their interpretation. 126 The interpreter must “pursue a historical perspective and submerge himself or herself into a foreign world”. 127

3. **Tradition: Exploring Stock Metaphors.** Zimmermann recognises how some parable motifs carried symbolic or metaphorical meaning within ancient Jewish or early Christian communities. These motifs, including more established “stock metaphors”, make an important contribution to “analysing the metaphorical transfer of a parable”. 128

4. **Meaning: Opening up Horizons of Interpretation.** Steps 1-3 above combine to “open up horizons of interpretations” for the reader. 129 A range of interpretive trajectories are anticipated. Creating an “abundance of socio-historical and tradition-historical information and interpretations”, the exegete offers a “maieutic service” to the reader, by identifying “possible routes of understanding, which the readers then must follow on their own in order to achieve the creation of meaning”. 130

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124 Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 183 (see 183-209 for the full discussion); see 191-2 for the importance of the chosen sequence. Cf. Zimmermann, *Kompendium*, where the analysis of individual parables is structured under these headings: (i) Sprachlich-narrative Analyse (Bildlichkeit); (ii) Sozialgeschichtliche Analyse (Bildspendender Bereich); (iii) Analyse des Bedeutungshintergrunds (Bildfeldtradition); (iv) Zusammenfassende Auslegung (Deutungshorizonte); (v) Aspekte der Parallelüberlieferung und Wirkungsgeschichte (see 28-44 for a discussion of each section).

125 Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 192-6. Zimmermann’s “memory approach” (189; see 76-99 for the full discussion; also more recently Zimmermann, “Memory”, 156-72) means he is working with the literary form and arrangement of a parable (as I am).

126 Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 196; see 196-8 for the full discussion.

127 Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 198. Socio-historical analysis draws on archeological findings, as well as “biblical texts… Jewish or Christian apocrypha, Hellenistic-Roman texts, or even rabbinical writings” (197). For Zimmermann, “the parables primarily reflect the environment and life of the people in Palestine, or at least in the Mediterranean world, in the first century after Christ” (197), though in my view a careful reader will recognise that the NT Gospels purport to narrate events taking place in the early decades of the first century.

128 Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 203. Thus, it is “necessary to investigate the embedding of transferal phenomena in linguistic conventions and traditions” (199; see 198-204 for the full discussion); attention must be given to the “Bildfeldtradition (the tradition of this imagery) in which we see a traditional coupling of metaphorical domains” (202); cf. Zimmermann, “Metaphorology”, 12-16.

129 Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 205; see 204-8 for the full discussion.

130 Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 208.
Zimmermann’s “criterion of *contextuality*”\(^{131}\) means he recognises the interpretive significance of a parable’s literary context, as is important in my methodology. “The transfer signals that demonstrate the metaphoric character of a parable as well as the impulses of comprehension that pre-structure the meaning of the text are generally not located exclusively in the parable itself.”\(^{132}\) His literary analysis “begins with the [parables’] introductions and conclusions, continues with a classification in the pericope or the narrower literary context, and ends with a placement within the entire arrangement of the source writings.”\(^{133}\) Zimmermann’s literary analysis is also thoroughly informed by his meticulous socio-historical research, and by his extensive exploration of the historical symbolism of parable motifs and linguistic elements. On account of these features, Zimmermann’s methodology has much in common with my own, applying similar critical disciplines and drawing on similar areas of supporting research.\(^{134}\)

However, in Zimmermann’s scholarship, a parable’s significance is not limited to its function as defined with reference to its literary context; a parable “also has a rhetorical power uncovered in the process of reading the parable itself.”\(^{135}\) Thus, alongside contextually shaped readings, Zimmermann at times provides additional readings that tend to be more reader/scholar directed. These readings may retain a point of connection to Zimmermann’s literary and socio-historical research through the interpretive emphasis given to individual symbolic images or narrative motifs.

\(^{131}\) E.g. Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 195. “Parables are embedded in larger narrative contexts or in speeches and arguments that greatly influence the constitution of meaning and direction of the reader. The parable’s relation to context is viewed here as constitutive. In contrast to an earlier structuralistic consideration that emphasised the autonomy of the form of the parable and the resulting ‘decontextualisation’, it is the context in question that characterises the finding of meaning in the interpretation of a parable” (149).

\(^{132}\) Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 149; italics mine. Hence, “in interpretation... the context is taken into consideration as far as possible as a frame of reference” (196).

\(^{133}\) Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 195; italics mine. As to how influential this is in practice, see e.g. (i) the significance of Luke 15.1-2 for his reading of the Lukan Lost Sheep (230) and Matt 18.1-14 for the Matthean Lost Sheep (233); (ii) his analysis of the “contextual narrative framework” (356) of the Dying and Living Grain (John 12.20-32)(340-4), and how this informs his “Ecclesiologico-evangelistic interpretation” (356-7); (iii) his recourse to the “eschatological discourse” of Matt 24-5 for reading the Ten Virgins (269, 283-5); (iv) his reading of the Good Samaritan (304-6), noting that the parable’s ethical content is reliant on contextual signals.

\(^{134}\) As an example, in reading the Good Samaritan, Zimmerman brings into dialogue (i) the Story; (ii) details of the parable’s Lukan audience and precipitating circumstance; (iii) the dialogue and ethical imperative following the parable in its Lukan arrangement (232-4). He finds, using language similar to that which I use throughout this thesis, that the parable is designed to bring about a “change in perspective from the one needing help to the subject of the helper”, and also to a “categorial leap in the ethical system” so that the emphasis lies on “the process itself of ‘becoming a neighbour’... [and] the ethical impulse of the parable is... carried out relationally” (Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 324; italics mine). There is much in common here with my methodology and the kind of interpretive outcomes I anticipate.

\(^{135}\) Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 157.
(each able to stimulate interpretive trajectories of their own). However in these readings the balance in interpretive weight has tipped clearly in favour of the reader/scholar, whose paradigms and issues are brought directly into dialogue with the parable. This is a marked departure from my approach, where the literary context provides the crucial interpretive signals. I explore this aspect of Zimmermann’s scholarship, and provide my reasons for dissenting, in Chapter VIII.

**Toward Methodological Transparency**

Reading the NT parables contextually, one must inevitably take a methodological position concerning the following matters: (i) the role of the reader; (ii) the nature and significance of Stock Imagery; and (iii) the nature and significance of correspondences between parable motifs and contextual elements. In this chapter I indicate how these matters are treated in my interpretive practice, and explain the choices I have made. These choices reflect a desire to honour the literary presentation of the parables and the process of reception this anticipates. What follows is not a comprehensive treatment of any of these issues, but primarily an exercise in methodological transparency.

**The Implied Reader and the Parables of Jesus**

Literary theory introduces us to the “Implied Reader” of a text, a hypothetical construct that “incorporates both the prestructuring of the potential meaning by the text, and the reader’s actualisation of this potential through the reading process”. The Implied Reader is the nexus of text and reader, in which the actualisation of the text occurs on terms anticipated in the text itself. The role of the Implied Reader carries particular importance in a literary study of parables since, as an indirect and enigmatic literary form, they demand comparatively more of a hearer/reader than

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136 Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 208. The process Zimmermann describes here means that individual motifs, an image’s varied symbolism, various allusions to other literature, and individual pieces of socio-historical data may each be taken up (even in isolation) to inform (or stimulate) different reader-directed “horizons of interpretation”. The aim of socio-historical analysis is to “illuminate as concretely as possible individual aspects of the narrative that can then become ‘source domains’ for the parables” (198; italics mine). Similarly, there is no need to decide on an “ultimate and final determination” of a motif’s symbolic meaning; what is important is to “be as broad as possible” in assessing possible symbolism (including through reference to “linguistic conventions from outside early Christianity…”), so as to create a range of data to stimulate interpretive inquiry (204). There is some tension between this approach and Zimmermann describing his final stage of interpretation as a “summarising interpretation”, where “the lines of reasoning from the previous analytical steps are brought together” to produce interpretive outcomes (204; italics mine). Zimmermann’s more reader-directed interpretations fail to evidence this integration of prior socio-historical and literary analysis, creating an unresolved tension within his methodology (see further on this matter in Chapter VIII).

Further, as I will argue below, the Synoptic arrangement of the parables makes further demands of the reader. In seeking to understand the Implied Reader associated with the Synoptic arrangement of the parables I have drawn on the scholarship of Wolfgang Iser, which recognises a substantive role for both text and reader in realising the full potential of a given text. I have taken the view that a literary and contextual reading of the Synoptic parables must similarly recognise both design/structure in their literary arrangement and a substantive role for the reader in realising the full potential of that arrangement. My reason for holding this view is as follows.

The Synoptic parables, the data placed in literary proximity to them, the combining of these items at a textual level, and their placement within a broader narrative (collectively the "text"), are all generative of meaning. However, this literary arrangement of the parables does not constitute their actual interpretation, but rather provides the grounds for interpretation to occur, while anticipating that interpretation will occur in a process of reading/reception in which the reader plays an integral role. The necessity of the reader’s involvement, to give effect to interpretation, may be explained as follows (using Iser’s terminology). The parable genre is characterised by openness, or

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138 Cf. Polk, “Paradigms”, 564 on how “speech-acts designated mesalim” have a “heightened performance and reader-involving quality”; also Quilligan, Language, 224-78 on how the “reader’s involvement in allegory is perhaps more arduous than in any other genre” (225); a “reader’s participation... must be active and self-conscious” (226), involving a “burden of choice” in interpretation, accompanied by a “weighty self-consciousness... at each stage of the reading experience” (277). See Chapter IX for further discussion of this matter.

139 See Iser, Act; Iser, Reader; Iser, “Indeterminacy”; Iser, “Phenomenological”; Iser, “Interaction”; also the critical assessment of Iser in Holub, Reception, 82-106. This aspect of Iser’s scholarship informs one approach to Reader Response Criticism (“RRC”). Thus, as Thistlethwaite, Thiselton, 411 recommends, I am here seeking to apply “the positive and constructive gains of reader-response hermeneutics” within my broader methodology (cf. similarly Brett, “Future”, 14). RRC, a diverse and unsettled field (e.g. Suleiman, “Introduction”; Thiselton, Thistlethwaite, 489-514; Powell, Narrative, 16-18), is typically concerned with the active role of the reader in realising the communicative intent of the text and may also concern the dynamics of the reading process. On RRC and the NT see the varied perspectives in Thistlethwaite, Hermeneutics, 306-26; Thistlethwaite, Thiselton, 395-521; Blomberg, Interpreting, 155-60; Ressegue, “Reader”; Ressegue, “Woman”; Zimmermann, Puzzling, 8-16; Fowler, Reader, 9-58; Fowler, “Reader”; Powell, Chasing; Porter, “Why?”; Porter, “Reader”; Schwab, “Mind”; Brett, “Future”; Blomberg, Hearing, 9-16; Tannehill, “Freedom”; Klein et. al., Introduction, 128-31; Howell, Matthew’s, 38-51, 205-11. On RRC generally see the essays in Suleiman and Crosman, Reader; Mailloux, “Learning”; Harkin, “Reception”; Fish, “Text” Fish, Doing, 68-96; Holub, Reception.

140 In applying Iser’s model to reading the Synoptic parables I am seeking to recognise a process of reading/interpretation, and the associated role of the reader, as anticipated by these particular texts. By way of contrast, had I been discussing parables in the Gospel of Thomas I would have described the role of the Ideal Reader quite differently, since that text appears to anticipate a much more demanding and substantive role for the reader/reading community (see Chapter III). Had I been discussing parables in Irenaeus, I would have described the role of the Ideal Reader differently again given the detailed explanations of the parables he provides, requiring a less substantial role for the reader (see Chapter II). As Eco has demonstrated in his treatment of a range of different texts, some texts are more “open” than others, so that the role of the Ideal Reader will differ accordingly (see the discussion in Eco, Role, 3-40 and the examples in subsequent chapters).
indeterminacy, so that the reader’s involvement is essential to their “actualisation”. The Gospels’ literary arrangement of the parables serves to “counterbalance” the parables’ natural indeterminacy by providing textual signals that guide interpretation, so that the reader does not interpret freely but as guided by the text. However, as we have seen in Chapter II, this contextual data, itself sometimes enigmatic, often introduces its own literary indeterminacy, since the relationship between a parable and the data placed in immediate literary proximity to it must also be resolved. The resolution of this indeterminacy occurs in the process of reading/reception and involves the active participation of the reader. Textual “blanks” between a Story, its narrative setting, framing sayings, and accompanying dialogue, all stimulate a reader to explore and resolve the relationship between these textual components. Of particular importance in this thesis is a resolution of the implied textual relationship between a parable and accompanying Plain Speech. While the Gospels, by placing Story and Plain Speech in literary proximity, invest this relationship with interpretive significance, the relationship is often not given explicit definition in the Gospel narratives, but rather is presented for resolution in the process of reading/reception. Accordingly, the reader/hearer may be said to play an essential role in the actualisation of the Synoptic parables.

To summarise, the Gospels, in their literary arrangement of the parables, create both the possibility of interpretation, and also the necessity of a reader’s active participation for interpretation to occur, so that text and reader contribute jointly in reading the parables.

The Implied Reader and the Initial Audience

One notable structural feature of the Synoptic arrangement of the parables is how individual parables are usually addressed to a specified audience in the ministry of the Synoptic Jesus. I have called these individuals or groups the “Initial Audience” in that they are portrayed in the

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141 Regarding indeterminacy, see e.g. Iser, “Indeterminacy”, 7: indeterminacy arises because literary works have “no concrete object corresponding to them in the real world” and because they contain internal “indeterminate sections or gaps” (43). Both forms of indeterminacy feature in the Synoptic arrangement of the parables.

142 The term is from Iser. Cf. Iser, “Indeterminacy”: indeterminacy “is the fundamental precondition for reader participation” (14); it invites the reader’s engagement to resolve the relationship between text and reality in some way, in the act of reading. Narrative gaps are “the most important link between text and reader… the switch that activates the reader” (43). “Generation of meaning” occurs for the reader in the “repair of indeterminacy” (42). Also, Iser, Implied, 287: “the unformulated parts of the text... [are] the force that drives [a reader] to work out a configurative meaning”.

143 The term is from Iser, “Indeterminacy”, 9; see 17-22 on “the many ways in which a reader’s response may be guided” (17) by elements within a narrative; also Iser, Implied, 274-5 on how the process of “realisation” of a text by a reader is “acted upon by the different patterns of the text”, and how a text “imposes certain limits on its unwritten implications” (278). Iser has been criticised for embracing contradiction (e.g. Fish, Doing, 70), but in my view his depiction of the relationship between text and reader retains a dialectic tension that is inherent to the reading process itself.

144 See Iser,”Interaction”, 112: “blanks” between segments of a narrative “leave open the connection between textual perspectives, and so spur the reader into coordinating these perspectives and patterns”. These blanks “indicate that the different segments and patterns of the text are to be connected... [and thus] prompt acts of ideation on the reader’s part”. These blanks (or elsewhere “gaps”) form an “unseen structure that regulates but does not formulate the connection or even the meaning”. See the more detailed discussion in Iser, Act, 168-70, 182-212, and further on the literary function of these gaps in Chapter IX.
Synoptics as the earliest audience of the parables. For example, the Markan Initial Audience of the Sower is a large crowd that includes Jesus’ earliest disciples (Mark 4.1-2,10). The Synoptics fairly consistently provide details of the Initial Audience for the parables, often identifying them immediately prior to a parable, or prior to the discourse in which a parable is set. This Initial Audience will often have “narrative history” with Jesus, and may sometimes have spoken or acted in ways that precipitate the telling of the parable. The prominence of the Initial Audience in the Synoptic arrangement of the parables signals a textual expectation that the significance of a parable for its Initial Audience will carry interpretive importance for the Implied Reader. This point can be illustrated by considering Herodotus’ literary presentation of the parable of the Golden Foot-pan. In the Histories, this parable is told by the Egyptian Pharaoh Amasis as an attempt to correct his subjects’ lack of respect for him. Herodotus’ arrangement of the Golden Foot-pan means an Implied Reader will be expected to give attention to this parable’s narrated reception by the Egyptian assembly (the Initial Audience) in determining the literary significance of the parable. In the same way, I suggest that where the Synoptics situate a parable of Jesus so that it is addressed to a particular audience within the ministry of the Synoptic Jesus (the Initial Audience), an Implied Reader’s recognition of the significance of that parable for its Initial Audience will be a material factor in that Implied Reader’s understanding of the literary significance of the parable (and in their actualisation of the Gospel pericope that contains the parable).

The Implied Reader can also be expected to recognise that a particular Initial Audience is defined by socio-cultural, religious, geographical and historical particularity. The Synoptics locate the origins of the parables within the world of first century Palestine, associated with Initial Audiences defined by the geography, cultures, languages, religions, social structures, world-views and history of that world. An Implied Reader can be expected to recognise these socio-cultural and historical factors in reading the parabolic sections of the Synoptics. To reflect this in a literary analysis of the parables means giving due weight to the origins of the parables within a Jewish context, but

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145 See Baird, Audience, for evidence of the Synoptic authors’ consistent concern (“fixation”) with audience details in their presentation of Jesus’ teaching (32-53), the stability of audience markers across the Synoptics (“a stability to the audience tradition that makes it unique [in the level of stability] among all Synoptic phenomena” (73)), and how Jesus is presented as one “who adapts his teaching to his audience” (16, see 90-109) so that “we cannot really understand [Jesus’ teachings] until we understand the audience to which they are attributed” (134). See for example, how δοῦλος is a central figure in parables addressed to his disciples (while only a marginal figure for parables addressed to his opponents) (98-101), helping establish this motif and its symbolism as central to a Synoptic understanding of discipleship, and of leadership in the kingdom of God. That Jesus used δοῦλος outside the parables, in conversation with the twelve, to describe discipleship (Matt 10.24; 20.27; Mark 10.44), helps to affirm that the δοῦλος of the parables corresponds to Jesus’ closest followers. Baird’s findings argue strongly for audience details to inform a literary reading of the parables. Cf. Cook, “Sense” on Luke’s “ubiquitous and significant sense of audience” (19).

146 Herodotus, Histories, 2.172.

147 An example from an alternative literary genre: Sophocles, Ajax, 1144-1149 features a story of a “bold-tongued” man who had encouraged sailors to set sail during winter, only to fall silent and hide beneath his cloak (and be trampled on by the sailors) when a storm broke out. The story is told by Menelaus to the boastful Teucer, so that an Implied Reader will take account of its significance for Teucer in their own reception of the story. By way of a contrasting literary arrangement, parables such as the Broken Jar are presented within Thomas without narrative context or Initial Audience. The intent of this is perhaps that ancient and modern readers/hearers are to hear the words of the living Jesus addressed directly to them (Grosso, “Matter”, 561).
recognising (where such distinctions can be made) how these origins were understood within the wider Hellenistic world of the latter part of the first century. For example, a sensitive Hellenistic reader of Luke, coming to the Good Samaritan will recognise the parable’s Jewish narrative content (e.g. it refers to a Levite travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho) and the Jewish geographical and socio-cultural narrative context of its telling (it is addressed to a Jewish lawyer by a Jewish prophetic/rabbinic figure on his way to Jerusalem). On account of these factors, the Implied Reader’s actualisation of this parabolic episode in Luke can be expected to include recognition of the parable’s significance for the Jewish lawyer as of primary importance, rather than hearing the story in purely Hellenistic terms.\textsuperscript{148}

In summary, I use the term “Initial Audience”, to refer to the audience to whom a parable is addressed within the narrative world of the Synoptics, as that audience would be perceived and understood by the Implied Reader of a Gospel. Given the explicit literary connection between the Synoptic parables and their Initial Audiences, I seek to give the Initial Audience due interpretive weight in my contextual readings of individual parables in the following chapters.

\textit{The Initial Audience Hears a Parable}

Recognising the importance of the Initial Audience for a contextual (and literary) reading of the Synoptic parables, I draw on an aspect of Scott’s methodology to explore how the Initial Audience will be engaged by, involved with, and react to a parable, as its plot unfolds. Scott rightly recognised that the reception of parabolic narratives involves a dynamic process of “interaction” between parable and audience.\textsuperscript{149} Scott utilises a form of “descriptive analysis of the time-flow of the reading experience”,\textsuperscript{150} involving a line by line analysis of the parable, to identify different aspects of narrative design and their potential impact - incremental and cumulative - on the Initial Audience. For example, he identifies how a narrative: (i) is structured to create audience interest through positioning questions and narrative “gaps” early in the narrative; (ii) builds suspense throughout; (iii) utilises (and subverts) stock tropes, characters and plots; (iv) causes an audience to identify with a character, perhaps out of sympathy or from approval of their actions; (v) creates

\begin{enumerate}[label=(\roman*)]
\item whatever the status of Samaritans within the Hellenistic world, an Implied Hellenistic reader may be expected to recognise the importance of what the Jewish lawyer thought about Samaritans, rather than reverting automatically to any Hellenistic stereotypes.
\item Scott, \textit{Hear}, 75. The examples that follow are my observations of Scott’s interpretive practice. For discussion of the literary conventions that inform this form of analysis, see e.g. Mailloux, “Learning”, 99-107; Iser, “Indeterminacy”, 14-17; Fish, \textit{Text}, 152-9, discussing how the reader in involved in “the making and revising of assumptions, the rendering and regretting of judgments, the coming to and abandoning of conclusions, the giving and withdrawing of approval, the specifying of causes, the asking of questions, the supplying of answers, the solving of puzzles” (158-9).
\item The phrase is from Resseguie, “Reader”, 317 (see 316-8), who recognises a “temporal” dimension to the reading process; see also Mailloux, “Learning”, 99-102; Fish, \textit{Text}, 150-8; Howell, \textit{Matthew’s}, 43-4.
\end{enumerate}
audience expectations, which may then go unfulfilled, or be met in unexpected ways;\(^{151}\) (vi) leads the audience to entertain or “own” a certain point of view concerning the events narrated, which may subsequently be called into question; (vii) raises questions, that remain open as the narrative ends, to encourage further inquiry and reflection.

Within my methodology, this analysis remains within the world of the Gospel narratives, concerning the rhetorical situation between Story and Initial Audience, and helps establish the unique contribution of the Story to the Parabolic Process.

The “Inner World” of the Initial Audience

In the above analysis it is necessary to give some definition to the “Inner World” of the Initial Audience, their thoughts, emotions, beliefs, attitudes, self-understanding, and worldview.\(^{152}\) Some of these matters are general in nature and known to us from socio-historical research. Literary analysis allows us to give further definition, particularly in relation to audience-specific issues. A parable’s immediate literary context will often contain information concerning the Inner World of the Initial Audience. This information takes various forms:

1. Questions or statements by the Initial Audience. E.g., Peter’s question, preceding the Forgiven and Unforgiving Slave (Matt 18.21), suggests Peter understood forgiveness to have limits.\(^{153}\)

2. Narrative signals. E.g., the religious leaders are said to be perplexed as to how to respond to Jesus, and fearful of the crowd (Matt 21.26), immediately prior to the Two Sons.\(^{154}\)

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\(^{151}\) For example, the initial sequencing of characters in the Good Samaritan (priest-Levite), represents “a conscious steering of the expectations of the reader or listener” given the normal division of Jewish society into three “socio-religious classes - priest, Levite, and Israelite” (Zimmermann, Puzzling, 319). Thus the audience, expecting “the entrance of the ‘normal’ Israelite” after the Levite will experience surprise and even confusion as the Samaritan’s entrance to the Story “stymies” normal expectations (319-20). Cf. Mailloux, “Learning”, 106: reader disappointment, and “disorientation”, is designed for “the moral trial of the reader”, leading to self-criticism and correction.

\(^{152}\) Resseguie, Narrative: known as “inside views” or the “psychological point of view” (172; also 190-4); e.g. see Fowler, Reader, 120-126 on inside views in Mark.

\(^{153}\) Similarly (i) the Jewish elite’s question (Mark 7.5) preceding What Goes In and Out of the Mouth that reflects a certain paradigm of ritual purity; (ii) Peter’s question (Matt 19.27: ἐδού ἡμεῖς ἐφήκαμεν πόντα καὶ ἠκολουθήσαμέν σοι—τί ἥρα ἐσται ἡμῖν;) preceding the Workers in the Vineyard, that reflects a particular self-understanding; (iii) the question that precedes the Lukan Narrow Door (Luke 13.23: κῦριε, εἰ ὀλίγοι ὀἱ σῳζομένοι;) These questions usually occur immediately prior to a parable, but can also be a response to a parable (e.g. Matt 21.31, 41; Mark 12.12; Luke 10.37; 20.16; John 10.19-21). The paradigm suggested in these questions must be refined and tested by historical inquiry where possible.

\(^{154}\) See also (i) Jesus’ δοκεῖτε ὅτι…; δοκεῖτε ὅτι…; (Luke 13.2.4), prior to telling the Barren Fig Tree; (ii) the Jewish leaders being κατηχούμενο, while the crowd ἔχαιρεν (Luke 13.17), immediately prior to the Mustard Seed and the Yeast; (iii) how the crowd δοκεῖν αὐτοῦ ὅτι παραχρήση μέλει ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ ἄναφθαι (Luke 19.11) immediately prior to the telling of the Hidden Mina; (iv) how the Pharisee and the Tax Collector is addressed to τινὰς τοὺς πεποιθότας ἐφ’ ἐαυτοῦ ὅτι εἰς τὸν δίκαιον καὶ ἐξουθενοῦντας τοὺς λοιποὺς τὴν παραβολὴν ταύτην (Luke 18.9); (v) the Pharisee’s inner thoughts (Luke 7.39: ἐπὶ τὸν ἐν ἐαυτῷ ἑτερόν… concerning Jesus and the sinful woman prompts Jesus to tell Two Forgiven Debtors; (vi) the lawyer to whom the Good Samaritan is addressed is described as θέλων δικαιοσύνης ἑαυτόν (Luke 10.29).
3. Plain Speech discourse accompanying a parable. E.g., the discourse preceding the Judge and the Widow describes the disciples longing for the day of the Son of Man (Luke 17.22), and vulnerable to losing heart (18.1).\textsuperscript{155}

4. In some instances, the Inner World of a parable’s \textit{characters} is profiled, and this may illuminate the Inner World of the Initial Audience, to whom that character corresponds. E.g., the indignation of the first employed in the Workers in the Vineyard (Matt 20.11-12) may illuminate the attitude of Peter, who has asked a very similar question immediately prior to the parable (19.27).\textsuperscript{156}

The prevalence of this material means consideration of the Initial Audience’s Inner World is a legitimate and necessary component of literary analysis. This data is important for identifying the issues to which the parables are designed to speak, the paradigms and aspects of worldview they are designed to subvert/reframe, and in assessing how a parable might have been heard by the Initial Audience. In my analysis I limit the assessment of an Initial Audience’s Inner World to what is signalled directly in the Gospels’ literary arrangement of the parables, and as that is informed by socio-historical research.

The possibility of inquiry into the Initial Audience’s Inner World is further confirmed by recent scholarship on “characterisation” of individuals/groups in the NT Gospels,\textsuperscript{157} which finds reasonably high levels of characterisation in some instances. For example, Bennema's model for studying character in New Testament narrative classifies persons/groups as either “agent”, “type”,

\textsuperscript{155} Similarly, the parables of Matt 24.36-25.30 speak (to varying extent and in various ways) to the potential for the disciples’ love to grow cold (24.12) during the absence of the Son of Man. Other examples are: (i) My Father’s House speaks to the anxious hearts of the disciples (John 14.1); (ii) the potential for anxiety and fear among Jesus’ disciples (Luke 12.22-33), and for the heart’s devotion to be misdirected (12.32) are addressed in the Faithful Slaves and A Faithful or Unfaithful Slave?; (iii) Reference to devotion/hatred toward God/money (Luke 16.13), to the Pharisees’ love of money (16.14), to how God γινώσκει τὰς καρδίας of the audience, and to ὅτι τὸ ἐν ἄνθρωπος ὑψηλὸν (16.15) must be factored into a literary reading of the Dishonest Steward and the Rich Man and Lazarus; (iv) the Dying and Living Grain is followed by reference to the disciples either loving or hating their own lives (John 12.25); (v) the Woman in Labour speaks to the coming grief and then joy of the disciples.

\textsuperscript{156} Other examples: (i) the tenants’ desire to gain from the death of the son (Mark 12.7, in the Murderous Tenants) may illuminate selfish ambition and self-preservation in the hearts of the religious elite; (ii) the slave’s surprise at the presence of ζήτησιν, and recommendation for immediate removal (Matt 13.27-8, in the Wheat and the Weeds), may anticipate the disciples’ own attitude toward the wicked amidst the coming of the kingdom; (iii) the Rich Fool’s inner thoughts/plans for his future (Luke 12.17-19), may bring into the open the hopes and dreams of the audience; (iv) the slave who εἴπῃ… ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτοῦ that his master is delayed (Luke 12.45, in A Faithful or Unfaithful Slave?) may expose a vulnerability in the audience to similar presumption; (v) the anger of the Prodigal Son’s older brother, and his verbal outburst (Luke 15.28-30), may illuminate the inner world of the Jewish leadership grumbling against Jesus; (vii) the stubborn unbelief, unmoved even by resurrection, of the rich man’s brothers (Luke 16.31, in the Rich Man and Lazarus), may highlight similar unbelief in the religious elite concerning the person and ministry of Jesus.

\textsuperscript{157} See in recent scholarship: Bennema, \textit{Theory}; Bennema, “Character”; the essays in Rhoads and Syreeni, \textit{Characterization}; Rhoads et. al., \textit{Mark}, 99-136; Burnett, “Characterization”; the essays in Hunt et.al., \textit{Character}, and especially the overview of literature on characterisation in the NT Gospels and Acts (13-33); the essays in Dicken and Snyder, \textit{Characters}; Black, \textit{Rhetoric}, 22-42. This scholarship draws on the Gospel accounts, other ancient literature, and relevant socio-historical data, to reconstruct a portrait of individual characters and groups in the NT Gospels.
“personality”, or “individual” (in order of increasing complexity in characterisation). Benne

finds that Peter, a named audience for several NT parables and as one of the disciples (and sometimes representative of the disciples) an audience for many NT parables, is portrayed as an “Individual”, a “complex character”. Assessment of characterisation of the Jewish leadership (and groups within it such as the Pharisees), the other common audience for the NT parables, also finds relatively complex characterisation. This complexity of characterisation confirms the potential to identify aspects of an Initial Audiences’ Inner World.

Imagery, Symbolism, and Literary Parallels

A contextual reading of the NT Gospel parables recognises that they often contain motifs that carried established symbolic meaning within the world these Gospels narrate, and that would have conveyed meaning to the Initial Audience. This “Stock Imagery”, where present, is important because it helps define the Underlying Circumstance to which a parable speaks. For example, master-slave imagery is widely used in the OT to symbolise the relationship between Israel’s God and Israel (nation or leaders). The presence of this imagery in a parable is suggestive that it concerns this relationship in some way.

Zimmermann rightly identifies the varied strength or “plausibility” of symbolic imagery, and argues that where plausibility is low, textual signals will determine the meaning of the Imagery. In practice, I suggest, textual signals will usually be required. This is because even Stock Imagery may well have a range of possible symbolic meanings, so that the particular contextual emphasis

158 Bennema, Theory, 72-90. Bennema evaluates characters on a “Continuum of Complexity”, a “Continuum of Development”, and a “Continuum of Inner Life”.

159 For Peter as representative or spokesman for the twelve or wider group of disciples, see Labahn, “Simon”, 153-4; Burnett, “Characterization”, 22: “Peter's emotions and opinions usually represent the whole group of disciples”; Syreeni, “Peter”, 149. On characterisation of the disciples as a group, see e.g. Kingsbury, Matthew, 13-17 (finding the Matthean disciples to be “round” characters); Hylen, “Disciples”, rejecting “a flat assessment of the disciples [in John] as simple believers”, finding instead “complexity in the disciples’ character” (215); Rhoads, et.al., Mark, 123-30 (the disciples in Mark).

160 Bennema, Theory, 183, finding (for Peter) the highest levels possible within his model, of “complexity” and “development”, and the second highest levels of “inner life”. Complex characterisation of Peter is seen also in Wiarda, Peter: the relationship between “an individual disciple and Jesus” is nowhere else in the NT so concretely portrayed as in the Peter narratives of the Gospels (232); Labahn, “Simon”, 151-167: Peter is “a complex narrative figure” (151) and “one of the most vividly portrayed characters in the Gospel of John” (166); Burnett, “Characterization”, 22-3 on how Peter (in Matthew) at times “approaches characterhood, even ‘personality’”.

161 Cf. Popluz, “Pharisees” (on the Pharisees in John); Bennema, “Chief”, finding the Chief Priests in John to be a “group personality”, the second highest level of characterisation; Zimmermann, “Jews”, and von Wahlde, “Narrative” (on of Ιουδαϊοι in John); Bennema, “Crowd” who finds the crowds in John to be a “corporate personality”, thus having the second highest level of characterisation; Rhoads, et.al., Mark, 117-23 (on the “authorities” in Mark).

162 Some parables have no Stock Imagery; e.g. Zimmermann, Puzzling, 248 finds that the the mustard seed “has no role in [ancient] religious language”, so that in Mark 4.30-2 Jesus creates “truly a fresh or ‘bold’ metaphor”.

163 See Roth, Parables, 97: “a rather extensive Jewish Bildfeld tradition exists”; Weiser, Knechtsleichnisse, 22-7; Harris, Slave, 173-5 (citing many examples of metaphorical uses of δοῦλος in the LXX).

164 Zimmermann, Puzzling, 202, 204.
needs to be signalled.\textsuperscript{165} Also, the parables’ use of imagery may constitute a development on or divergence from, an image’s conventional use.\textsuperscript{166} Thus in my methodology, Stock Imagery does not (in isolation) usually play a decisive role in defining the Underlying Circumstance. I regard it as suggestive, needing to be understood contextually and to be considered alongside other factors. In my interpretive practice, once the crucial interpretive decisions for reading a parable are made (contextually), the symbolism of a parable’s imagery will often enrich a reading.

In my methodology, the potential symbolism of a particular motif is determined with reference to the Initial Audience. Some imagery (e.g. shepherd-leader;\textsuperscript{167} slave of god-people of god\textsuperscript{168}) had consistent symbolic use throughout the ancient world. However, the symbolism of other imagery varies between socio-cultural groups, so that audience definition becomes important to how we understand a parable’s use of that imagery. For example, Collins rightly distinguishes between the symbolism of seed/sowing for an audience “familiar with [Jewish] traditions” (who hear reference to the “eschatological community” being constituted through “the proclamation of Jesus”), and for “those educated in Greek and Hellenistic literature and tradition” (who hear “an analogy to or allegory of education”).\textsuperscript{169} Where symbolism of a motif varies by socio-cultural group, the perspective of the Initial Audience must be decisive.

\textit{Parable Motifs and Parallels in the Literature of Antiquity}

There are many possible linguistic, motif-related, or conceptual parallels between a NT parable and the literature of antiquity. Care must be taken in assessing the interpretive significance of these parallels. Other things being equal, the closer a text's date and geographical origins lie to the historical origins of Jesus’ parables, and the greater the importance of the text within Israel’s religious life (increasing the likelihood of the text being widely known), the more weight it carries in

\textsuperscript{165} E.g. (i) “Lamp” can symbolise e.g. the presence, protection and blessing of God, the Davidic King, or Torah; (ii) Seed/sowing/fruit can symbolise Israel’s eschatological hope (N.T. Wright, \textit{Victory}, 230-9), resurrection of the dead (Zimmermann, \textit{Puzzling}, 349-51), or “the aim and result of religious action” (351); (iii) “Shepherd” can symbolise king, Yahweh, or Messiah (Zimmermann, \textit{Metaphorology},14). Even where a clear symbolic meaning is established, there may still be a range of emphases (e.g. Zimmermann, \textit{Puzzling}, 203: the King-Shepherd metaphor has a “ruling aspect” and a “defending aspect”).

\textsuperscript{166} See e.g. (i) Roth, “Master”, 391-2, on the development in the use of “master” imagery in the Q parables to suggest a “functional equivalence’ between God and Jesus” (cf. Payne, “Jesus’”, 14-17); (ii) Long, \textit{Jesus}, 205-224: in Matthew, Jesus “combines the marriage metaphor with the eschatological banquet” (both symbols of the eschatological age), “creating a unique image of the coming age as a wedding banquet” (223); (iii) Van Staaldruine-Sulman, “Agricultural”, 223-4, on development of agricultural imagery in Matthew; (iv) Bauckham and Hart, \textit{Hope}, 163-5 on Jesus’ frequent use of “kingdom of God” (and infrequent use of “king” imagery for God) in ways that connect Jesus’ kingdom teaching with a contemporary “Jewish discussion in which the issue is universal dominion” while at the same time “characterising God’s rule as radically different from that of earthly rulers” (164).

\textsuperscript{167} See Zimmermann, “Metaphorology”, 13-14, citing Sumerian, Akkadian, Syrio-Palestinian, Egyptian, Hellenistic and Jewish examples.

\textsuperscript{168} Harris, \textit{Slave}, 140, citing the work of Yamauchi who finds widespread evidence of this motif throughout the ancient Near East (also Martin, \textit{Slavery}, xiv-xvii, 56-8). Park, “Slaves”, 80-2 arguing a Hellenistic reader would be unlikely to see a slave as a positive role model (due to their despised status) is unconvincing. See alternatively Martin, \textit{Slavery}, 56-7: a slave’s authority/status was linked to their owner, so that being slaves of Christ “would have carried… meanings not of humility but of authority and power”.

\textsuperscript{169} Collins “Discourse”, 529.
my interpretive practice. In my interpretive practice parallels involving texts more culturally or temporally distant do not direct interpretation, but may provide evidence suggesting widespread symbolic use of a particular motif,\textsuperscript{170} and may further enrich my analysis by providing insight into worldview and cultural norms of the time.\textsuperscript{171}

The significance of other ancient texts for reading the NT parables is also dependent on audience assumptions. A strong argument has been made that the Gospels anticipate a wide readership,\textsuperscript{172} which may include culturally diverse readers (e.g. Hellenistic, Jewish, and ethnically Jewish but culturally Hellenised readers). However, the NT Gospels also clearly signal the predominantly Jewish context of the events they narrate, and this must - to an extent - influence a sensitive reading of these Gospels, irrespective of the cultural setting of the reader. For example it has been argued that a Hellenistic reader of the Prodigal Son will pass over without surprise the accusation by the older brother that the prodigal had καταφαγών σου τὸν βίον μετὰ πορνῶν (Luke 15.30),\textsuperscript{173} because of the widespread use of “the trope of a young man squandering his patrimony on a prostitute” in Greco-Roman comedy.\textsuperscript{174} But even if the influence of Greco-Roman comedy is as widespread as is argued here, in my view a sensitive reader of Luke will still recognise the very Jewish narrative setting and audience (Luke 15.1-2) of the Story within Luke, and give these matters weight in reading the parable, so that the older brother may (with reference to Jewish

\textsuperscript{170} E.g. Knowles, “Abram”, discussing seed imagery in 4 Ezra and Jubilees, rightly argues that even if these texts were not known to “Jesus’ hearers or Mark’s readers”, they suggest “metaphoric identification of... seeds with words was current in their day”, and thus may inform how we read the Sower.

\textsuperscript{171} An approach similar to mine is seen in the sensitive analysis of Van Staaldruine-Sulman, “Agricultural”, exploring how agricultural imagery in Targum Jonathan (second century (211)) might inform Matthew. Van Staaldruine-Sulman recognises: (i) how Targum Jonathan may confirm or develop OT use of similar imagery (as the primary background for Matthew (223)); (ii) distinctive Matthean use of this imagery (signalled contextually); (iii) elements of continuity between first century (Matthew) and second century (Targum Jonathan) Jewish use of certain images. In these ways, “TgJon may be used as part of the explanation of the Matthean parables” (223; italics mine). In contrast, Draper, “Holy” places too much interpretive weight on the Aramaic Targum of Isaiah 6.13 (which equates the “holy seed” to “the exiles of Israel” (349)) to argue John 12.20 refers to Hellenistic Jews, and the Dying and Living Seed speaks of the “survival and increase of the remnant of the scattered people of Israel” (358). Such parallels are too weak to play such a decisive interpretive role.

\textsuperscript{172} See Bauckham, “For Whom?”. While some scholars still see individual NT Gospels as initially closely associated with particular communities, it is fairly widely accepted in NT scholarship that the Gospels quickly reached a fairly wide readership.

\textsuperscript{173} Callon, “Adulescentes”, noting the puzzle of no prior mention of prostitutes earlier in the story (259-63).

\textsuperscript{174} Callon, “Adulescentes”, 267; the trope is a “stereotypical feature”, a “cultural commonplace”, recognisable to “an audience in antiquity familiar with... Graeco-Roman comedy, as Luke’s community was” (277-8). Similarly Harrill, Slaves, 67-78 argues the ὀξονυχός in the Unrighteous Manager Who Acted Wisely plays the role of the parasitus (parasite) or servus callidus (clever or wily slave), stock characters for whom such behaviour is conventional in Greco-Roman comedy (also Callon, “Adulescentes”, 264-5). Harrill, “Psychology”, similarly discusses the “stock scene of apsente ero (‘when the master’s away’), familiar to ancient audiences from Greco-Roman comedy” (71), found in parables such as A Faithful or Unfaithful Slave? In my view, a sensitive reader (of the Lukan parables) would recognise difference in genre, and be sensitive to the Jewish origins of the parables.
cultural norms) be understood (in 15.30) to be making a “very serious accusation”, in an attempt to prevent “reconciliation between the prodigal and the community”.175

The literary arrangement of the parables directs an Implied Reader to the Jewish origins and predominantly Jewish Narrative Audience of the NT parables, and thus to their dependence on Jewish culture and traditions. Accordingly, while at times I explore a range of possible parallels or literary echoes between the parables and writings from the wider Graeco-Roman-Jewish world, I give particular emphasis to how they are informed by Jewish Scripture, writings and traditions. Also, where textual signals provide the reader with interpretive guidance, these signals are given primary interpretive weight (not relativised by giving more weight to distant literary parallels).176

**Parable and Allegory**177

One’s understanding of the nature of allegory and of its relationship to the parables of Jesus will materially shape interpretive practice. My position is summarised here. “Wild allegorisation” of the parables is now rightly and widely seen as a form of over-interpretation, that “lies beyond scholarly exegesis”.178 The parables are also not now usually understood as allegories, i.e. having “a whole set of elements that [correspond] to another set of elements and [finding their] meaning in the accumulative value of the corresponding elements”.179 However, modern parable scholarship generally recognises that correspondences between some motifs of a parable and analogous realities external to the parable will carry interpretive significance (and may do so without turning

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175 See the analysis in Bailey, *Finding*, 178-80, arguing on the basis of Jewish cultural norms and with reference to Jewish Scripture. A further example: Even if Hellenistic readers of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector may naturally “reject the toll-collector’s implicit understanding of God” (Downing, “Ambiguity”, 83, with reference to various classical sources), I suggest the Jewish nature of the story (e.g. it concerns a Pharisee, in the Temple) and the Jewish nature of the (Lukan) circumstances of its telling (a Jewish Rabbi speaking to his followers), will signal to a sensitive Hellenistic reader that the Tax Collector's prayers may alternatively (and especially contextually) be understood to express “a genuine repentance” (Downing, “Ambiguity”, 87, citing Jewish texts).

176 For example, Downing has argued that reading the Pharisee and the Toll Collector with reference to Hellenistic literature containing similar motifs suggests a Lukan reader’s “likely ambivalence” toward the parable’s two main characters (Downing, “Ambiguity”, 84). However this stands in some tension with the parable’s Lukan frame, which makes it “abundantly clear … how [Luke] means the [parable] to be read” (81; see also “what Luke clearly intends” by his arrangement of the parable (86)), and it is these contextual signals that will carry primary interpretive weight in my interpretative practice.


178 Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 199; also Snodgrass, “Allegorizing”, 5: “allegorising is no legitimate means of interpretation”, rightly observing how it involves parallels between the parable and a truth already established (independent of the parable); Blomberg, *Interpreting*, 47. See also Klauck, *Allegorie*, 355 on “Allegorese” as an exegetical method that tends “die intentionale Textur der Vorlage zu mißachten und von einem umgreifenden philosophischen oder theologischen Vorverständnis her anachronistische Einträge vorzunehmen”.

179 Kreglinger, *Storied*, 40-1; see the full discussion at 39-42. Kreglinger’s distinction between allegory and parable (39-48), with reference to differences in how they function, is extremely helpful.
parable into allegory). This is simply to recognise how allegory, as a literary mode, features in a range of genres. In a literary and contextual reading of the parables of Jesus, correspondences between motifs of a parable and analogous elements of the narrative/discourse in which it is set are often readily identifiable. As noted above, these correspondences help create connectedness between Story and Underlying Circumstance, “ground[ing] the story in a world familiar to the reader”, and thus providing “a platform from which to explore [the] unknown.”

Allegorical correspondences also make an important contribution within my methodology to defining the Underlying Circumstance to which the parable speaks. For example, that the behaviour of the Pharisees and Scribes (Luke 15.1-2) is analogous to that of the older brother in the Prodigal Son (15.25-30) is highly suggestive that the parable speaks to the religious leaders in their grumbling against Jesus. However, I do not go so far as to “equate” characters in a Story with those in the Gospel narrative (e.g. by claiming the older brother “stands for” or “is” the Pharisees). This tends to hinder inquiry into a Gospel’s unfolding narrative dynamics, obscuring a parable’s intended rhetorical function at the particular point in the Gospel narrative where it is placed (a focus of this study), where it may be designed to prevent such identification (or prevent it continuing), and at which point a character’s response to a parable may still be open.

Where parables are adapted to a broad, multi-faceted “hypothesis” (e.g. NT theology), many possible allegorical correspondences between parable and hypothesis may arise. Being concerned in this thesis with a contextual reading of the parables, possible allegorical correspondences are limited to strong and reasonably obvious parallels between motifs of a Story and central aspects of

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180 See e.g. Blomberg, Interpreting, 47; Lischer, Reading, 51: “no matter the critical prejudice against allegory, we cannot overlook the many allegorical features of the parables of Jesus”; Zimmermann, Puzzling, 199: even in exploring Bildfeldtradition, “a certain ‘rehabilitation of allegory’” is involved; Klauck, Allegorie, 134-9, 354-7. Cf. Neusner, “Parable”, 13-14 on how the main characters of exegetical Rabbinic parables are given their significance on account of their “close correspondence” to elements of the “base-verse” to which a parable relates; van Dijk, Fables, 121 on how, in a contextual reading of fables, he seeks to identify the extent to which fable and context are “analogous and/or interconnected”.

181 On allegory as a literary mode used in many genres see e.g. Klauck, Allegorie, 354: “Die Allegorie ist eine rhetorische und poetische Verfahrensweise, die zu den wenigen grundlegenden Modi zählt, die bei der Textproduktion angewandt werden können. Sie konstituiert selbst keine eigene Gattung, sondern geht mit den verschiedensten Gattungen, nicht zuletzt mit parabolischen Kleinformen wie Gleichnis und Fabel, eine mehr oder minder enge Verbindung ein.”; Carlston, “Parable”, 240; Sider, Interpreting, 19-20; Snodgrass, “Allegorizing”, 20; Boucher, Mysterious, 20. Others see allegory as both a genre and a literary mode, e.g. Quilligan, Language, 14-15: while allegory is a mode so “omnipresent” that it appears disguised in the robes of many other genres, there is also “a pure strain… the classic form of a distinct genre”; Lemmer, “Movement”, 97, Kreglinger, Storied, 39-42.

182 Cf. Klauck, Allegorie, 139: “für die Diskussion um den allegorischen Charakter der Gleichnisse sind genaue Beobachtungen zur Wechselwirkung von Gleichnissgattung und Evangelienform von eminenter Wichtigkeit”.

183 Kreglinger, Storied, 42.

184 Cf. Snodgrass, Stories, 27: “the only reason to identify correspondences is to know to what the analogy refers”.

185 E.g. in a literary-critical approach to reading the Murderous Tenants, seeking to understand its contextual significance, we hold in tension how the religious leaders eventually hand Jesus over to be crucified, with how at the point in the narrative at which the parable is told, they have not done so, and thus the parable may (in part) have been designed to open an alternative for them (even if they did not take the opportunity, the parable may still have been designed to create it).
its immediate literary context. Focusing only on a parable's immediate literary context, and on major elements of context/Story, minimises both the range of possible correspondences and the subjectivity involved in identifying them.

Section III: DEFINITIONS

Here I provide the definition of the genre that informs my thesis, and define the terms "Function" and "Plasticity" as they are understood within this thesis.

Parable

Zimmermann has defined the genre as follows:

A parable is a short narratival (1) fictional (2) text that is related in the narrated world to known reality (3) but, by way of implicit or explicit transfer signals, makes it understood that the meaning of the narration must be differentiated from the literal words of the text (4). In its appeal dimension (5) it challenges the reader to carry out a metaphoric transfer of meaning that is steered by contextual information (6).

The definition recognises the narrative and metaphorical nature of the stories, their rhetorical potential, and contextual dependence, all factors that are highlighted in this study. Using this definition, Zimmermann classifies a broad range of metaphorical sayings and narratives in the NT. This is consistent with my argument in this thesis that the Synoptic arrangement of the parables locates them in proximity to other textual segments carrying interpretive significance. For examples of the importance of similar allegorical correspondences in Zimmermann’s work see e.g.: (i) the Ten Virgins: the “clear parallel” between Matt 24.44 and the uncertain timing of the groom’s arrival (25.5), and again how the “direct parallels between [Matt 24.42,44 and 25.13] relate the groom to the ‘Son of Man’ or ‘Lord’” and how in this way “the groom becomes a metaphor for the Son of Man” (Zimmermann, Puzzling, 283); (ii) the Dying and Living Grain: the “parallel arrangement” of John 12.24-5 that “binds the realm of vegetation… with the human realm” (342), and his exploration of the parallel between 12.24 and the contextual reference to Jesus’ own death (342-4).

The immediate literary context is very limited in scope/size compared to a complete NT Gospel, a historical reconstruction of the life/ministry of Jesus, or NT/biblical theology (all commonly plundered for corresponding elements in parable scholarship). For similar emphasis on major elements of a parable (as having allegorical significance) see Sider, Interpreting, 238-41: his criteria for identification are proportion (or prominence), similarity, relevance, and indispensability; Blomberg, Interpreting, 166, emphasising “the main characters of a parable” (which in practice often extends to these characters' behaviour or circumstances). Plummer, “Parables”, 9, rightly asserts that “not all details in a parable have [metaphorical] significance” (similarly Tertullian, On Modesty, IX).

Zimmermann, Puzzling, 137. A parable must be narratival, metaphoric, fictional and realistic (these are “core criteria”). Rhetorical and contextual elements are “supplemental criteria” (138), though in my view these criteria also are typical, especially for the NT parables, as arranged in their literary presentation. Zimmermann uses “realism” to differentiate from science fiction, apocalyptic visions, fables and myths (145); the term does not mean everything in the parables was common practice. On parable definitions and categorisation by major parable scholars since Dodd, see Zimmermann, Puzzling, 105-50; the survey in Foster, “Parables”, 257-74, including his assessment of Zimmermann (268-71); Roth, Parables, 7-18 (arguing in support of Zimmermann’s wide definition).

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Gospels as “parable”. While criticised by some, Zimmermann’s approach here rightly recognises the similarly broad range of material explicitly designated παραβολή in the NT Gospels.

Zimmermann argues that his definition recognises “unifying characteristics”, common across the genre. He denies the validity of traditional sub-categories of parable, demonstrating how linguistic and content-related distinctions are difficult to maintain. As further support for this viewpoint, I suggest that the communicative dynamics which give a parable its rhetoric/didactic force (as per my model of the Parabolic Process) may also be common across the genre (though this is to be tested). However, in my view Zimmermann has overlooked an important distinction within the genre. In Snodgrass’ scholarship Single Indirect Narrative parables are distinguished from Double Indirect Narrative parables, on the grounds that they “function differently”. The former are “about the subjects they narrate” (e.g. money, prayer) even though they address the audience indirectly by talking about other persons. With the latter, the audience is addressed indirectly by talking about other persons/subjects, and the subject of the narrative (e.g. seed growing in a field) is different from the parable’s ultimate concern. Even if these parables are similar in form to others, in my view Snodgrass’ functional distinction is valid and important, and failure to acknowledge it can result in methodological conclusions being drawn from discussion of Single Indirect Narrative parables (the Good Samaritan is the perennial case study) that are not valid (or not equally valid) for Double Indirect Narrative parables.

The NT parables I examine in depth (Chapters V and VI) are widely accepted as parables. Elsewhere I refer to a wide range of parabolic material, including parabolic sayings, parabolic

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190 E.g. Foster, “Parables”, 271; Kloppenborg, “Jesus”, 286-7 on the value in distinguishing between “brief similes” and longer narrative parables, the later having “greater force as proofs” (and 286n45 on the distinction in the writings of Demetrius and Quintilian); Snodgrass, Stories (2018), 570.

191 See the discussion in Zimmermann, Puzzling, 116-120. In my view this is a strong and important argument.

192 Zimmermann, Puzzling, 137.

193 Zimmermann, Puzzling, 132-3; see 132n98 for examples of these sub-categories. Cf. Snodgrass, Stories, 9-15 arguing for the kind of subcategories typically utilised in parable scholarship.

194 See Zimmermann, Puzzling, 107-27 for a discussion of shared features of some traditional categories.

195 See the discussion in Snodgrass, Stories, 13-15 (here 14; italics original; also 350-3). These parables were traditionally known as “example stories”. See Zimmermann, Puzzling, 112-117, Snodgrass, Stories, 14, for critique of the category; also Tucker, Example (esp ch 4) for an extensive examination of the category, finding these parables to have similar form and features to parables generally. What is important in my mind is not the creation of a sub-category (Single Indirect Parables), but the recognition in parable interpretation that some major motifs in some parables (perhaps more than Snodgrass’ five) do not carry metaphorical significance, while in others they clearly do. In my analysis the only grounds for making this interpretive call is where it is clearly signalled contextually.

196 Snodgrass, Stories, 14.

197 See by way of example my discussion of Zimmermann’s proposal for ethical engagement with the Good Samaritan (Zimmermann, Puzzling, 177-8) in Chapter VIII.
material in the Sermon on the Mount, and parables within John, all of which fall within Zimmermann’s definition.

**The Parables’ Plasticity**

While my methodology recognises a distinct and essential contribution by a parabolic narrative itself (Story) within the interpretive process, it also recognises high levels of contextual influence in determining a parable’s situational significance. The importance of contextual factors in shaping interpretive outcomes ultimately reflects the nature of the genre. The parables are versatile, adaptable, and malleable, as we have seen in Chapter II. They are an “open” literary form, having a metaphorical dimension that is only given definition by interaction with elements external to the parable, and thus that may be variously defined by different external environments. The parables' chameleonic sensitivity and auto-adaptive tendency in relation to external factors brought into interpretive proximity means their meaning and function are shaped readily and substantively by the literary/rhetorical environment in which they are placed. I have chosen the term “Plasticity” to describe this characteristic of the genre.

The concept of “Plasticity”, as it applies to parabolic Stories, can be illustrated by the way the term is used in neuroscience. Greenfield describes Plasticity as the “superlative talent” of the human brain, that allows it to “adapt to any environment into which we are placed”.198 Plasticity is used to describe the infant brain’s “sensitivity... to external influence”, how it is “impressionable... vulnerable”.199 It describes how structural changes occur in an adult brain from engagement with environmental factors such as “repeated experiences”.200 And it speaks generally of how the brain “remakes itself throughout life, in response to outside stimuli, to its environment and to experience”,201 so that at any one point in a person’s life, we may find “a unique, changed, personalised brain circuitry (a ‘state of mind’)”.202 Thus the human brain may be said to readily adapt to many different environments, and, at any one point in time, to be *structurally formed in a particular way, by the particular environment in which it is placed.*

Similar Plasticity can be seen in the way a parable’s function and meaning is determined in interaction with the literary/rhetorical environment in which it is placed. The Plasticity that allows a

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198 Greenfield, *Mind*, 47; a characteristic of the brain “which allows us to occupy more ecological niches than any other species on the planet” (3; see esp 57-72 on the Plasticity of the human brain). Greenfield’s study examines the impact of cyber technology on the human brain. Since I am only using the concept to illustrate my point, I have not cited a wider range of neuroscience scholarship; suffice to say the point made here appears widely acknowledged in the discipline.


201 Greenfield, *Mind*, 64.

parable to feature meaningfully in many different contexts, also means that its meaning and function in any one context will be determined to a large extent by its interaction with that context. Similar Plasticity is evident in the classical use of fables in education and rhetorics. The collation of ancient fables into anthologies anticipated (and was designed to facilitate) the use of individual fables by orators, writers, poets and artists in a wide range of literary/rhetorical contexts.\(^{203}\) The function of an individual fable in any one rhetorical setting was then determined by the fables’ relationship to that setting.\(^{204}\) The educational foundations for this were laid in the fables’ inclusion in classical *progymnasmata*, where students learned and created fables and practised using them to varied literary/rhetorical ends, a process that exploited the genre’s versatility, even while showcasing their rhetorical power in situational particularity.\(^{205}\)

The parables’ Plasticity exposes a limitation to the use of the term *polyvalence* in parable scholarship, where it is often used to describe both the nature of parabolic stories, and their having multiple meanings at the point of use/reception (without distinguishing between the two).\(^{206}\) A failure to adequately distinguish between parables’ nature and their use/reception risks inaccurate use of the term polyvalence. While the parables are a versatile literary form, they may be used in a *particular* (rather than polyvalent) way. An example illustrates the distinction. The fable of the Flute Player and the Fish is polyvalent in nature, and has functioned variously.\(^{207}\) However, when placed in a *particular* context, it functions in a *particular* way. For example, in Herodotus’ *Histories*, the fable is King Cyrus’ answer to the Ionian and Aelian Greeks, who came seeking to become his “lieges” (following his conquest of Lydia and defeat of Croesus, to whom they had been subject).\(^{208}\)

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203 On the process of the ancient fables’ “extraction from the context in which they had served as exemplum” and compilation into anthologies see Holzberg, *Ancient*, 22-5 (here 24).

204 See Perry, *Babrius*, xxv, on how a fable’s “aim swerves back and forth on the compass of the writer’s artistic purpose”.

205 See how Aelius Theon, *Exercises*, 75, envisages pupils learning a wide range of fables, so as to apply them to a range of literary and rhetorical purposes, and observes how “there can be several conclusions (epilogoi) for one fable when we take a start from the contents of the fable, and conversely one conclusion when many fables reflect it” (trans. in Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 17-20; here 19). Similarly Holzberg, *Ancient*, 29-31: the *progymnasmata* required students to: (i) identify a historical event to which the moral of a fable could be applied; (ii) reinterpret the fable to draw a different lesson from that traditionally associated with it; and (iii) invent a fable to suit a given maxim (30).

206 This scholarship is discussed further in Chapter VIII. For an exception, see Bryan, “Transformation”, 118 who, in describing his Narrative Critical approach to reading the parables, makes a similar distinction to that argued for in what follows.

207 The fable: “Once… there was a flute-player who saw fishes in the sea and played upon his flute, thinking that so they would come out on to the land. Being disappointed of his hope, he took a net and gathered in and drew out a great multitude of the fishes; and seeing them leaping, ‘You had best,” said he, “cease from your dancing now; you would not come out and dance then, when I played to you.” (Herodotus, *Histories*, 1.141). The fable, in similar form, features in Babrius’ Aesopic anthology (Perry, *Babrius*, 14-15), where by virtue of an *epimythium* (“It’s not possible to gain anything by lounging around and making no effort; but when you get what you want by working for it, then with propriety you may indulge in banter and idle play”), he makes it a fable emphasising the importance of hard work. Various ethical/moral lessons have been drawn from the same fable elsewhere e.g. (i) when you are in a man’s power you must do as he bids you; (ii) there are certain rules and methods for the doing of all things in this world; and therefore let every man stick to the business he understands, and was brought up to, without making one profession interfere with another (source: https://fablesofaesop.com/a-fisherman-and-his-bagpipe.html).

The Story reminds the Greeks of their prior unwillingness to join the revolt against Croesus, and portrays them as having fallen into Cyrus’ power, thus functioning as a refusal to their request for terms. The Greeks appear to have understood the Story as Cyrus intended, since they prepared for war. The Story functions this way because of its symbolism and because elements of the Story are analogous to events in the narrative in which it is placed. In this way a story that is polyvalent in nature becomes univalent in its intention and univalent in its reception, when placed within a particular literary/historical context.

Polyvalence is thus an appropriate term to describe the nature of parables, but it is not always an accurate term to describe the use/reception of a parable in a literary/rhetorical context, where polyvalence of genre frequently gives way to particularity of rhetorical/literary intent. Because “polyvalence” (at least in some scholars’ usage) fails to adequately distinguish between the nature and reception of a parable, I have proposed Plasticity as a more precise term. Plasticity refers only to the nature of parables, leaving open the question of the intended function of a parable in any particular setting, and how it is heard by the audience in that setting.

The Plasticity of the parables is further explored in Appendix I, where I consider a range of parables that feature in more than one literary context. My analysis of NT parables in the next two chapters will help establish whether the Synoptics, in the way they present the parables of Jesus, emphasise their Plasticity (so as, for example, to invite multiple readings) or their situational particularity.

The Function of A Parable

Reading the parables contextually directs our attention to their rhetorical function, the contribution they make in their own right to the situation of their telling, and particularly the effect they have (or were intended to have) on their audience. According to Cadoux, the parables of Jesus typically functioned as “weapon[s] of controversy”, designed “to drive home a resented, distasteful or, at least, difficult truth”. Cadoux makes two important points here. Firstly, that the parables made a Rhetorical Contribution (my term), in their own right, within the ministry of Jesus. The parables, as argued by N.T. Wright, are not “second order activity, talking about what is happening…they are a

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209 See further the excellent analysis in van Dijk, Fables, 270-3. The fable’s communicative intent is clear on account of: (i) analogous elements between the fable and the audience’s recent history; (ii) the symbolism of sea/land (and their “structural opposition”), pointing to the Greeks as sea power and the Persians as land power; (iii) “fish” often symbolises enemies in ancient literature; (iv) the fables’ final line, dripping with sarcasm (the fish can only obey the Flute Player’s order by dying), cannot be “anything but Cyrus’ answer” and depicts the Greeks as “completely within his power” (273).

210 Cadoux, Parables, 13. They are “art exercised under hard conditions”, spoken by one involved in a “conflict that led to the cross” (12); as such they take us “into the brunt of [Jesus’] warfare” (59).

211 Cadoux, Parables, 50.
part of the primary activity itself”. In my analysis of individual parables I assess the Rhetorical Contribution of the parables, though within their Gospel context, where rhetorical significance varies. Not all parables are told into situations of controversy as Cadoux suggested; many are addressed to the disciples. Thus in a literary-critical study, a didactic as well as a prophetic function must be recognised.

Secondly, Cadoux alludes to the heightened rhetorical power of the parables, their ability to communicate “difficult truth”, where direct speech is unlikely to be effective. Roth similarly recognises that “certain arguments can only, or at least most effectively, be made through the parable genre”. What are the Rhetorical Dynamics (my term) that explain the parables’ unique rhetorical power? Various proposals have been made in parable scholarship. The parables are “language events” through which Jesus creates and enters a world; through this “artistic medium” Jesus “draws a hearer over to his side” so that he/she “may think together with Jesus” (Fuchs).

Through the parables, the matter causing opposition between Jesus and an audience “enters into language”, thus allowing the situation to be understood in a new way and creating new existential possibilities for the hearer (Linnemann). The parables “create a new situation”, even

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212 Wright, Victory, 176.

213 A broad range of functions is recognised in regard to comparable literary forms. In his analysis of Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic fables, occurring outside the fable anthologies, van Dijk finds most fables have “a specific application to their respective contexts” (van Dijk, Fables, 376). Their function may be: persuasive, satirical, intimidating, illustrative, explanatory (especially aetiological), entertaining, or a combination of these functions (376-8). Stern, in his analysis of Rabbinic parables, argues that the “mashal’s message is essentially a functional category rather than an abstraction or a belief” (Stern, Midrash, 102). Their most common functions are apologetics, polemics, eulogy and consolation, complaint, and warning (103-145).

214 Cf. Snodgrass, “Contextualization”, 155 who emphasises the “prophetic” function of Jesus’ parables, but also notes their “additional purposes… to instruct about behaviour, compassion, the use of wealth, prayer and discipleship”. In my view, Jeremias’ assertion that the parables “were preponderantly concerned with a situation of conflict” (Jeremias, Parables, 21, following Cadoux) created an unfortunate bias in subsequent parable scholarship, resulting in a lack of attention to the didactic function of the parables (especially in relation to the disciples), that is at odds with their Synoptic arrangement.

215 Roth, Parables, 406-7: thus “a parable is worth a thousand words”. He cites several features that give the parables a distinct didactic and rhetorical edge over direct speech: (i) parabolic narratives model behaviour and commend it to an audience for emulation; (ii) parabolic narratives have an “appeal structure”, that lead the audience to an intended conclusion, aided by hyperbole, rhetorical question and direct address; (iii) “certain depictions of judgment can almost only occur through parables”.

216 Fuchs, Studies, 129. See e.g. on the Workers in the Vineyard (33-7): the parable creates an “opportunity of trusting along with Jesus in God’s kindness” (37); the audience is “drawn over on to God’s side, and learns to see everything with God’s eyes” (155; italics mine). For discussion and critique of Fuchs see Thiselton, “Parables”, 438-47, 462-8 (esp 446-7); Thiselton, Thiselton, 478-81; Reimuth, “Sprachereignis”, 541-8.

217 Linnemann, Parables, 24-5; creating a new understanding “across the opposition”.

218 Linnemann, Parables, 30-1. The parables gave Jesus’ audience “the possibility of making a change of existence, of understanding themselves anew from the depths up, of achieving a ‘new life’” (31). Such a change was not within a person’s own power, but required “a saying that reaches into the depths of [a person’s] existence…such sayings the parables of Jesus are” (31-2). In my view Linnemann’s theory had considerable potential, particularly in explaining the way parables opened the possibility of repentance for his opponents. However, I suggest that form-critical suspicions of the day meant Linnemann did not feel she had access to the specific details of the parable’s situation within the ministry of the historical Jesus that would have allowed her to apply her general theory to a detailed analysis of individual parables.

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“a new world” for their audience;\textsuperscript{219} they represent a subversive (re)telling of Israel’s story,\textsuperscript{220} and the audience is invited to “make this strange story their own, and to join Jesus in his new way of being Israel” (N.T. Wright).\textsuperscript{221} Parables, as a form of indirect communication, are able to get past normal defence mechanisms (that defeat the intent of direct communication by “conform[ing] its message to the channels of [people’s] understanding of reality”), finding “a way in a back window” and confronting “what one thinks is reality” (Snodgrass).\textsuperscript{222} The parables illustrate “a common rule that Jesus then applies to the topic discussed” (Thurén).\textsuperscript{223} The parables engage an audience at a “cognitive (conceptual), an emotive, and a communicative level” (Zimmermann).\textsuperscript{224}

These arguments, emphasising illumination, participation and persuasion, are given a more precise focus by Herzog, who studied Paulo Freire’s literacy campaigns amongst the poor, to understand how parables functioned in the ministry of Jesus (as teacher of an oppressed peasantry).\textsuperscript{225} Because the peasantry has “internalised the oppressor’s world”, they no longer perceive their oppression.\textsuperscript{226} The parables are a necessary form of “codification”, that depicts and exposes a “reality” of oppression no longer recognised, so that it begins to “stand out” for the peasant, assuming the “character of a problem”,\textsuperscript{227} thus enabling peasants to begin conversations about new possibilities for their lives. In other cases the parables offer “glimpses into another reality”, pointing to actions that can “transform the dead-end limits of oppression into the

\textsuperscript{219} Wright, Victory, 130.

\textsuperscript{220} Wright, Victory, 175-6: The parables “break open the prevailing worldview and replace it with one that was closely related but significantly adjusted at every point”; in this Jesus was “articulating a new way of understanding the fulfilment of Israel’s hope” (italics original).

\textsuperscript{221} Wright, Victory, 229: “in explicitly describing what the kingdom is like, the parables, in that very act inaugurate it, by inviting people to come and share the secret”. On Wright’s view of how the parables function see the discussion in Denton, “Interpreted”, 236-9.

\textsuperscript{222} Snodgrass, Stories, 8; cf. Snodgrass, “Contextualization”, 156 on how they use “hyperbole, surprise and inexactness” to this end (italics original).

\textsuperscript{223} See Thurén, Parables, 29-34 (here 29), applying Toulmin’s model of modern argumentation to the parables. In Toulmin’s terminology, the parable is the “backing” that supports a general rule (“warrant”) that should be acceptable to the audience. This warrant is then used to persuade the audience that because of what they presently think (the data), they ought to accept something new (the claim) suggested by Jesus (33).

\textsuperscript{224} Zimmermann, Puzzling, 154; similarly Thiselton, Thiselton, 424, 436. Cf. Zimmermann, “Matthew”, 180 on the “affective” and “rhetorical” effect of the Matthean parables.

\textsuperscript{225} Herzog, Parables, 16-29.

\textsuperscript{226} Herzog, Parables, 95.

\textsuperscript{227} Herzog, Parables, 95. This is necessary because peasants otherwise tend to accept the dominant ideology of ruling powers, internalising their judgments and thus participate in their own oppressions (28).
boundaries where genuine social change might begin”. Herzog’s analysis of the Rhetorical Dynamics of the parables describes how:

1. The parables, as instruments of socio-political and ecclesiastical change, may combine a prophetic (challenging injustice) and didactic (teaching the victims of injustice) function.
2. Subverting deeply held and often unacknowledged mental constructs and aspects of worldview, through which an audience understands themselves and their world, and by which they organise their lives within that world, requires enhanced communication methods, such as the parables are.
3. The parables’ power comes through their ability to portray the familiar in a new light, enabling an audience to see themselves, their circumstances, and the actions of others, in new ways, and to envision a future otherwise unimaginable; and
4. New ways of seeing the present and the future open up, for an audience, possibilities of new initiatives that represent the beginnings of a new existence.

In this thesis I see myself drawing on Herzog’s insights, even while developing them further (in my model of the Parabolic Process), to explore how the NT parables subvert existing paradigms and open new perspectives for their audiences on themselves, their situation, and the in-breaking of the rule of God, and by doing so open new possibilities for participation in the kingdom of God. At the same time I dissent from Herzog in drawing on the diverse and situational contextual data the Gospel writers provide to enrich my understanding of how the parables function, thus allowing for variation in audience (not all parables are addressed to peasants) and precipitating circumstances, variation in the subject to which the parables speak (not all concern oppression), and a broader view of Jesus and his ministry.

Thus throughout this thesis I will use the term “function” to refer to the Rhetorical Contribution of a parable (its contextual “function”), and to the Rhetorical Dynamics that enable it to make this

228 Herzog, Parables, 171.

229 What follows can (to an extent) be seen also in N.T. Wright’s understanding of the parables (as discussed in Chapter II), which has also been influential for me (though I find his insistence that the parables tell Israel’s story problematic for many parables).

230 Cf. Brueggemann, Finally, 109-10: “the deep places of our lives ... are reached only by stories, by images, metaphors... that line out the world differently...”; Afsar, “Literary”, 501 on the use of parables in the Qur’an to subvert elements of the “dominant pagan or polytheistic culture of the seventh-century Arabia”.

231 For various other viewpoints on how a new perspective opens the possibility of new ways of living see Denton, “Interpreted”, 239 (re parables in N.T. Wright’s scholarship); Tannehill, “Freedom”, 267; Brueggemann, Finally, 85; Ricceur, "Listening", 245; Berger, Precarious, 201-2, observing how the Gospel (equally I note, the parables) allows humanity to “see through their own ideological befogment” so as to open the way to “avenues of responsible action in one’s situation”, to a “chance of modifying some of the morally questionable features of the situation”, a possibility shut off whilst the situation remained “shrouded in ideology”. Cf. Quilligan, Language, 249-65 on how allegory is an “invitation” to the reader to “judge one’s own character by one’s reading” (252), so that allegory “engenders an unsettling and intersubjective self-consciousness within the reader’s attitudes toward himself as an interpreter of the fiction”, in which “the choices [a reader makes] about the text also reflect the kinds of choices they make in life” (253).
contribution (how it “functions”). An example will help to illustrate. The Two Forgiven Debtors features in a very tense social setting where a sinful woman disturbs Simon’s dinner party, by attending to the feet of Jesus (Luke 7.36-38).232 The parable’s Rhetorical Contribution is highly situational. In telling the parable the Lukán Jesus vindicates the woman and opens new self-understanding for Simon, with a view to his own redemption.233 The supporting Rhetorical Dynamics are sophisticated and complex. Simon thinks Jesus should know the woman is a sinner (7.39),234 reflecting a strongly held paradigm, in which he is deeply and personally invested, where righteous-sinner, clean-unclean, man-woman are clearly defined social groupings, and the relationships between them rigidly defined. Such a strongly held paradigm is not easily challenged. An indirect approach, by way of a parable, is needed. How the parable (together with the discussion that follows it) subverts this paradigm (its Rhetorical Dynamics) can be illustrated as follows:

1. The parable moves away from the situation (it creates Distance),235 in order to reframe it by depicting it in (partially) analogous terms. There are two persons in the Story, as there are before Jesus (a factor contributing Proximity), but they are alike in being indebted to another (a point of Difference between Story and Simon’s view of the situation). Jesus’ question (7.42b) forces Simon to implicitly endorse the existence of two debtors/sinners (7.43a).236 By the time Jesus has finished, Simon has been subtly portrayed as one of the two debtors (7.47) so that the distinction between Simon and the woman (in Simon’s worldview) is undermined.

2. Jesus alters the terms of the discussion (from those that define Simon’s paradigm), by narrating a story about forgiveness and responsive devotion (7.42b).237 Simon must pass judgment on characters in the parable, on the basis of their devotion. Jesus then reminds Simon that he is a guest in his home (7.44: εἰσῆλθόν σου εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν), and profiles his lack of hospitality, while simultaneously depicting the woman’s actions as extravagant

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232 On the likely identity of the woman and the nature of her actions see Bertschmann, “Hosting”, 36-7.

233 My comments here are illustrative and not comprehensive (there is more going on with this parable!). I have not for example discussed the christological dimension to the pericope (in which Jesus is portrayed as one announcing forgiveness of sin).

234 See Bertschmann, “Hosting”, 35 on Simon’s likely perception of Jesus as a prophet as the basis for his invitation (thus making Jesus a guest of honour, and creating a situation of balanced reciprocity), and how the woman’s actions (and Jesus’ response) makes Simon “revise his view of Jesus” (as per 7.37) “and therefore the rationale for his invitation” (36). Jesus has “failed in Simon’s eyes” and contributed to the shame of the incident for Simon as host (37).

235 See Resseguie, “Woman”, 15-16: on how Jesus’s parable illustrates Iser’s rhetorical technique of “defamiliarisation” (9-10).

236 Simon’s reply affirms this point by assuming it (7.43a).

237 Herzog, Prophet, 94: Jesus uses the parable to “shift the conversation from the question of purity” (which he sees as Simon’s main concern), to the “matter of debt…producing a sea change in the conversation”.

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hospitality, and interpreting their contrasting actions in terms of devotion (and experience of forgiveness (7.47)). This assessment, characterising Simon as one who loves little, carries particular force for Simon, since he has earlier passed his own judgment on analogous elements of the parable (7.43a).

Simon has been led down a rhetorical path, whose circuitous nature prevents him from initially seeing its destination. Through sophisticated collaboration of Story and Plain Speech (rhetorical question, accusatory observations, sayings, and proclamation), Jesus subverts Simon’s existing paradigm. Simon and the woman are portrayed as sharing a socio-religious space (both are sinners), even while standing apart on account of varying degrees of devotion. The way to Simon’s own redemption is now open before him.

By nature, the concept of function is situational. An understanding of Rhetorical Contribution is heavily dependent on reference to the specific circumstance of a parable’s telling. Rhetorical Dynamics are intimately related to questions of place, persons, established paradigms and world view, prior actions and speech, and come most readily to the fore in specific (rather than generalised) contexts. In my analysis of six NT parables (Chapters V and VI), I will see whether the NT Gospel authors, in arranging the parables, provide sufficient detail concerning audience

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238 Note the accusatory tone of 7.44-46, highlighting Simon’s inadequacies: οὐκ ἔδωκας… οὐκ ἔδωκας… οὐκ ἠλείψας. Simon’s failure is amplified by the final question concerning the identity of Jesus (7.48), which is suggestive that Simon has in fact failed to shown normal hospitality for a guest of honour. See Bertschmann, “Hosting”, 40 for how the pericope “is very much about hosting Jesus appropriately”, and for how Jesus “imaginatively reframes the scene by interpreting the woman’s ambiguous gestures as the deeds of a generous host” (43), so that the woman is “reconstructed as an able host who properly welcomes Jesus, God’s visitor from on high, as the guest of honour, and as God’s saviour who brings the gift of forgiveness (44). Cf. Love, “Hellenistic”, 207 on how in receiving the woman’s “hospitality”, Jesus “challenges Simon’s worldview” and portrays the woman as a “model disciple”.

239 Simon’s answer is reinforced and given emphasis as Jesus then affirms that Simon has judged rightly (7.43b).

240 Similarly Ressegue, “Woman”, 11-20: the parable “uproots Simon from his familiar context that had provided validity and a frame of reference for his norms and values, and places him in an unfamiliar setting that makes his point of view appear odd. In this new context, Simon is forced to see what he could not see, namely that the motivation for the woman’s behaviour is love for a canceled debt” (16). Ressegue might have given more attention to how the parable also reframes Simon’s self-understanding, and to its Christological implications.

241 Cadoux, Parables rightly saw that a parable must be interpreted in “closest attachment to the actual conditions of its occasion”, from which it gains its power; conversely when “an endeavour or controversy is forgotten or ignored, parables rooted in, and dealing with, its concrete and vital movements must grow unintelligible” (25). “The parable always persuades” but can only do so if kept “near to experience” (45). Similarly Linnemann, Parables, 34 : “For every attempt to master the parables directly, without return to the historical situation, only yields a theological utterance or a moral demand”. The correctness of these important observations is illustrated in S. Wright’s dual analysis of the parables. Wright assesses how each parable was heard (i) “as part of an early oral performance of the Gospels”, which includes attention to their Gospel context; and (ii) in “the original oral exchange between Jesus and his hearers”, a context of necessity (due to our inability to reconstruct detailed historical circumstances) is defined in more general terms (S. Wright, Storyteller, 6 also 44-6). Comparing readings of the same parable, we find more precisely defined interpretations and more attention to rhetorical function, in (i), and more generalised outcomes, often more theological in nature, in (ii). E.g. (a) in Luke, the Good Samaritan is “told to blow apart a lawyer’s narrow conception of neighbour” (78); (b) the Rich Fool serves as “a warning against covetousness to a man who is overanxious about his property rights”; (c) the Barren Fig Tree concerns “Israel, whose people are still called to repent (13.5) and to avoid being diverted from projecting their own sinfulness on to the victims of a ruler’s atrocity or a natural disaster (13.1-4)” (79). Considered in their general historical context, these same stories, respectively, are about (a) the “capacity” for compassion, showing “how universally such compassion is possible” (109); (b) how the rich “like everyone else, are but the beasts which perish (see Ps 49…)” (112); (c) Jesus’ reflections on “the fortunes and possibilities of the nation” (114).
and situation to enable a parable’s Rhetorical Contribution and Rhetorical Dynamics to be assessed.

**CONCLUSION**

In this chapter I have presented my model of the Parabolic Process, outlined the intended structure and sequence of my interpretive practice, explained my interpretive choices around some crucial methodological issues in parable interpretation, and explored some terms that give further definition to the interpretive task I propose to undertake. This is partly an exercise in transparency, defining as clearly as possible the task with which I am concerned in the following chapters, the methodology by which I propose to undertake that task, and the reasons for the methodological choices I have made. In this chapter I have also sought to give further definition to my central thesis, concerning the possibility and importance of a contextual reading of the parables, which will be tested in the chapters that follow.

In applying this methodology to six NT parables (Chapters V and VI), I will be testing whether the NT Gospels’ literary arrangement of these parables anticipates and is able to inform the kind of contextual reading I have been describing above. I will also be testing my model of the Parabolic Process, assessing its suitability for reading the NT parables. I will seek to establish whether (or not) the NT parables are arranged so that the components of the Parabolic Process (Story, Plain Speech and Underlying Circumstances) can be readily identified and can be brought into meaningful interpretive relationship with each other, as the model suggests. I will evaluate the extent to which Story and Plain Speech are rhetorically dependent upon each other, able to mutually inform in the Parabolic Process, and able (in collaboration) to generate new meaning and provide a new perspective on the Underlying Circumstance. And I will be looking to see whether the model allows us to be more specific, than parable scholarship has typically been, in describing the Rhetorical Dynamics that give individual NT parables their persuasive force.
Chapter V
NEW TESTAMENT PARABLES (1)

The Judge and the Widow
The Barren Fig Tree
The Rich Fool

It may be as important as it is odd that our textual basis for an alternative humanity is found in
these peculiar tales, scarcely reasonable, telling more than is explained, voicing what the regime
preferred to silence. It takes such poetic rendering to move beyond the seduction of command…
and the seduction of decree… to another life in the empire. - Brueggemann¹

¹ Brueggemann, Finally, 141, concerning the narratives of Dan 1 and 4, but equally apt for the parables of Jesus.
INTRODUCTION

In this and the following chapter I provide contextual readings of six Synoptic parables: the Judge and the Widow, the Barren Fig Tree, the Rich Fool, the Hidden Talent, the Sower, and the Two Sons. In each case, I look to the parable’s immediate literary context to provide the crucial interpretive signals, and use my model of the Parablic Process to illuminate associated Rhetorical Dynamics. I have chosen parables that test my methodology and model in different ways. The six parables include:

1. At least one parable from each Synoptic Gospel.²
2. One parable (the Sower) that features in all three Synoptic Gospels, and in a highly similar form, allowing us to compare their respective arrangements of this parable.
3. Parables with an immediate literary context dominated by narrative, others where it is dominated by discourse, and one where it is dominated by parables (the Hidden Talent).
4. One parable that heads up a collation of parables (the Two Sons) and one that is located within a collation (the Hidden Talent).
5. Parables with varying levels of accompanying Plain Speech related directly to the parable, including one with an extended interpretation (the Sower) and one without any dedicated introduction or concluding comment (the Hidden Talent). Also, I have chosen parables with varying kinds of accompanying Plain Speech (e.g. questions, dialogue, imperative, saying).
6. Parables having a range of audiences (e.g. disciples, crowds, Jewish leadership) and different kinds of precipitating circumstance.
7. Parables where the Underlying Circumstance is an actual narrative circumstance, and others where it is a (future) circumstance anticipated in prior discourse.
8. Parables with varying levels of Distance between Story and Underlying Circumstance, including one Single Indirect Narrative (the Rich Fool).
9. Some parables having motifs with well established symbolic meaning and others lacking such motifs.

This variety is designed to maximise - as far as is possible when working with a subset of the Synoptic parables - the extent to which the conclusions drawn from my analysis apply to the NT parables of Jesus in general. Also, I have chosen several parables (the Barren Fig Tree, the Rich Fool, the Judge and the Widow, and the Hidden Talent) where my readings have reasonable thematic coherence with well established and widely attested lines of interpretation,³ in order to make it easier to identify what is distinctive about my methodology and associated interpretive outcomes. My readings are presented here and in the following chapter without concluding comment, being discussed and evaluated at length in Chapter VII.

² Also, the Hidden Talent is generally regarded, within Q scholarship, as originating in Q (see e.g. Roth, Parables, 108 and 108n100).
³ Especially among scholars giving due weight to the parables’ literary context.

Setting

Immediately prior to this parable, the Lukan Jesus anticipates a period of absence from the disciples, and their unfulfilled longing for the day of his coming (17.22). The disciples are assured that the day of the Son of man will come, “suddenly, ubiquitously and unmistakably”⁴ (17.23-4), bringing judgment and deliverance (17.25-30) and a final division of humanity (17.32-35).⁵ In that day, “the destiny of all people will be determined on the basis of their conduct during the ‘days’ preceding the End”.⁶ While much of 17.26-37 is descriptive, it clearly has didactic intent. The disciples’ unfulfilled longing for the Son of Man (17.22) must not cause them to become consumed within the ordinary affairs of life (17.27-8) or attached to the things of this age (17.31-3). The chilling recollection of Lot’s wife (17.29-32) anticipates the possibility the day of the Son of man will find some disciples with divided loyalties and affections.⁷

Luke’s introduction to the parable (18.1) returns to the circumstances described in 17.22. The entire pericope (17.22-18.8) anticipates a “time of sufficient duration and difficulty”,⁸ where the disciples, experiencing “oppression and maltreatment”,⁹ may be tempted to lose heart and fall away (18.1: ἐγκακέω). Jesus counsels renunciation of those things that make up life in the present age (17.33), and then - through Story and Plain Speech - directs the disciples to prayer (18.1), as the means of sustaining their faith and faithfulness in the present age.

⁴ Holmås, Prayer, 138.
⁵ See Carroll, Response, 93 on use of ἐλεύσονται ἡµέραι (17.22) in prophetic literature for a time of future judgment and distress (citing Amos 4.2; Jer 7.32, 16.14; Zech 14.1); cf. also Luke’s own use in 19.43; 21.6; 23.29. See Nolland, Luke II, 860-1 on reference to Noah and Lot (17.26-30) as indicating “deliverance as well as judgment” at the coming of the Son of man.
⁶ Carroll, Response, 88. He cites the final emphatic position of πᾶς (17.27b,29b) as evidence for the “universal impact of the coming of the Son of man” (90).
⁷ See Carroll, Response, 90-94: “a note of warning for Jesus’ disciples” (90), lest being “diverted by daily activities” they lose “the edge of eschatological expectancy” (94); also Catchpole, “Son”, 85; Edwards, Luke, 495.
⁸ Holmås, Prayer, 139; citing “the reference to suffering in 17.25, the forensic imagery of the parable…and the stress on the granting of justice to the wronged” that features in the parable and subsequent Plain Speech (139). Similarly Forbes, God, 209: an implied “setting of rejection and affliction”; Marshall, Luke, 671: “the parable presupposes…persecution for disciples”; Bailey, Peasant, 130: “intensified rejection and hostility”; Eddy, “Transformation”, 125; Bovon, “Apocalyptic”, 387-8 (re the significance of βοάω). I note that 17.25,33 evokes earlier passages in Luke where the disciples are told they will share in Jesus’ suffering (e.g. 9.21-27).
⁹ Carroll, Response, 92.
¹⁰ See Carroll, Response, 91 on the impossibility of “business as usual” in this age if one is to be ready and willing to participate in the day of the Son of man. Nolland, Luke II, 864 captures the spirit of the passage well: “only the one for whom the [coming of the Son of man] is everything and all else is valueless by comparison will be able to escape in the final moment of crisis”.

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Story

A corrupt judge refuses to grant a widow justice against her adversary,\(^{11}\) despite her many requests. But after a period of time the judge comes to regard the widow as troublesome, and recognises the potential for her ongoing (public?) appeals for justice to undermine his position.\(^{12}\) He decides to grant her justice.

Audience Engagement

The Story begins by describing a situation familiar to Jesus’ audience. The judge and the widow would have been perceived initially as stereotypical figures,\(^{13}\) “occupants of different ends of the continuum of power and privilege”.\(^{14}\) The widow “symbolised the ultimate state of vulnerability, status deprivation, and need”.\(^{15}\) She has been wronged in some way and seeks justice;\(^{16}\) her very livelihood may depend on the outcome of the case.\(^{17}\) The judge belongs to the urban elite. His

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\(^{11}\) Possibly he has refused even to hear the case e.g. Cotter, “Parable”, 336-7; Bailey, Peasant, 133-4; Herzog, Parables, 226.

\(^{12}\) While ἐμπιστοξεύω is regularly translated in the ‘weakened sense... of ‘annoy/exhaust/wear out’... such a sense is difficult to document [elsewhere]’ (Nolland, Luke II, 869). It is, in my view, best to read ἐμπιστοξεύω in the figurative sense of causing shame or loss of reputation, something that may have begun to occur already (the verb is present active subjunctive) and that the judge fears will intensify to the point of undermining his position and role. For this figurative sense see: Herzog, Parables, 229-31; Derrett, Studies I, 43-5; Marshall, Luke, 673: “give him a bad name”; Kartzow, “Rewritten”, 217-223, emphasising the social power of “gossip”; Reid, “Godly”, 29: “to slander’ or ‘to besmirch one’s character”; Liefeld, “Parables”, 257; Hicks, “Parable”, 218; Janssen, “Rechnet”, 257: the judge fears “eine öffentliche Ehrverletzung”; Nolland, Luke II, 867: “utterly shame me”, noting the “root developed a use in the direction of ‘shame/dishonour/defamation”’ in some classical writings. Examples of metaphorical usage in classical texts are: (i) Cicero, Letters to Atticus, I.20.5: the consulship of Aulus’ son is described as a “blot [ἐμπιστοξεύω] in our Great Man’s copybook”; (ii) Plutarch, Moralia, XII.921-2: amateurs in lunar science are said to “blacken the Moon’s eye [ἐμπιστοξεύω], defiling her with blemishes and bruises”. Some scholars reject this reading because it appears inconsistent with the judge as having no respect for persons. But as Herzog, Parables, 230-1 rightly sees, in a “dyadic society” his ability to function as judge is dependent on some level of public confidence being retained in his position (230). Thus the widow tests “the limits of his expediency” (230) and prevails (similarly Derrett, Studies I, 45; Merz, “Woman”, 63; Hicks, “Parable”, 218). Schottroff, Lydia’s, 104; Jones, Studying, 331; Cotter, “Parable”, 338-42 see the threat of physical violence though most regard this as practically unlikely (e.g. Kartzow, “Rewritten”, 216).

\(^{13}\) See Scott, Hear, 36 re Jesus’ parables generally: “the characters are stock characters, the plots are stock plots... everydayness is part of the conventional character of parables”. Regarding this parable see Merz, “Woman”, 58: “a typical situation”; Kartzow, “Rewritten”, 211; Kensky, “Courtrooms”, 72; Catchpole, “Son”, 89: “typical persons corresponding to a standard pattern”, citing similar material in Wisdom 1-4; Green, Luke, 639: the judge and widow are “prototypes”; Cotter, “Parable”, 332 on this judge as “the norm” in classical world.

\(^{14}\) Green, Luke, 639.

\(^{15}\) Green, Luke, 640; similarly Janssen, “Rechnet”, 255. Hence why the widow is recognised in the OT as needing special protection (for the OT background see e.g. Scott, Hear, 180-1; Praeder, Word, 52-7; Snodgrass, Stories, 450-1). The widows discussed in Cotter, “Parable”, 333-4 (also Levine, Stories, 229-30; Deines, “Gewaltbereite”, 76-78) are all highly exceptional figures in Israel’s history. Even if the Lukan widow can be regarded as comparable to these exceptional women by the end of the story (unlikely in my view, given her cause is personal rather than corporate), her initial appearance evokes the stereotypical rather than the exceptional.

\(^{16}\) See Bailey, Peasant, 133-4 on the likely assumptions behind 18.2-4a which cohere with reading the Story as having stereotypical characters and plot. While ἐχθρίκεω can refer to taking vengeance as well as obtaining justice and ἀντιδίκος can mean enemy as well as opponent, the ability of the widow to cause the judge public dishonour suggests a just cause. Cotter, “Parable”, 336-7 finds these to be “regular legal terms” in contemporary Graeco-Roman court documents, with ἐχθρίκεω meaning “set things right” and ἀντιδίκος referring to the accused (a important finding given Luke’s readership). Contra Levine, Stories, 224-5, the “ambivalence” (?) of the term is not license to regard the widow as wanting to “punish” her opponent, so that he might “suffer” or “be executed”.

\(^{17}\) Herzog, Parables, 228.
ungodly character, explicitly described, is demonstrated in his failure to deliver timely justice to the widow.\textsuperscript{18} He will be perceived in a “completely negative way” by the audience.\textsuperscript{19}

In the opening lines of the Story (18.2-3), the audience will recognise an \textit{almost} familiar situation. A widow’s quest for justice against a more powerful adversary, frustrated by an ungodly judge, was an experience undoubtedly familiar to them.\textsuperscript{20} The audience know the usual outcome.\textsuperscript{21} They will be surprised by how the widow breaks with her stereotype, and in violation of social norms keeps coming to the judge demanding justice.\textsuperscript{22} The judge’s consistent refusal of the widow’s recurring demands for justice\textsuperscript{23} creates narrative tension for the audience who will want to see how this battle of wills is resolved. Does Jesus have something in mind that would turn the plot in an unexpected direction? The judge in the end acts, true to form and expectation, out of pure self-

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\textsuperscript{18} Some argue for a positive or morally neutral view of the judge’s character (e.g. Levine, \textit{Stories}, 233-5; Hedrick, \textit{Parables}, 195-6; the scholars listed in Curkpatrick, “\textit{Dissonance},” 114-5n24). Niemand, “Übersetzungsprobleme,” 113, rightly observes that to see reference in 18.2 to judicial independence represents “der gewaltsame Eintrag modern-aufgeklärter Rechtsideologeme und somit eine grandiose Fehldeutung!” The judge’s refusal to grant justice for the widow during a significant period of time (18.4) and his allowing self-interest to direct the course of justice (18.5) make a positive moral assessment difficult (see also Dinkler, “Thoughts”, 384, 390-1 for how the judge’s monologue provides a “reliable indicator” of the person’s character, intentions and “posture toward God”). For τὸν μὴ φοβούμενον καὶ ἄνθρωπον μὴ ἐντυπωσίμονος as proverbial for wickedness see Scott, \textit{Hear}, 179-80; Freed, “\textit{Parable}” 42-3; Cotter, “\textit{Parable}”, 331; Snodgrass, \textit{Stories}, 735-6n62; Praeder, \textit{Word}, 58-9.

\textsuperscript{19} Cotter, “\textit{Parable},” 332. Various scholars have sought to explain the background to the widow’s claim and the judge’s delay, but often going beyond what can be known with historical certainty, or assumed in relation to the Story itself. In my view Herzog, \textit{Parables}, 229-31 does the best job at reconstructing the likely historical dynamics of the situation; also Merz, “Woman”, 58-60 provides a judicious assessment of likely audience assumptions about the opening scene (18.2-4a). On the many ‘unknowns’ of the Story, see Metzger, “\textit{God},” 46; also Scott, \textit{Hear}, 183-4 (noting also gaps in our historical knowledge and how these do not affect the function of the parable); Fitzmyer, \textit{Luke II}, 1178 re Derrett’s “distracting trivia about Jewish courts and secular judges; the parable does not depend on such details”; also Snodgrass, \textit{Stories}, 454 on how our knowledge of “the judicial system in first century Palestine” is “sketchy at best”, but a reading of the parable does not require further detail.

\textsuperscript{20} So Green, \textit{Luke}, 640: a “well-known topos”; Schottroff, \textit{Lydia’s}, 101-2, 247n198: “the everyday reality of widow’s hardships that was known to everyone”; Scott, \textit{Hear}, 180.

\textsuperscript{21} E.g. Nolland, \textit{Luke II}, 867: a widow at the mercy of a judge described as in 18.2b “seems to doom any prospect of justice”, so that “the hearer is prepared for a total failure of justice” (871); similarly S. Wright, \textit{Storyteller}, 134; Janssen, “Rechnet”, 257: “Die Wahrscheinlichkeit, dass die Geschichte auch anders hätte ausgehen können [to its eventual ending], ist hoch”; Merz, “Woman”, 60: the situation described in 18.2-4a “initially prompts a perception of reality that leads to despair”.

\textsuperscript{22} So Merz, “Die Starke”, 669: “Die Witwe sich in einer typischen Situation befindet, aber auf wenig typische Weise agiert. Typisch ist, dass sie Schwierigkeiten hat, ihre Rechtsansprüche...In jeder Hinsicht ungewöhnlich sind ihre wiederholten Annäherungen an den Richter und die Wahl ihrer Worte”; similarly Green, \textit{Luke}, 640: the widow “assumes unusual responsibility for her own well-being” by continually returning to the magistrate; hers is an “astonishingly uncharacteristic initiative”. Cotter, “\textit{Parable}”, 333-6, 338 cites her involvement in court (as a woman) and lack of respectable address to the judge (her “defiant bossy order”) as a violation of Graeco-Roman social norms; see also Schottroff, \textit{Lydia’s}, 104; Scott, \textit{Hear}, 183.

\textsuperscript{23} The woman’s persistence is emphasised by her coming repeatedly (the ‘imperfect ἔχειν [18.3] ... is iterative and suggests repeated appeals’ (Bock, \textit{Luke II}, 1448)) and in the judge’s monologue, with ἐπιρέχειν and ὑποτιμάω as present active (thus, persist in...). In 18.5, εἶς τελός probably modifies ἔχομεν (present tense) and is thus “continually” (see Culy et.al., \textit{Luke}, 562 on this reading, though noting how it could also modify ὑποτιμάω; either way he refers to an \textit{ongoing} problem). That the judge refuses repeatedly and over a period of time, see also: ἐνὶ χρόνον (18.4) is indefinite, thus “for a time” (Bock, \textit{Luke II}, 1448); μείτα δὲ ταὐτά (18.4) further suggests the passage of time and the plural ταὐτά may point to more than one previous encounter.
interest. The ultimate surprise in the Story is that the judge's self-interested action leads directly to justice for the widow.

**Significance**

Ch 18 begins with no change in "scene, topic, or character". The delay in the day of the Son of man, the disciples' longing for justice during that time, and the associated risk of disillusionment and loss of faith, combine to constitute the Underlying Circumstance to which the parable speaks. The unity and literary coherence of the pericope is seen in how instruction and warnings (17.22-37), Story (18.2-5), and framing Plain Speech (18.1,6-8) all speak to these issues. The disciples' unfulfilled ἐπιθυμία for the day of the Son of man during a time when they will not see it (17.22) explains the necessity of actions that prevent them losing heart during that time (18.1), and is the context and stimulus of the elect's cries for justice (18.7), which have their parallel in the widow's actions. Throughout the pericope there is also recurring reference to assurance of justice. The just judgment of God will come on the whole earth (17.27-30); the judge resolves to grant the widow justice (18.5); God will ποιήσῃ τὴν ἐκδίκησιν for his elect (18.7-8). These assurances are best understood to refer to eschatological justice: (i) the parable is framed by material that refers to the day/s and the coming of the Son of Man (17.22-37; 18.8b) giving the whole section an eschatological focus; (ii) the parable speaks to the disciples' longing that is unfulfilled in this age (17.22); (iii) the use of εὑρίσκω, ἐκλεκτός, and ἐγκακέω in 18.1-8 give the passage an eschatological flavour. Thus "Luke's concern in 18.1 is not prayer in general, but praying... with respect to the eschaton".

The parable stands at a Distance from the circumstances 17.22-37 anticipates, from which a new perspective on those circumstances may be opened for the disciples, providing hope,

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26 So Marshall, Luke, 676: 18.8b “links the parable to 17.22-37, and is clearly meant to be eschatological”; similarly Cranfield, "Parable", 298; Catchpole, "Son", 85-6.

27 On ἐκλεκτός, originally language referring to the privileged status of Israel, as developing “an eschatological orientation” in Second Temple and Qumran literature see Nolland, Luke II, 869; TDNT IV, 183-4: in apocalyptic material, “a common feature is the eschatological emphasis”; in the Synoptics, it “is always used in an eschatological sense” (186-189). Thus Marshall, Luke, 675: “the use of the term implies that eschatological vindication is in view, and not a purely this-worldly answer to prayer”.

28 Snodgrass, Stories, 457 (italics original); also Lischer, Parables, 115: the parable exhorts “praying incessantly for the Parousia, the ultimate vindication of God’s justice”; similarly Bock, Luke II, 1447; Nolland, Luke II, 867: “we should think here not of prayer in general but of prayer in connection with the longing of 17.22...”; Blomberg, Interpreting, 271.
encouragement and exhortation. The Distance is particularly great. The widow’s social status and gender separate her from the disciples as does her social isolation and marginal status. The judge might symbolise God, except that he is described in ways that set him against God. Thus the precise relationship between the Story and the disciples’ future situation is not clear with reference to the Story alone. Distance is tempered by the analogous nature of the widow’s (initially) futile quest for justice and the disciples’ unfulfilled longing for the day of the Son of Man (17.22). Accompanying Plain Speech reinforces this interpretive relationship: the ongoing cries of the elect for vindication (18.7, together with πάντοτε προσεύχεσθαι (18.1)) parallel the widow’s persistent demands for justice (18.3). The double use of ἐκδίκω in the parable and the double use of ἐκδίκησις in 18.7-8 provide further Connectedness. But even with these connections, we are still left ignorant of the necessity of prayer (18.1), and wondering whether God is like the unjust judge. Here 18.6 plays a crucial role. The focus on the judge in 18.6-8 is not intended to alter the emphasis of the parable from the widow to the judge, but to provide guidance at the point where Difference between Story (unjust judge) and Circumstance (God during the delay?) are greatest, and thus where interpretive signals are most needed.

Changing the Face of the Matter

The coherence of the passage is seen not only in its thematic unity (above) but also in how Story and accompanying Plain Speech interact and inform each other to achieve a stated didactic aim. The purpose of the parable (18.1) is to demonstrate the necessity for the disciples to πάντοτε προσεύχεσθαι while they wait for the day of the Son of Man, rather than losing heart because of trouble and delay. In what follows I argue that the necessity of prayer is demonstrated as the disciples are given new self-understanding and a new perspective on prayer.

The Disciples and the Justice of the Kingdom of God

In the opening scene of the parable, the widow experiences injustice and the refusals of a corrupt judge, a situation of apparent powerlessness and hopelessness. Analogously, the disciples will appear helpless and powerless as they experience trouble and persecution while longing to see

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31 For God as judge see e.g Gen 18.25; 1 Sam 2.10; Ps 7.11; 58.11; 75.7; 96.10-13; 98.9; Is 33.22; Ez 34.17-20.

32 It is widely seen to require explanation e.g. Herzog, Parables, 218; Scott, Hear, 177; Forbes, God, 199; Mertz, “Woman”, 52: “the contextless parable on its own does not force the reader to interpret it in any one particular way”; Snodgrass, Stories, 449: there is “no hint as to the referent(s) of the parable”; Hicks, “Parable”, 212.

33 See Wallace, Greek, 124 re ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτός (18.7): the genitive of time indicates the time in which the prayers take place; thus not 24/7 prayer, but prayer during the day and night. Thus regular and ongoing (each day and night) prayer, rather than continuous prayer.

34 Contra e.g. Jeremias, Parables, 156; Curkpatrick, “Dissonance”, 108-9, arguing against the coherence of the pericope.

35 See Blass et. al., Greek, 207 on πρὸς τό: “denotes purpose (or result)”; Culy et. al., Luke, 561: it indicates purpose; thus πρὸς τὸ δε结合起来 may be read as “shorthand” for expressing “in order to show the necessity”.

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the day of the Son of Man, but not seeing it (as anticipated in 17.22-25). The natural tendency of people in such circumstances is to give up, to accept the status quo, to abandon hope. In his analysis of the parable, Herzog observes how “at some fundamental level” victims of injustice must “collude in their oppression for the system to work”. This collusion typically takes the form of “accept[ance] of the inevitable and submit[ssion] to the injustice of the system”, and arises out of “fatalism and despair that anything will change”. These things might well be expected of a widow facing systemic injustice. Jesus perceives that his disciples are vulnerable to similar collusion with the unjust and faithless system of the age, which may take the form of despair (18.1: ἐγκακέω) and/or deliberate participation in that system (17.26-30).

As discussed above, the Story opens with a familiar scene of injustice involving stereotypical figures and then moves on to describe the unexpected and atypical action of the widow. In this way the narrative encourages the audience (the disciples) to identify with the widow (in that they too face injustice from a position of social weakness), only then to subvert their view of the widow as a vulnerable and helpless victim. Refusing to accept her situation, the widow prevails against injustice and against the unjust, and in doing so opens up an analogous possibility for the disciples. Even amidst the trouble and injustice they encounter while awaiting the day of the Son of Man, the disciples are not hopeless or helpless but rather are the elect of God, whose prayers are heard by God (18.7-8), and who (like the widow) may play a direct role in bringing the fullness of the justice of the kingdom. The widow’s transformation within the Story, from victim of injustice to conqueror of injustice, when brought in interpretive dialogue with the description of the disciples in 18.7-8, is designed to bring about (for the disciples) what Moxnes has called a “decentering of perspective” in which there is a “reversal of the world as it is presently known and legitimised”. As a result of

36 See similarly Bovon, Luke II, 539: “God’s chosen ones… are here compared to a widow… with God absent and the community being in a state of social powerlessness”; Johnson, Luke, 273: readers may “easily see themselves as the widow, subject to oppression and delayed retribution”. That the widow depicts Jesus’ disciples in their trouble and waiting perhaps coheres with how “widow” may be used metaphorically to describe the people of God (and especially Jerusalem) in times of exile and desolation (e.g. Lam 1.1; Baruch 4.12), even while awaiting the deliverance of their God (Is 49.21 (LXX); 54.4). On this potential symbolism see Stählin,”Witwe”, 8-10,15-16; Merz, “Die Starke”, 676.

37 Herzog, Parables, 231.

38 Herzog, Parables, 230-1.

39 On ἐγκακέω see BDAG, 272: “to lose one’s motivation in continuing a desirable pattern of conduct or activity, lose enthusiasm, be discouraged”; TDNT III, 486: “to fail” or to “grow weary”. Carroll, Response, 98 sees how delay may cause “disillusionment and despair”; similarly Mappes, “What”, 301: “languishing or giving up”; Bock, Luke II, 1447n6: “almost has the force ‘do not give up faith’”.

40 See Herzog, Parables, 232 on how the widow manages “to break the mould”. This parable is included in his section on parables that help the oppressed identify actions within their power to “transform the dead end limits of oppression into the boundaries where genuine social change might begin” (Herzog, Parables, 171).

41 Moxnes, Economy, 168.
this reversal, the poor and powerless “in the company of Jesus” are seen, and come to see
themselves, as those “upon whom the future of the world is dependent”.42

This new self-understanding is required to prepare the disciples for the crucial role they will play
during the days of waiting for the Son of man. But precisely how will the disciples achieve these
things?

The Necessity of Prayer (1): Bringing the Justice of the Kingdom

Reading the Story in dialogue with 18.6-8 invests the “passionate cries”43 of the elect (18.7) with
potency and significance in redemptive history. Just as the widow’s persistent demands contribute
directly to her securing justice, so the disciples’ analogous prayers play a direct role in bringing
about their eschatological vindication. Merz has drawn attention to the widow’s “active role in
carrying out the will of God”,44 so that the parable speaks to “the role that the individual believer is
called to play”, in order to “increase the capacity for calculated action” toward “the eschatological
realisation of salvation”.45 This aspect of the parable finds support in the proposal in Culy, et. al.
that the “natural way” to read καὶ μακροθυμεῖ ἐπ᾽ αὐτοῖς; (18.7b) is as a “statement of God’s
patience toward his people”, so that the sense of 18.7 is best understood as “Will God not certainly
give justice to his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night? Isn’t he patiently waiting for them
to do just that?”.46 This translation invests the elect’s desperate cries (18.7a) with causal
significance in bringing about the justice of the kingdom. In this way prayer is characterised as a

42 Moxnes, Economy, 168, re Jesus’ parables generally. Moxnes’ comments here are particularly helpful for understanding the role of
parables directed to Jesus’ disciples for preparing them to lead his mission after his departure (see also in this thesis on the Hidden
Talent and the Sower). See also the insightful analysis by Merz, “Woman, 73-5 on how (in relation to the disciples) there occurs
throughout Luke a “transformation of objects of care into models of a conduct that changes the world” (75).

see TDNT I:625-8: it is “the needy cry of the oppressed and downtrodden to God” (625-6), including that of the widow (e.g. Ex
22.21-24), and of God’s people in distress in the Psalms (e.g. Ps 55.16-17). See Silva, Dictionary I, 522: in LXX the “word group
expresses the extremities of human needs and joys” and is sometimes used in an eschatological sense (e.g. Is 40.3; 54.1).

44 Merz, “Woman”, 65-66; rather than (characteristically) being a “defenceless victim or a powerless recipient of God’s care”.
Knowing she has divine justice on her side, the widow “takes her demand for justice into her own hands” (66).

45 Merz, “Woman”, 70, reading the parable within a paradigm of seeking this worldly justice, but capturing the Rhetorical Dynamics of
the parable.

46 Culy, et.al., Luke, 565; suggesting 18.7b may be translated as “Isn’t he patiently waiting for them to [cry out day and night]?”.
This reading commends itself in that it allows μακροθυμεῖ (18.7b) to take the normal sense of God’s forbearance toward his people in
the present time (see the discussion in what follows and further on μακροθυμεῖ in n56), and suggests an implied rationale for God’s
forbearance (not made explicit in 18.7b) that relates directly to the contextual concern to sustain the elect in regular and persistent
prayer for the eschatological justice of God.
weapon of the (otherwise) weak and vulnerable, in the face of persecution and injustice, the nexus of a divine/human partnership through which the justice of the kingdom comes fully and finally.47

The pericope also gives insight into how prayer facilitates the coming of the kingdom of God. The parable’s portrayal of an ironic collusion of interests, so that the widow’s demands and the judge’s self-interest align to bring justice, demonstrates the potential for prayer to bring a convergence of human longing and divine action. The imperative that follows the parable (18.6) directs our attention to the judge’s monologue (highlight self-interest as the basis of the judge’s actions), suggesting it carries considerable interpretive importance.48 This imperative (18.6) acts as an explanatory hinge, linking the judge’s resolve to grant the widow justice (18.4-5) to the strong words of divine assurance of justice for the elect (18.7a).49 But the precise basis for this assurance is not specified in 18.7a, a question presupposing an affirmative answer, but lacking obvious rationale as to why.50 I suggest that the judge’s monologue, which 18.6 specifically directs our attention to, provides the rationale.51 The judge’s need to act, to preserve his position and honour, suggests by analogy that God will similarly act to bring justice for the elect, in order to preserve his own honour and reputation. God’s honour is presumably being called into question by the long delay in the coming of the Son of man.52 The circumstances described in 17.22 must eventually create something of a “crisis of honour” for God, where his faithfulness is brought into question as his eschatological justice appears delayed interminably. This crisis of honour is greatly heightened by the loud cries and lamentations of God’s own people (18.7), which cannot remain unanswered without reflecting badly (and presumably publicly) on the God to whom they are directed. Thus the prayers of God’s elect bring salvation history to that point where divine intent and resolve align with the elect’s longing and loud cries, so that it becomes necessary at last for God to act in order to

47 Metzger, “God”, 51-3 invokes “process theology” to explore this dynamic; the passage assumes “the divine nature is dynamic and that human experience, decisions, and actions may affect God…Creatures’ actions therefore play a decisive role in determining how God responds to the world and what our future will look like…”. Cf. Blomberg, Interpreting, 273-4; Weaver, “Luke”, 319 on prayer as “collaboration” in divine justice; Wenham, Parables, 189-90: prayer is “a weapon of divine power… the most powerful means we have of collaborating in God’s work. God does not bring about his kingdom independently of his people, but through his people”.

48 The arresting aorist imperative ἀκούσατε, and that it comes from the mouth of ὁ κύριος, invests the monologue with particular importance.

49 Wallace, Greek, 468: οὐ μὴ with the subjunctive is the “strongest way to negate something in Greek”; Marshall, Luke, 673: it is “used here to give a strong question an emphatic answer, ‘Yes’”.

50 The widespread view among scholars that a qal wahomer argument is present is not demanded by the text. Snodgrass, Stories, 457 is typical: for the ‘analogical contrast to work, the parable presupposes that people praying are in a much more advantageous relation to a righteous God…than the widow is to the unrighteous and uncaring judge’. The key term is “presupposes” - this interpretation rests on what is unstated. My reading seeks to give due weight to the substance of the judge’s monologue (to which 18.6 explicitly refers).

51 Following 18.6 (note δέ), 7a relates in some way to the judge’s monologue. The point of comparison could be that justice is done in both instances because of another’s persistence (e.g. Metzger, “God”, 49 seeing a comparison between earthly and heavenly spheres, though he does not satisfactorily explain the force of the comparison i.e. why it is the same between the two spheres). The reason why the judge decides to grant justice (the substance of his monologue) is surely also important.

52 That this was an issue in the early church is suggested by 2 Peter 3.1-10 (esp 4).
preserve the honour of his name.53 Hence the necessity for the disciples to πάντοτε προσεύχεσθαι.

The Necessity of Prayer (2): Generative Grounds of Faith

In 18.7-8, divine and human action are repeatedly juxtaposed. In 18.7a divine assurance that God will grant justice is combined with a description of the elect crying out to God day and night. Similarly, 18.8b combines assurance of the Son of man’s coming, with a question concerning faith among humanity. There may be a further similar combination in 18.7b-8a. While a majority of scholars see καὶ μακροθυμεῖ ἐπὶ αὐτοῖς; (18.7b) as referring to divine delay (e.g. NRSV: “will he delay long in helping them?”54), this involves a reading of μακροθυμεῖ ὃς for which there is little precedent.55 The normal meaning, of God’s forbearance toward his people on account of their sinfulness,56 still surely informs the word to some extent. Thus alongside assurance of God’s timely57 justice (18.8a) stands a reminder that God is in the present time extending forbearance to his elect (18.7b), perhaps suggesting opportunity for repentance58 and development of faithfulness. This juxtaposition of divine and human motifs may be summarised as follows:

53 On prayer that appeals to the preservation of God’s honour see e.g. Ex 32.11-13; Num 14.13-16; Deut 9.25-29; Josh 7.9; Ps 25.11; 31.3; 79.8-10; 109.20-7; 143.11; Jer 14.7-9; 14.19-22; Dan 9.15-19; cf. Ps 74.22. For prayers that imply delay in God’s response and the need for God to act to protect his honour among the nations, see e.g. Ps 35.17-28; 42.3,10; 79.10; 80.4-7; Joel 2.17; Mic 7.10; cf. Ps 13.1-2; 90.13-15; Ez 36.22-23; Hab 1.2-4; Zech 1.12-17. The story of the Jewish heroine Judith shares motifs with the parable (widow seeking God’s salvation/justice (for Israel) against an adversary) and its frame (her fervent prayers for God’s intervention on Israel’s behalf). It is striking that in her prayer, prior to setting off for the Assyrian camp, she twice identifies herself as a widow (9.4,9) and appeals to God to save his people, so that all peoples might ἔπιγνωσον τὸν θεόν τῷ θεῷ τοῦ σώζοντος κράτισι καὶ σωτηρίας (9.14).


55 So Snodgrass, Stories, 459: “the evidence for ‘delay’ is not strong”. The main justification provided by scholars for this reading is an appeal to parallelism in Sirach 35.19 (LXX): καὶ ὁ κύριος ὁ θεός ἡ γῆ ἄνθρωποι ἂν μὴ μακροθυμήσῃ ἐπὶ αὐτοῖς. But as Snodgrass, Stories, 738-9n109 rightly points out, μακροθυμήσῃ and ἁρπάζῃ are “not merely synonyms”.

56 Μακροθυμεῖ in 18.7 is often understood in the sense of “delay”. But the more normal use of μακροθυμεῖ is to “have patience, be long-suffering, forbearing” (see e.g. Filzmyer, Luke II, 1160; BDAG, 612; TDNT IV, 374-87: merciful delay of God’s wrath (376); Catchpole, “Son”, exploring the theological matrix of thought in other LXX/NT passages where the verb or noun occur, finds reference to God’s forbearance in “the merciful restriction of judgment [in the present time]” (104)). Scholars recognising the normal sense of μακροθυμεῖ in reading 8.7b include Bailey, Peasant, 137-140: “also he is slow to anger over them”, understanding μακροθυμεῖ as referring to “God’s willingness to put his anger far away because of the sins of the elect”; Nolland, Luke II, 869: “He [will indeed show himself] long-suffering with them”, seeing reference to God’s restraint toward the elect; Johnson, Luke, 270: “show patience toward them” noting the “overwhelming use of makrothymoe and its cognates is…juridicial restraint and long-suffering, or tolerance… it is a quality most associated in the LXX with God… the dominant NT usage supports [this] reading”; Snodgrass, Stories, 459: “[given that] he is mercifully patient with them?”. This may then lead to 18.7b being understood as an assurance i.e. because God is forbearing, surely he will grant justice to his elect.

57 The majority of scholars read ἐν τόπῳ as “quickly”, though some argue for “suddenly” (see the lists in Bock, Luke II, 1455). The sense of “suddenly” coheres contextually with 17.26-30 (so Snodgrass, Stories, 459). See the analysis of Edwards, Luke, 500-1, who argues for “certainly” or “surely”, which also coheres well in the context as repeat assurance.

58 See Nolland, Luke II, 871: a time of “discipline” prior to vindication; Snodgrass, Stories, 459: “the implication of [18.7b] is that God’s people need to examine themselves”; TDNT IV, 377-9 on the connection between forbearance and mercy/repentance in OT (377-8) and for repentance as a rationale for God’s forbearance in Rabbinic writings (379); hence 18.7 makes reference to a time for “necessary interval of grace which should kindle the faith and prayer that moves mountains” (381). Cf. how in Matt 18.26 ὁ ἄνθρωπος ὁ ἄνθρωπος allows for settlement of debts; also the connection between forbearance and mercy/repentance in Rom 2.4; 9.22-3; 2 Peter 3.9,15.
This repeat juxtaposition of divine assurance and human responsibility creates a didactic tension. The disciples are living in the present age between promise (of justice) and warning (of loss of faith), while awaiting the day of the Son of man. The disciples’ unfulfilled longing (17.22), raising questions concerning God’s faithfulness, is acknowledged in the assurances provided of the coming of the Son of Man. At the same time, the passage insists on the importance of the disciples’ own faithfulness if they are to participate in that day (18.8b).

I suggest that the purpose of this didactic tension is exhortative; it is designed to direct the disciples to prayer as the discipline that will sustain faith (and faithfulness) during that period, preventing them from giving up, and thus ensuring their participation in the day of the Son of man. The interrogative particle ἆρα (18.8b) poses a question, expecting a negative answer, that functions in a similar way to a question implied in the parable’s opening scene (i.e. “will the widow get justice?”). The widow typically does not; hence the surprise of her persistence and the justice it secures. Similarly, 18.8b is designed to highlight how faith does not come in the ordinary course of events, or through participation in the ordinary affairs of the world (17.26-28). Rather faith is the product of the elect’s regular prayers for justice, and through persisting in prayer they sustain that faith throughout suffering and delay.

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59 Thus evoking the need for eschatological alertness and faithfulness as explored in 17.22-37. On 18.8b, see Marshall, Luke, 670: “the decisive question”; Fitzmyer, Luke II, 1181: “the real question” (italics original); Edwards, Luke, 501: “the ultimate concern rests with the human side of the equation. Jesus is more concerned with anthropodicy than with theodicy…God is not the only one in the dock; humanity is also in the dock” (italics original); Green, Luke, 642-3. Linnemann, Parables, 122 catches the force of the question: “God will not fail, but how does it stand with you”; also Delling, “Gleichnis, 25: “Die sich als die Gemeinde Gottes wissen, fragen danach, ob Gott zu seinem Wort stehe — Gott fragt, ob sie zu und bei dem Menschensohn stehen werden”. Regarding ἆρα, see BDAG, 127: a “marker of a tone of suspense or impatience in interrogation”; Johnson, Luke, 270: it gives the question a “tentative, even troubled character”.

60 Cf. Fitzmyer, Luke II, 1177 who catches this sense of 18.8b: the rhetorical question “implies that such faith will not be found… unless his disciples have learned the ‘need to pray always’, and thus ‘implies a call for vigilance’. Snodgrass, Stories sees the connection in regard to the passage as a whole: “the maintenance of faith depends on persistence in prayer” (457); thus prayer is both “evidence of faithfulness and a primary path to alertness and faithfulness” (462). Similarly Hultgren, Parables, 259: “only as persons persist in prayer will they persist in faith”.

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As noted above, the widow’s ongoing petitions prevent her from colluding with the judge in perpetuating a system of injustice. Her petitions orient her continually toward justice, the only outcome she will accept. Analogously, it is the ongoing prayer of the elect for eschatological justice that sets them apart from (and in opposition to) the injustice of the systems of this age, which their prayers daily denounce and challenge. By labelling this system as injustice (in their prayers), the disciples continually orient their lives away from that injustice and toward the day of the Son of man and the justice he will bring. Thus a further necessity of prayer is that it is both act of faith and generative grounds of faith and faithfulness.

In summary, the parable - in dialogue with its Lukan frame - substantiates the need for regular and ongoing prayer by providing the disciples with new self-understanding and a new perspective on prayer. The disciples are not helpless or hopeless, even amidst great trouble and persecution; rather through regular and ongoing prayer they can help hasten the coming of the Son of Man, bringing the fullness and justice of the kingdom of God. The disciples are vulnerable to temptation and to giving up; it is regular and ongoing prayer that will sustain them in faith and faithfulness (through trouble and persecution) so that they may participate fully in the day of the Son of Man.

Reading the Judge and the Widow in Luke-Acts

The “close interplay between prayer and redemptive history” in Luke-Acts is widely acknowledged in Lukan scholarship. As in our reading of the parable, prayer throughout Luke-Acts is linked causally to the unfolding of God’s plan of salvation. The opening chapters present the dawning of the messianic age “as the answer to the long-standing prayers of pious Israel”. For Jesus and his disciples likewise, it is through prayer that the kingdom of God comes (11.2). That Jesus’ loud cry from the cross (23.46) is answered in resurrection gives courage that the disciples’ “shouts” (18.7) will be heard in divine vindication. In Luke-Acts, prayer is often positioned prior to or during crucial moments in the unfolding of redemptive history. Holmås rightly understands this literary scheme to signal divine sanction for the spread of the gospel and the establishment of the early church. He might also have seen how the narrated answers to the disciples’ prayers establish a causal

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62 The most recent study is Holmås, Prayer (here, 262); see his discussion of previous scholarship (4-16).

63 See Holmås, Prayer, 65-76 (here 76), also 142 on how just as the Messiah comes in fulfilment of the prayers of faithful Israelites so in 18.7, “assurance is now given that the ultimate vindication will come speedily for God’s elect who pray ‘day and night’”.

64 See the analysis of ἐλθέτω ἡ βασιλεία σου in Allison, Constructing, 36-8, arguing persuasively that it is a “plea for God to redeem the world once and for all”.


66 Holmås, Prayer, 263 summarising a major conclusion to his study.

67 Particularly for the giving of the Spirit (cf. 11.13; Acts 1.14; 2.1-4) and the spread of the gospel (cf. 10.2 and Acts 2.42-7; 4.31; 6.6-7, etc).
link between prayer and the unfolding of redemptive history, and in doing so provide encouragement that ongoing prayer will bring the final fullness of the kingdom.

In Luke-Acts, prayer is also that which sustains faith and faithfulness while God’s people wait for him to act. Anna’s prayerful worship sustains her faith and eschatological alertness so that (after long delay) she is able to recognise and proclaim the day of the redemption of Israel (2.36-38). In that she prays νύκτα καὶ ἡμέραν (2.37) she is an encouragement to the elect that their regular prayer (18.7: ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτός) can sustain them in faith also. Jesus, often in prayer, is the supreme example of prayer that sustains faithfulness. His prayer immediately prior to his betrayal becomes an occasion of divine assistance (22.43-4), which is linked to his faithfulness unto death, standing in contrast to the disciples who do not pray (22.45-6) and subsequently abandon him. The disciples are taught to pray throughout Luke, so as to avoid entanglement in worldly affairs, maintain eschatological vigilance, and find strength to remain faithful through troubles and stand before the Son of man (21.34-36). Examining the mimetic aspect to Jesus’ prayer (and related instruction), Holmås observes how these things occur during a “time of apprenticeship” for the disciples, so that the full significance of this teaching can only be seen “when the reader reaches Acts”, where prayer sustains the faith and witness of the early church and its leaders through trouble and persecution.

In reading 18.8b, it is helpful to consider the use of ἄρα in the LXX, where it poses questions that function within a narrative to indicate divine intent. Similarly, the question in 18.8b indicates God’s intention that faith should be found on the earth despite the delay in the coming of the Son of man, and the trouble his followers experience while they wait. As Luke’s narrative continues, the prayer of the disciples (17.5: πρόσθες ἡμῖν πίστιν) and of Jesus (22.32: μὴ ἐκλίπῃ ἡ πίστις σου) are answered as the disciples become οἱ πιστεύοντες (Acts 2.44) and those whose testimony

68 See Holmås, Prayer, 76 for how in the early chapters of Luke prayer is “the definitive characteristic of representatives of faithful and expectant Israel”.
69 See the detailed study of relevant texts in Holmås, Prayer, 77-114.
70 See Holmås, Prayer, 107-8 on the textual issues for 22.43-44.
71 Especially 6.26; 10.2; 11.1-13; 18.1-14; 21.36, but also by example in 9.18; 9.28-9; 11.1; 22.39-46.
72 Holmås, Prayer, 115-155.
73 Holmås, Prayer, 121; thus Luke 11.1-13; 18.1-8; 21.36 all “signal... that the instruction on prayer applies ultimately to another, future time” (149); thus the disciples are being prepared to take on the role Jesus has played in prayer (151).
74 See Holmås, Prayer, 159-260 for the relevant passages, though he might have given more emphasis to the role of prayer in sustaining the faith and faithful witness of the early church and its leaders, especially after persecution and imprisonment, in 4.24-31; 12.5; 16.25.
75 See how ἄρα in LXX Gen 18.13; 37.10; Jon 2.5 (ET: 2.4) features in questions that signal to the reader the divine intent and the direction the narrative will subsequently take, even where the course of action that is the subject of the question seems highly unlikely in the natural course of events.
becomes the basis for faith among many. Luke’s account of the faith of a diverse range of characters prefigures the spread of the gospel and how it will be received by diverse peoples throughout the Roman world. Despite persecution and trouble, the church would be ἐστερεοῦντο τῇ πίστει (Acts 16.5) and grow daily in numbers. The answer to 18.8b is given in Luke’s sequel; the Son of Man will find faith throughout the whole earth when he comes. Prayer in the early church (and its successors) will have played a crucial role to that end.

My Interpretation and Other Scholarship

I have given greater emphasis than most to 17.22-37 as the circumstances to which the parable speaks. While the parable does not have a narrative context, the discourse in which it is set clearly defines the (future) circumstances to which it speaks. This keeps a sharp eschatological focus to my reading, and argues for 18.1 to present regular prayer as a means to avoid losing heart or giving up (the faith) while waiting for the coming of the Son of man (rather than understanding 18.1 to mean not growing weary in prayer).

I have demonstrated the thematic and rhetorical coherence of the pericope (17.22-18.8), against some scholarship that has identified literary dissonance (see below).

With most scholars, I recognise the parable’s concern with prayer. However, I have proposed a new way of thinking about the parable’s Rhetorical Dynamics, the way in which it substantiates the necessity of prayer. In my reading the parable is not an illustration (even if it relies partly on

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76 E.g. Acts 4.4; 5.14; 9.42; 11.21; 14.1; including many Jews (Acts 6.7; 14.1; 21.20) and many Gentiles (Acts 13.48; 14.1; 14.27; 15.9), who in turn are exhorted to ἐμείνειν τῇ πίστει (14.22) in order to sustain the ongoing spread of the faith.

77 E.g. The Samaritan (17.19), the centurion (7.9), the sinful woman (7.50), the unclean woman (8.48) and those marginalised by sickness (5.20; 18.8).

78 See e.g. Bock, Luke II, 1447: “the disciples are not to grow weary in making this request [for God’s justice and the return of the Son of Man]”. For a similar reading of 18.1 to mine see Holmås, Prayer, 139: “the pressing need for persistent prayer is pitted against the possibility of ‘losing heart’”.

79 Most scholars see the parable in some way related to prayer, e.g. Snodgrass, Stories, 449-62; Marshall, Luke, 669-77; Nolland, Luke II, 871; Fitzmyer, Luke II, 1175-82; Johnson, Luke, 268-73; Bock, Luke II, 1444-57; Bovon, Luke II, 528-39; Edwards, Luke, 496-501; Hultgren, Parables, 252-62; Bailey, Peasant, 127-41; Blomberg, Interpreting, 271-4; Wenham, Parables, 185-90. Others see the parable as speaking in various ways of the justice of the kingdom in the present age e.g. Cotter, “Parable”, 342-3; Curkpatrick, “Dissonance”; Curkpatrick, “Parable”; Schottroff, Lydia’s, 103-4, 116-7; Herzog, Parables, 215-232; Merz, “Woman”, 70, 78-80. Such a reading is possible if taking the parable in isolation, but is inconsistent with the Lukan presentation of the parable. Bindemann, “Die Parabel”, thinks the parable was originally addressed to the Pharisees and scribes; just as the judge abandons his principles, so the parable “lädt sie zur Revision ihrer Grundsätze als (einziger!) Voraussetzung zur Teilhabe an der Gottesherrschaft ein” (94-5). This is evidence of the flexibility of the parable to fit other contexts when considered in isolation from its Gospel frames. Janssen, “Rechnet”, 251-4 argues 17.20-37 refers to the distress and potential for loss of faith of the Lukan community following the destruction of Jerusalem and its Roman occupation, and makes no reference to ἡ ἡμέρα ὧν ὁ θάνατος τῶν ἄνθρωπων ἀποκαλύπτεται (17.30) as a future event (her emphasis is on the presence of the Son/Kingdom among us). Thus she reads the parable as a call for prayer/labour in relation to present trouble and injustice. Her honest personal reflections on the parable (259-60) point to how her interpretation potentially leaves a reader with insufficient grounds for the faith and faithfulness 18.1,7 call for.
comparative elements), helping establish a teaching point already expressed adequately in 18.1, and/or with 18.6-8 providing “further sayings of application”. Rather, I have argued that the parable (in dialogue with its Lukan frame) is designed to provide the disciples with new self-understanding (they are not helpless or hopeless amidst trouble and persecution; they are vulnerable to giving up and losing faith), and a new perspective on the significance of their regular and ongoing prayer, for themselves and for the outworking of salvation history (it makes an essential contribution to bringing the eschatological fullness of the kingdom of God; it has power to sustain the disciples in faith and faithfulness until that time). By leading the disciples to understand themselves and to understand prayer in this way, the parable substantiates the necessity of prayer.

I have gone further than other scholarship in demonstrating the potential for an interpretive dialogue between the Story and its Lukan frame, from which the above perspectives and understanding emerge. The frame makes an essential contribution by signalling the Story’s concern with prayer, the eschatological fullness/justice of the kingdom, and the faith of the disciples. The Story also makes an essential contribution, especially as the familiarity of its opening scene gives way to the unexpected behaviour of the judge and the widow. For example, the judge’s monologue makes an essential contribution to substantiating assurance of eschatological justice for the elect, and to investing their prayers with causal significance for salvation history. The transformation of the widow within the narrative from a marginal and vulnerable figure to one who prevails against injustice and the unjust, makes an essential contribution to providing new self-understanding for the disciples, and to opening alternatives to helplessness and the associated temptation to lose heart and fall away from faith. Thus both parable and frame (in their Lukan arrangement) are dependent upon each other and may mutually inform. In my reading neither Story nor Plain Speech dominates interpretive outcomes; rather they are given shape in a process of constant dialogue between Story and Plain Speech, in which the full contextual significance of each is established, and the didactic purpose of the pericope as a whole is realised.

I have argued that 18.6-7a sets up a comparison between the self-interest of the judge and God’s need to defend his honour in light of a “crisis of honour” created for God by the regular and ongoing prayers of the elect while they wait for the day of the Son of Man. This argument has not

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80 E.g. Hultgren, *Parables*, 260: “in order to instruct his followers on prayer Jesus needed an illustration”; similarly Snodgrass, *Stories*, 453 referring to 18.1 as the “explanation” of the parable. The parable cannot be reduced to 18.1, or even to an illustration of it. Rather, 18.1 creates a question, as to why regular prayer is necessary. The parable helps to answer this question, substantiating the necessity of prayer.

been made in prior scholarship. This reading allows 18.6-7a to concretely demonstrate the necessity of prayer (as per 18.1), in that the prayers of the elect have a crucial contribution to make to bringing about the eschatological justice of the kingdom of God. This insight is missing from the more common reading that tends to emphasise how the judge’s monologue provides assurance of answered prayer and/or eschatological justice.

I have also argued that 18.8b, far from undermining the assurances of 18.7-8a, has an important didactic function when read in dialogical interaction with the parable, illuminating prayer’s vital role in generating and sustaining faith. Further, 18.8b contributes to the unfolding narrative of Luke-Acts, anticipating how prayer - amongst Jesus’ followers - will constitute both an expression of the divine will (that faith should be found throughout the whole earth) and a necessary contribution to its outworking.

Excursus: Dissonance in Luke 18.1-8?
Some consider Luke 18.1-8 to suffer from “incorrigible dissonance”, with Curkpatrick having provided the most extensive arguments for this view. The arguments used to defend this position are based on assumptions I regard as erroneous. The most important of these are: (i) that there is sufficient meaning within the Story itself to guide readers as to what it is about and to adjudicate between possible readings (a view this thesis challenges on the grounds it is not possible to make such strong judgments with reference to Story alone); and (ii) that in locating an alternative context for interpreting the parable that “works” we have

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82 With few exceptions, the assurance of 18.7a is understood by scholars to rest on a qal wahomer argument: if the unrighteous judge will grant the widow her request, how much more will God grant justice to his elect. In my view this conclusion is drawn too hastily and under undue influence from 11.13 (e.g. Snodgrass, Stories, 458), where there is an explicit signal for interpreting the related parable this way (ποισιν μὴ διηλοκεῖτε). This signal is absent from 18.7. Metzger, “God”, 48, in contrast, has suggested that the parable portrays a God who is, like the judge, “deaf to the cries of the suffering and oppressed” (similarly Herzog, Parables, 217). Metzger rightly sees suffering as the parable’s context, but is not able to give adequate weight to the assurance of 18.7a and wrongly reads 18.8b as undermining the assurances of 18.7-8a. To my knowledge only Derrett, Studies I, 45 has seen a comparison between the judge and a God who “has a reputation to lose. For his name sake he will do justice”, though he does not relate the idea adequately to prayer. Stählin,”Witwe”, 19-20 argues “die Willkür und Selbstherrlichkeit des Richters” portrays “die Freiheit Gottes”, but this fails to take account of the reason given by the judge for his action.

83 E.g. Metzger, “God”, 50, who argues 18.8b “undermining the confidence” 18.8a hoped to instil, since “responsibility for the emergence of justice is suddenly shifted from God to auditors…” its arrival now appears to depend on their ‘faith’. Similarly Curkpatrick, “Dissonance”, 119-20 sees 18.8b undermining previous assurances. In my view these arguments strain the natural sense of 18.8b, which calls attention to what the Son of man will find at his coming, not to whether he will come or not. Curkpatrick, “Dissonance”; quotation from 107. See 107n1 for other scholars who similarly identify dissonance in the passage.

84 Statements like “there is nothing intrinsic to the parable... that requires its interpretation as a parable of prayer and eschatological vindication” (Curkpatrick, “Dissonance”, 112) are true (because of the nature of the genre) but ultimately unhelpful (later we are told “the parable, however, is not about prayer” (117), which is to say more than the Story itself allows us to). Neither is it helpful to say “it could be interpreted as a parable of challenge and change, in which an inclusive and just community is established as an expression of the reign of God’ (112). Yes it could be; or it could not be. It could also be a parable about the need to speak softly (and repeatedly) but carry a big stick (with which to blacken the eye of a personal or political opponent). Or it could be a parable about how to maintain one’s position of power when one’s opposition becomes publicly vocal. Or it could be a parable about prayer. The Story alone does not allow us to decide.
the potential for a better reading of the parable, particularly if the alternative context is within Luke. As I have argued in this thesis (see further Appendix 1), the malleable nature of parables and the diverse theology of any Gospel makes it quite possible to bring a parable into meaningful interpretive dialogue with a range of other theological themes or narrative settings. In arguing that the parable primarily concerns justice rather than prayer, Curkpatrick has decided the Story concerns the matter it directly portrays. This crucial methodological step is not adequately justified, apart from appealing to wider Lukan concerns and “major themes” of the Travel Narrative. But prayer is also a major theme in Luke, as is eschatology. Thus, Story alone does not allow us to decide where the focus lies and wider theological themes are too diverse to be the deciding factor. Parables can “work” in multiple contexts. Luke, in arranging the parable, provided interpretive signals that determine its meaning and function at a literary level. Those who wish to set these aside must acknowledge a high degree of methodological subjectivity in any subsequent interpretive process. It is a particularly unusual argument to assert Luke is wrong in placing 18.6-8 in proximity to the parable (thus giving them interpretive significance), but that other parts of Luke can be appealed to in order to read the parable rightly. This introduces far greater dissonance at a literary level, for Luke as a whole, than exists within 18.1-8.


Christ Jesus, the Dresser of the Vine-yard, take care of thee, dig about thee, and dung thee, that thou maist bear Fruit - John Bunyan

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86 Curkpatrick, “Dissonance”, 110; see Curkpatrick, “Parable”, 35 for how Luke has not provided “an optimum framing of the parable” and for Curkpatrick’s “alternative, more adequate frame for the parable” (33). These are strong statements and the basis for them not adequately argued, particularly in light of the coherence that can be demonstrated for 18.1-8, including in this chapter.


88 Curkpatrick, “Dissonance”, 111; Curkpatrick, “Parable”, 35. Merz, “Woman”, 72-80 also justifies her interpretation with reference to Lukan themes (though far more thoroughly). The important decision concerns where one takes initial interpretive guidance from. Merz, “Woman”, 62-70 finds it in Jewish history of heroic women, on the grounds “there is no reason to doubt that [Jesus] was familiar with this biblical narrative concept of a widow…who is victorious over adversaries”, which is to move from the literary to the historical interpretive plane (raising other methodological questions). Curkpatrick, “Parable”, 26-31 interprets in dialogue with the Magnificat (Luke 1.52-3) on account of “striking parallels” between the two. Both are possible ways to read the parable; neither gives adequate weight to the Lukan arrangement of the parable.

89 Curkpatrick, “Dissonance”, 118.

90 Curkpatrick, “Parable”, 35 finds Luke's reading inadequate but asserts that “Luke has ample ingredients for alternative possible interpretations”. This is Luke against Luke! The case for using general theological themes to interpret Luke against his specific interpretive guidance is surely a weak one. In justifying this step, Curkpatrick has to resort to theorising about “gospel communities” (which he acknowledges are “hypothetical”) and their tensions, as the origins of dissonance he perceives within the text (36-37). This is very speculative.

91 Bunyan, “Barren”, 10; italics original.
Setting

The Barren Fig Tree follows a discourse addressed to Jesus’ disciples and the crowds,92 concerning how to live in the present age, in light of the presence and coming of the Son of Man (12.1-59).93 The audience is called to test or interpret (δοκιμάζω) the present hour rightly (12.56), which means to order their lives in this age so as to be honoured and rewarded at the coming of the Son of Man. They should fear nothing and no one in this age, but seek only to escape γέεννα (12.5) and be acknowledged by the Son of Man in heavenly courts (12.8). They should use wealth now to gain eternal treasure from God (12.13-34). They should serve faithfully now to avoid judgment and be commended and rewarded at the return of the master (12.35-48). Turning to the crowds (12.54) Jesus rebukes them for failing to understand the time in which they are living (12.54-56), urging them to act quickly to avoid otherwise certain judgment (12.57-59).

The events that follow (13.1-5) are the narrative context of the Barren Fig Tree. That same hour,94 people arrive,95 telling Jesus the news96 of Pilate’s murder of a group of Galileans while they offered sacrifices (13.1). Pilate’s actions, typical and topical,97 symbolise the issue of “the present time” (12.56) for Jesus’ audience, evoking Israel’s situation as a nation under occupation and living in fear of Imperial war/violence. The events reported were deeply provocative and troubling for all those present, and in the Lukan context raise some obvious questions. How should they interpret these things? What does it mean to κρίνετε τὸ δίκαιον (12.57) in relation to these things? What does the Son of Man’s coming (12.40; 43-6), eschatological fire, baptism and division (12.49-51), and the need to settle with one’s adversary (12.57-9) mean for a nation subject to violent oppression.

Equally importantly, how does Jesus interpret these things? Whatever the precise agenda of those bringing this news,98 in confronting Jesus with a report of Roman brutality and sacrilege, a

92 Jesus speaks πρὸς τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ πρῶτον (12.1). The crowds are “present and even participate” (Edwards, Luke, 362-3), and are addressed directly in 12.13-21 and 12.54-59. The parable is addressed to both groups.

93 On the literary structure and theology of 12.1-13.9, see Green, Luke, 476-8, suggesting a unifying theme of “vigilance in the face of crisis” and that 13.1-9 forms a “climax” to this section (also Telford, Barren, 224); on Jesus’ interaction with the crowds throughout 4.16-13.21 see Tannehill, Narrative, 145-152. See Shirock, “Growth”, 15-29 on the literary structure and theology of 13.1-35.


95 So Marshall, Luke, 553: πάρει can mean “to arrive”, and citing NT and classical examples; also Bailey, Peasant, 74-5 on this sense in Syriac and Arabic translations.

96 Marshall, Luke, 553: ἀπεγέλλη has the sense “to bring news of something fresh”, citing examples in LXX; also Bock, Luke II, 1204n4 citing NT examples; Fitzmyer, Luke II, 1006: use of ἐν αὐτῷ τῷ καιρῷ “creates the impression of a report about something that has recently happened”; also Blinzler, “Gnadendiffer”, 155.

97 See e.g. Marshall, Luke, 553 for similar violent incidents recorded by Josephus.

98 Bailey, Peasant, 75-7 sees a test of Jesus’ “loyalty to the national cause” (a view Green, Luke, 513 rightly critiques); Wrembek, “Fünf”, 271 sees a call for Jesus to abandon his restraint (he must “Farbe bekennen”) and lead an armed rebellion against Rome; “jetzt müsse er die Gelegenheit nutzen”. In the end, the text does not allow us to be precise.
response that directly concerns these things was surely expected. Instead, Jesus declares that those murdered by Pilate are no worse sinners than all Galileans, and warns that a similar destructive fate awaits them all unless they repent (13.2-3). The same point is then made with reference to the fatal collapse of a tower in Jerusalem (13.4-5). The same point is then made with reference to the fatal collapse of a tower in Jerusalem (13.4-5).

Jesus’ response to this report of a mass murder, the victims of which may have been engaged in the most sacred act of worship and remembrance required by the Torah, in the Temple, was highly provocative (“schockierend”) to say the least. Moreover his reply creates a pressing question: why - in light of the oppression and violence just reported - is Israel the subject of Yahweh’s judgment (not Rome)? The parable provides a much needed rhetorical breather, and for new ways of seeing to emerge, that open the way for Jesus’ audience to accept his warning and respond appropriately.

Story
A man has a fig tree in his vineyard, and after three years of looking for fruit but finding none, instructs his gardener (ἀμπελουργός) to cut it down, thus avoiding wasting his soil. His gardener argues for the owner to spare the tree once more, so that he might dig the soil and place manure around the tree, in the hope of it bearing fruit in the coming season. He acknowledges that if it still does not bear fruit, it must be cut down.

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99 See Fitzmyer, Luke II, 1006, on the Semitic τράπα + acc.(13.2, 4) as a circumlocution for comparison. Johnson, Luke, 211 rightly sees how Jesus does not dispute the link between sin and punishment, but “simply questions whether they were more egregious sinners than others”; also Green, Luke, 514. Nolland, Luke II, 718 observes that a “connection between sin and calamity… is implicitly accepted by Jesus”. Contrariwise, Bovon, Luke II, 268-9, who argues Jesus rejects the “inexorable link” between sin and punishment, taking away from God both a “cruel power of retribution” and his “omnipotence over events”, so that Luke “transforms our image of God”, substituting a loving God for a “nosey” and “distant” one. It is difficult to see how this relates to 13.3-5 (or 13.1-9). Whether or not the victims would have been considered sinners (by Jesus’ audience) because of their fate (e.g. Bailey, Peasant, 77 sees reference to a “popular attitude”), their sinfulness is unlikely to have been top of mind for the inquirers or the crowd. It is Pilate’s horrific evil that is at the centre of the news that has just been reported, and Jesus is changing the subject!

100 Shirock, “Growth”, 19: the double pronouncements here and again in 13.31-35 contribute “a tone of urgency or certainty to the warnings”. The use of ὀφείλητης in 13.4 (compared with ὁμαρτωλὸς in 13.2) evokes imprisonment for debts as portrayed in 12.57-59. Noting the juxtaposition of similar terms in 11.4, Green, Luke, 514n122 translates ὀφείλητης as “the one liable [for sin]”. The two terms, having a shared root in the Aramaic ḫōbā (which carries both meanings) are probably synonymous here.

101 Jeremias, Words, 207n4 (citing Philo) suggests the events occurred at Passover, since only at that time were laymen directly involved in making sacrifices; similarly Blinzler, “Niedermetzelung”, 31-2.

102 Gruber, “Gerichtskonsequenz”, 584; see Bailey, Peasant, 78 on how a violent response to Jesus’ words might have been expected. Any audience expectation of a sympathetic response (Bailey, Peasant, 76; Edwards, Luke, 392) is left unmet.

103 Bovon, Luke II, 270: “less impassioned than threats, the parable would perhaps encourage reflection and decision”, though his hope it would get rid of “all defensive tension” is too optimistic.

104 The future indicative ἔκκοψεις “expresses a polite imperative or granting of permission” (Marshall, Luke, 556); the farmer can have no further basis for objecting.
Imagery and OT Allusion

The parable depicts a landowner and his vineyard, established stock imagery depicting Israel as a nation standing in relationship to Yahweh. The imagery evokes God’s gracious actions and commitment to his people, together with the need for responsive obedience (fruitfulness) on Israel’s part.

The fig tree is the Story’s central image, being the first word of the Story, and the main focus throughout. The fig tree is not expressly used in ancient Jewish writings to symbolise the nation of Israel, or any group within Israel. Lacking concrete symbolism, the fig tree motif’s significance may lie in how it creates allusions to various OT passages. Using a barren plant to symbolise unfaithful Israel is established OT prophetic practice. Destruction of the fig tree is an established motif in the OT, associated with divine judgment upon Israel. More specifically, this Story and its narrative context share several motifs with Mic 7.1-7, where the prophet compares himself to a harvester of summer fruit that fails to find the figs he longs for (7.1), symbolising the absence of upright/godly persons from the land while wickedness flourishes, including violence and bloodshed (7.2; cf. 6.12). Further, the prophet speaks of the arrival of an “expected time of punishment” (7.4).


An explicit link between the two is avoided in the OT. On fig tree imagery in Jewish and other writings see Snodgrass, Stories, 256-60; Heininger, Metaphorik, 125-8; Gruber, “Gerichtskonsequenz”, 581-2; Poser, “Umkehr”, 42-3; Telford, Barren, 132-63 (OT); 176-196 (Rabbinic writings), though he overstates the sense in which the fig tree symbolises Israel; Klotz, “Symbolism”, 258-9. While figs are sometimes used to refer symbolically to Israel (e.g. Jer 24.1-10; Hos 9.10), figs are explicitly absent from this parable! Pseudo-Philo, Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum 37.3, discussing Jotham’s fable (Judges 9.7-15) has “et ficus facta est in populum”, which can mean the fig tree represents or symbolises the people [of Israel], and if this is the intended sense, the passage is the only known explicit use of the fig tree to symbolise Israel in writings predating the end of the first century C.E.

When paired with a vine, the fig tree symbolises God’s faithfulness and blessing to Israel as evident in the nation’s peace and prosperity (Deut 8.8; 1 Kings 4.25; 1 Macc 14.12; cf. 2 Kings 18.31; Is 36.16) and anticipates the eschatological age (Mic 3.10; 4.4; Zech 3.10). But this is not the point of the imagery here, where the fig tree bears no fruit, and stands under the threat of judgment.

See e.g. Is 5.1-7; Jer 2.21; Micah 7.1-2 (where the prophet represents the divine perspective); Hos 9.16; Wisdom 4.5; 10.7. While not all these passages involve fig trees, the symbolism is conceptually similar to that of the parable.

See Amos 4.9; Hosea 2.12; Joel 1.5-7,12; Jer 5.17; 8.13 (cf. Is 34.4). Like the Lukan Jesus, Jeremiah speaks to a nation that persistently refuses to repent (Jer 8.4-6a). Like Israel in Jesus’ day, failing to correctly interpret the present time (Luke 12.54-6), Jeremiah’s audience do not understand the season in which they live (in contrast to the stork (Jer 8.7)), or the awful state of their spiritual condition (8.8-12). Cf. Ps 105.33 where the imagery is associated with God’s judgment on Egypt.

While Luke 13.1 speaks of Roman brutality, in Micah 7.2 violence and bloodshed are committed by one Israelite against another! Notable is Micah’s depiction of family dissension as a feature of that time (7.5b-6), with Jesus using highly similar language to describe the time of his own coming (Luke 12.49-53), leading Danker, Jesus, 260 (amongst others) to argue that Jesus had Micah 7 in mind in composing the parable. The argument is in my view even stronger at a literary level, especially given the proximity of the allusions within Luke.

As translated in Hillers, Micah, 83. On the difficult Hebrew of 7.4, see McKane, Micah, 212-3; Waltke, Micah, 420-2; their analysis supports Hillers’ translation.


106 E.g. Heininger, Metaphorik, 129: the fig tree is the parable’s “zentrale Metapher”.

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Audience Engagement

As stories similar to the Barren Fig Tree were told in antiquity, its basic narrative outline may have been familiar to Jesus’ audience. The Story’s vineyard imagery signals to the audience that Jesus is telling another chapter in Israel’s long story, their story, and they will pay attention to find out how the narrative evolves. The Story’s use of motifs with well established symbolic meaning (landowner and vineyard; barren tree) means the audience will likely recognise the metaphorical significance of the opening scene of the parable (13.6-7). A tree that bears no fruit, especially a tree within a vineyard, is readily recognisable as a symbol of Israel's failure to produce the righteousness and justice God requires of his people. God has come to Israel and found her wanting. The audience will recognise a threat of imminent judgment in the owner’s command to cut down the tree.

But questions remain. The lack of precise definition around the symbolism of the fig tree motif, and especially as set within a vineyard (does this mean the fig tree portrays one part of the nation, or only its leaders?), creates ambiguity for the audience. The intervention of the gardener on behalf of the tree is an unexpected development in the Story, his proposal perhaps all the more surprising for the audience given the stubborn barrenness of the tree. Will this plan succeed? The audience’s symbolic world has no established referent for the gardener, a figure that does not feature in other versions of the Story. Perhaps it is Yahweh himself, or his representative? They do not know, but will want to find out, since the tree/nation’s future rests on the success or otherwise of his work.

113 For a similar Aesop fable see Perry, Batrius, 480-1; for various versions of a similar parable in The Story of Ahikar, see Charles, Apocrypha II, 775; for Jewish parallels see Snodgrass, Stories, 256-8; for parallels in early Christian/Gnostic literature see Hedrick, “Unfinished”, 169-176; Bauckham, “Two”, 280-7.

114 Gruber, “Gerichtskonsequenz”, 581 observes the contrast between three years of barrenness “und dem unverhältnismäßig großen Einsatz des Arbeiters für einen einzigen Baum angesichts der geringen Chance auf Erfolg”. The fact the gardener treats the tree as if it were his own precious fig tree may lead a rural audience, who have so cared for their own fig trees, “sich mit seinem Anliegen zu identifizieren”.

115 The story of Ahikar and his son has the tree/son pleading (unsuccessfully) for himself; Aesop’s fable has the cicadas and the bird (unsuccessfully) pleading for the tree (on the grounds they will sit in the tree and sing rather than by promising a return to fruitfulness). Thus Green, Luke, 515: the “motif of clemency” is a “novelty” to the audience; Gruber, “Gerichtskonsequenz”, 582: “die unerwartete Wendung einer bekannten Geschichte”.

116 In OT passages with comparable imagery, it is Yahweh who works in the vineyard (e.g Is 5.1-4; Ps 80.9).
The parable concludes without resolution,\textsuperscript{117} its openness designed to engage the audience, emphasising their own responsibility for how the Story ends.\textsuperscript{118} The Story grants a degree of hope in portraying a \textit{delay} in judgment, and in the gardener’s proposal to fertilise the tree. However, this is significantly tempered, since the facts of the Story (the stubborn barrenness of the tree thus far) and potentially the structure of its ending\textsuperscript{119} suggest continued barrenness as the most likely scenario. To the extent the audience see the Story speaking to their/Israel’s situation, its uncertain ending and the threat of future destruction create urgency for an appropriate response.

Thus in a tense and emotive situation Jesus’ parable eases the rhetorical tension, providing his audience with psychological “space” to process his call to repentance and fruitfulness within the familiar world of vines and fig trees, even while indirectly intensifying his warning of judgment.

**Significance**

In this pericope Jesus’ Plain Speech questions/proclamation (13.1-5) and parable (13.6-9) combine to form a single prophetic piece, in which Jesus calls Israel to urgent repentance in order to escape otherwise certain and imminent judgment. Motifs describing or symbolising sin and judgment feature in both segments of the pericope, giving it coherence and unity. Both segments, in isolation, are able to function as a warning to Israel. The parable has clearer definition than many other parables on account of it combining several motifs with stable and narrowly defined symbolic meaning. However, both components (Story and Plain Speech) remain to an extent open and enigmatic (especially the parable), so that questions remain for the hearer/reader (as above). In juxtaposing the two components within a single unified literary unit (and on account of their analogous elements) Luke directs the reader to their potential to mutually inform, adding further definition and depth to each, and with the potential (as shown below) to create additional meaning and perspective.

In what follows I examine how the pericope is designed to subvert the prevailing paradigm through which Jesus’ audience understands the present time, and to reframe it to reflect the realities of his presence, work and proclamation among them. Notable is how central elements of the new

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\textsuperscript{117} Even if the Story implies that the landowner grants the gardener’s request (so Blinzler, “Gnadenfrist”, 162, on the basis the request was not declined), the Story remains unfinished in the sense that we do not know if the tree bears fruit or not.

\textsuperscript{118} E.g. Gruber, “Gerichtskonsequenz”, 580: as the parable ends, “Weder ein drohender Gerichtsruft... hat das letzte Wort, noch wird eine bedingungslose Begnadigung ausgesprochen. Der Raum, den die metaphorische Wirklichkeit eröffnet, ist, theologisch gesprochen, der Entscheidungsraum zwischen Gerichtskonsequenz und Gnadenchance”.

\textsuperscript{119} Bock, \textit{Luke II}, 1210 argues that the first class condition εἰ concerning not bearing fruit implies a more immediate and thus more likely outcome than the third class condition κἂν regarding bearing fruit. Thus “the time left to repent is short and the prospect of their doing so is not good”. Also, the “broken construction for fruit-bearing versus the completed construction for absence of fruit” is similarly suggestive.
perspective Jesus is opening for his audience emerge only from a dialogical interaction between Story and Plain Speech, from which meaning emerges that transcends what is explicit in each.

Changing the Face of the Matter

The narrative and proclamation preceding the Barren Fig Tree (13.1-5) are suggestive of how Jesus’ audience understood the time in which they live. The passage makes reference to: (i) the brutality of the Roman occupation; (ii) the sinfulness of some groups within Israel and of all Israel; (iii) divine judgment on sinners; (iv) one present who is widely regarded as a prophet (9.19) and known by the reader to be the Messiah (9.20). Each of these elements no doubt featured prominently within the paradigm (or worldview) by which Jesus’ audience made sense of Israel’s present circumstances and future prospects, even if the precise way the paradigm was construed varied somewhat between groups within Israel. If and when Israel’s God intervened in history, at the dawning of the messianic age, this would bring vindication of the righteous and judgment of evildoers. Rome was surely a leading candidate for that judgment in the eyes of most within Israel; various groups within Israel perceived other groups as also deserving of judgment. As we work our way through Luke 13.2-9, we see that Jesus subverts this paradigm. In parable and Plain Speech Jesus is putting a new face on Israel’s present situation, so that Israel might judge the present hour rightly and act accordingly. There are three interrelated elements of this new perspective.

Israel as Sinful Nation Called to Repentance

Having listened to a report of Pilate’s sacrilege and murder, it is likely Jesus’ audience - appalled, outraged and perhaps fearful - were mentally focused on the wickedness of Rome, whom they regarded as deserving the just judgment of God. Their interpretation of the times emphasised the evil of others; Rome in particular. Jesus’ reply, whilst retaining a connection with Pilate’s violence, shifts the focus of the conversation to the sinfulness of those murdered by Pilate, the

120 For references from Second Temple Jewish texts and liturgical practice that point to such a view being widespread within Israel, see e.g. Weinfeld, Normative, 68-89, 294-302. Weinfeld observes that while all Israel anticipated the coming of God’s rule and judgment, the “people longed for this judgment, assuming it will be followed by vengeance on Israel’s enemies and the redemption of Israel, while the prophets insist that judgement will encompass Israel as well as her enemies” (68) and also that “vengeance on the nations became the central aspiration of the Day of the Lord” during “low” periods in Israel’s history (80). For general surveys discussing first century Jewish expectations of future redemption/judgment see Dunn, Jesus, 387-404; N.T. Wright, New, 267-79, 280-320; Allison, Constructing, 32, providing a summary of the “cluster of themes well attested in postexilic Jewish literature” that constitute Israel’s “apocalyptic eschatology” (and the exploration of this in relation to Jesus in 32-220); N.T. Wright, Victory, 202-9; Grabbe, Judaic, 269-91.

121 See Green, Luke, 513 on the possibility 13.1 is designed to shift Jesus’ attention to those more deserving of the kind of judgment he has just described (12.54-59).
sinfulness of his audience, and the sinfulness of Israel as a nation. Bailey has argued that the oppressed, in their struggle against injustice, often assume their own righteousness. The wickedness of Rome, including her oppression of the people of God, must surely mean that it is Rome who is offside with Israel's God. Israel, or at least groups within the nation, are surely - even if only comparatively - the righteous who suffer unjustly. Jesus portrays the situation differently.

Speaking of the victims of violence and to those living under an oppressive occupation, Jesus describes them as oĩ ἁμαρτωλοί and oĩ ὀφειλέται and calls them to repentance (13.2-5). Jesus describes the nation of Israel as a whole as sinners, seriously offside with their God and deserving of his judgment, putting a radical new face on the nation’s self-understanding at that time.

This description of Israel is reinforced by the fig tree motif, its barrenness corresponding to the sinfulness of Israel referred to in 13.2-5. However, the precise nature of this sinfulness is not specified in 13.2-5. What exactly has Israel done to deserve the judgment of God? This question is raised but left unanswered by Jesus’ description of Israel as sinners (13.2-5). The fig tree imagery may be intended to give Israel's sinfulness definition, since it evokes Micah 7.2 where the absence of figs symbolises violence, bloodshed, and injustice perpetuated by one segment of Jewish society against another. In speaking of a barren fig tree, is Jesus reminding those who reported Pilate’s murderous actions (13.1) of the bloodshed occurring amongst the people of Israel, so that the sinfulness of Israel is seen to be similar to that of Pilate/Rome? Further, the threat to cut down the tree may allude to OT passages where the destruction of a tree symbolised the judgment of God upon foreign nations/kings (e.g. Is 10.33-4; Ez 31.1-12; Dan 4.10-15). Is Jesus subtly portraying Israel as every bit as wicked as pagan nations/kings and equally deserving of the judgment of God?

The parable also invests Jesus’ call for repentance (13.2-5) with considerable urgency in that it “sets a limit on the time available for the required repentance”. Even the merciful gardener must

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123 Bailey, Peasant, 79: “The more intense the struggle for justice the more the oppressed tend to assume their own righteousness... The subconscious rationale seems to be, ‘Our cause is righteous, thus we are righteous’.”

124 So Nolland, Luke II, 719: the fig tree’s barrenness “corresponds to the need for repentance in vv 1-5”.

125 The vineyard imagery in Luke 13.6 may similarly evoke Is 5.7 where a vineyard’s barrenness symbolises violence and injustice within Israel, with explicit mention of bloodshed (LXX has ἐποίησεν δὲ ἀνομίαν, but MT has הָעָשָׂה (“shedding of blood”)).

126 Identifying this allusion in the Barren Fig Tree coheres with how the Lukan Jesus describes his own generation as bearing responsibility for (past) violence and bloodshed against the prophets (11.47-51), events portrayed parabolically in 20.10-15. The Lukan account of John the Baptist’s beheading (9.9) records violence and bloodshed within Israel at that time.

acknowledge, in the final words of the parable, that if the tree does not bear fruit soon it must be cut down. Further, the grace period portrayed within the parable cannot be linked by analogy to any defined period of time within the Lukan narrative; it is of unknown duration, adding further urgency to the call to repentance. The Story does not so much announce the beginning of a period of grace, but rather portrays Israel as a nation living in a period of grace whose precise parameters are not known to them. Thus Israel must act with the urgency of one already ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ to the place of judgment (12.58).

The fig tree’s lack of defined symbolism, and it being presumably only one of many plants in the vineyard, means that with reference to the parable alone we do not know whether Jesus is speaking to all Israel or only to one segment of the nation. However, in a literary reading of the parable, the fourfold use of τὰς in 13.2-5, and reference to both Galilee and Jerusalem (synecdoche for the nation as a whole), must inform the motif of the fig tree so that it is understood to symbolise the nation as a whole. Perceived divisions within Israel are set aside as Jesus portrays the whole nation standing together as sinners before their God.

Rome as Agent of Divine Judgment

It is notable how Rome goes without critique in this passage, despite the news that Jesus has received. What has Jesus to say of the occupier and oppressor of the people of God?

While the Story portrays judgment, in itself it lacks details of the nature, timing or agent of that judgment. I suggest that the literary juxtaposition of the parable and 13.1-5, together with the presence of analogous elements within these two literary segments (warnings of judgment coming to sinful Israel, and a vineyard owner threatening to cut down an unfruitful tree), means they may be brought into interpretive dialogue to supply this detail. The parable is preceded by a report of Roman violence/murder (13.1), the recollection of the destruction of Jerusalem infrastructure (13.4), and Jesus’ warnings that Israel as a nation will experience these same things if they do not repent (13.3,5). Together these things anticipate war and destruction on a grand scale, and must surely inform (at a literary level) how we understand the judgment portrayed in the parable. The parable - in dialogue with 13.1-5 - can thus be seen to anticipate divine judgment upon Israel in the

128 The motif thus functions similarly to the unknown hour of the master’s return, and the unknown time of the burglar’s arrival (12.35-48). The audience are being asked to interpret the present season (12.56) but without knowing its precise duration. Johnson, Luke, 214 rightly sees that the comfort for Jesus’ audience is only “that the prophet is still on his way to the city”.

129 Cf. Shirock, “Growth”, 20: the references to Jerusalem here and in 13.33-4 have a “representative nuance”. There is no signal in 13.1-9 that the Jewish leadership are in view (contra Bailey, Peasant, 81-2; Blomberg, Interpreting, 259).

130 So Tannehill, Luke, 216: the events described can be taken “as omens of the great catastrophe to come”; N.T. Wright, Victory, 331, who sees 13.3,5 anticipating Israel’s destruction by “Roman swords and falling masonry”; similarly Schottroff, Parables, 59: in this passage “Jesus speaks of the impending war” (and arguing Jesus’ contemporaries lived in fear of the nation/temple being destroyed, citing Josephus in support); Young, “Luke”, 61; Poser, “Umkehr”, 40, also arguing both events described are “als menschengemachte Gewalteneignisse begriffen werden”.

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form of Roman military initiative. Standing in a long prophetic tradition (cf. 11.47-51), Jesus portrays Rome as the agent of Yahweh, for enacting divine judgment on a nation that has failed to live out its God-given vocation. The brutality of Pilate is a sign of the times, anticipating the potential for the full fury of Roman military power to be unleashed against the nation, as the just judgment of God. Such a chilling warning adds further urgency to Jesus' call to repentance.

Jesus as the Hope of Israel

In the person of the gardener, the parable introduces a new and decisive element to the present hour, pointing - within the Lukan narrative - to one among them who is able to secure a future for Israel. Inasmuch as Jesus’ audience regards the Messiah as one still to come, the gardener has no obvious correspondence in the audience’s own understanding of Israel’s present situation. This major point of Difference between a central element of the Story and the audience’s understanding of Israel’s circumstances, makes its own important contribution to altering the audience’s perspective on the time in which they live.

The Lukan Jesus speaks to an audience who have not recognised the presence of the Messiah among them. The intercession of the gardener and even moreso his proposed role in tending the fig tree is, as noted above, a feature not found in similar ancient stories. The closest parallel is found in contemporary and later Jewish stories of unproductive vineyards, where the intercession of a labourer on behalf of unfruitful vines is used to illustrate Moses’ intercession for Israel after the golden calf disaster. Jesus may be evoking a contemporary understanding of Moses as intercessor for Israel to position himself in a similar role.

However, the role for the gardener goes beyond intercession; he is to tend the tree so as to restore its fruitfulness. The hope of the fig tree rests on the success of the gardener’s attentive care. This

131 The concept of Israel’s God using a heathen nation to enact judgment on Israel is well established in the Jewish prophetic tradition. See e.g. Is 10.5-6 (Assyria is God’s agent of judgment on Israel); Jer 25.8-14 (the king of Babylon is God’s agent of judgment against Israel); Ez 21.1-24 (the king of Babylon is the sword in God’s hand bringing judgment against Israel/Jerusalem); Hab 1.5-11 (the Babylonian armies are raised up by God to bring judgment on the earth).

132 Cf. similarly Schottroff, Parables, 57-9: the murder of the Galileans is evidence of the time/hour in which Israel finds itself: “when enemies are in a position to bring shame upon the people, it is the hour of repentance”.

133 Within the Lukan narrative thus far, see e.g. 4.22-30; 7.20; 9.18-19; 9.51-3; 11.14-16; 11.29-32, and see especially the subsequent lament of Jesus over Jerusalem (19.41-4).

134 On Moses as Israel’s advocate/intercessor in early non-Rabbinic Jewish sources see Meeks, Prophet, 118, 137, 159-61; Graves, “Stories”, 3-4. For Moses using vineyard imagery when interceding for Israel, see: (i) Pseudo-Philo, Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum 12.8-10 (midrash on Ex 32), has Moses describing Israel after the golden calf incident, as a vine that has lost its fruit and forgotten the one who established it, but that should nonetheless be spared lest there be none to bring glory to God and to avoid God’s purposes being frustrated; (ii) Exodus Rabbah 43.9 (midrash on Ex 32.11-14), uses imagery of a vineyard which produced wine that went sour, but a labourer pleads for more time on the grounds “a freshly planted vineyard cannot produce good wine” (505, see further Graves, “Stories”, 15-18). The dating of Biblical Antiquities (no later than first century CE) suggests the concept of Moses as intercessor dates to around the time of Jesus or before. Gruber, “Gerichtskonsequenz”, 582 observes a linguistic similarity between Luke 13.9b (εἶ δὲ μὴ γε, ἐκκόψως αὐτῆς) and Ex 32.32 LXX (εἶ δὲ μὴ, ἐξάλειψόν με).
is a major and unusual motif within the parable, and is unlikely to be merely narrative detail. I suggest that in this motif, Jesus portrays himself and his ministry as the decisive factor for Israel in the present hour,\textsuperscript{136} in order to emphasise to his audience the importance of a right response to his ministry among them. The Messiah Jesus is among them, enacting and proclaiming the kingdom of God, bringing the necessity of repentance and the possibility of producing the fruit God requires of Israel. Despite the threat of judgment hanging over the nation, in Jesus’ person and ministry there remains hope of a future for Israel. “To judge the time rightly is to acknowledge it as the time of Jesus the Messiah”,\textsuperscript{136}

Summary

In prophetic proclamation and parable, Jesus seeks to subvert and reframe a paradigm by which his audience make sense of Israel’s present circumstance and future outlook. The parable skilfully combines familiar and unfamiliar imagery so that the story it tells is firmly anchored in well known chapters of Israel’s past, even while narrating the present chapter in unexpected ways. Story and Plain Speech warnings, when brought in interpretive dialogue, are designed to enable Jesus’ audience to see himself, themselves and the national situation in a new light. In doing so Jesus seeks to open up the possibility of repentance for all within Israel, a repentance for which their existing paradigm - in which those who are evil tend to be the “other” - supplies no obvious rationale. This repentance is focused on and enabled by Jesus’ presence and ministry among them. Only so can Israel avoid an otherwise certain and destructive judgment. But they must be quick… the time of Jesus’ visitation “is passing unrecognised”\textsuperscript{137}

The Barren Fig Tree and Luke’s Wider Narrative and Theology

John the Baptist called Israel to repentance, to produce the fruit of righteousness and justice, even while proclaiming that the axe was already at the root, so that every tree that did not bear fruit

\textsuperscript{135} Similarly Heininger, \textit{Metaphorik}, 128: “Mit Lk 13,6-9 bringt Jesus in indirekter, d.h. parabolischer Weise seine Sendung an Israel zur Sprache. Sein Auftreten und seine Predigt bedeuten für Israel eine letzte Gnadenfrist”. See also Young, “Luke”, 60-1 on Jesus’ message and presence as “a decisive ingredient in the present time” and thus failure to interpret the present time is failure to rightly “acknowledge Jesus and his message”; Shirock, “Growth”, 18-20: structural parallels between 13.1-9 and 13.31-35 help us see that repentance and fruitfulness of 13.1-9 concerns people’s response to Jesus (explicit in 13.34). This view coheres with 12.54-9, where “in appealing to ‘this present time’ [Jesus] implores hearers to recognise that, in his teaching and healing and mission, in his very person, the kingdom of God is present…the present time refers to the inbreaking of the kingdom of God in the person and ministry of Jesus” (Edwards, \textit{Luke}, 387-8).

\textsuperscript{136} Young, “Luke”, 62: his “presence is the most significant ingredient of the time”. We cannot be certain whether this parable’s Initial Audience immediately recognised the gardener motif as alluding to the ministry of Jesus. The imagery does not carry well established meaning, but the important role of the gardener within the Story (his work is the only basis for expecting a future for the tree) means the hearer/reader will be highly motivated to find out the identity of this figure. This aspect of the parable may have been deliberately enigmatic, perhaps inviting further inquiry and question from those who heard it and recognised a need to respond, so that more explicit explanation could be given (perhaps privately), to those with ears to hear. At a literary level, a correspondence between the role of this central character in the parable and the Lukan Jesus can be argued (see further below).

\textsuperscript{137} Tannehill, \textit{Narrative}, 152, observing the use of καιρόν in 12.56 and again in 19.44.
would be cut down and burned (3.7-9). In calling people to repentance, the Lukan John the Baptist recognised the possibility of avoiding judgment and held out hope of participation in the salvation of God (3.6). John also anticipated the Messiah’s coming, a period of his ministry within Israel (3.4-6, 15-18), and a mixed response to that ministry - the Messiah would gather (συνάγω) some, while others are destined for judgment (3.17).

As the Lukan narrative proceeds it becomes evident that an inadequate response to John and Jesus’ ministry means the judgment they warned of has not been averted. Judgment is coming to the people of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum (10.13-15), to ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη (11.29-32; cf. 11.47-51), and to Jerusalem (13.34-5; 19.41-4), due to their lack of repentance, and failure to recognise the Messiah among them. Following the Barren Fig Tree, the Lukan Jesus appears to regard judgment on Jerusalem/Israel as essentially unavoidable (e.g. 13.31-35; 19.41-44; 21.20-24). Part of the narrative/literary importance of the Barren Fig Tree is that, even while intensifying the warning that destructive judgment is coming upon the nation, it holds out a very real hope that some from within Israel may escape that judgment through repentance and responsiveness to the ministry of Jesus. The subsequent narrative evidences the reality of this opportunity, as men and women respond positively to Jesus, and take up their place in the community forming around him. Provided they remain alert and faithful, those who follow Jesus are given assurance they will escape the coming judgment. This dynamic tension, between pending judgment on Israel and opportunity for salvation for some within Israel, is evident also in

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138 There are strong parallels between 13.1-9 and the proclamation of John the Baptist (3.3-9) (e.g. Allison, Constructing, 217-9; Tannehill, Narrative, 144-5). The two passages share a refutation of any grounds for confidence outside of repentance (3.8; 13.2,4b); a call to repentance and fruitfulness; and the threat of imminent judgment. Haacker, “Zeit”, 339 suggests the parable speaks to the delayed arrival of the judgment proclaimed by John, especially following his execution (“Warum ließen die vernichtenden Axtschläge noch länger auf sich warten?” War mit der Ermordung des Täufers auch seine Botschaft liquidiert worden?), but perhaps more weight is to be given to the recognition in John’s proclamation of a period of ministry by the coming Messiah.

139 See Roth, Parables, 60 on how, even in the parabolic saying of 3.9 itself, judgment “is not inevitable”.

140 Note the use of συνάγω also in 11.23, by Jesus to describe his own ministry. These passages temper how we read ἐπισυνάγω in 13.34; not all within Israel have failed to respond to Jesus’ efforts to gather them.

141 Note how warnings of coming judgment are linked directly to their failure to recognise that one greater than Solomon and Jonah (11.31-2) is among them, and that God himself has come to them (19.44).

142 See the use of μεταναστεύω in 10.13; 11.32.

143 See e.g. 15.1; 17.15-19; 18.35-43; 19.1-10; 23.40-3 (cf. 19.37-38). The resulting division within Israel is portrayed vividly in the passage following the parable where a woman crippled by an evil spirit is healed and declared a child of Abraham, while the Synagogue ruler and others of Jesus’ opponents are rebuked for their failure to recognise him as doing the will of God (13.10-17). Only a few enter by the kingdom of God since the door is narrow, while many fail to enter (and to join the patriarchs of Israel) despite Jesus’ ministry among them (13.22-30). Luke 13.10-30 is reminiscent of John’s warning to Israel that their being descendants of Abraham provides no basis for assurance of escape from judgment, and that God is able to raise up children of Abraham from the stones (3.7-8). Here a crippled demoniac is declared a daughter of Abraham; the birds of the air (Gentiles) make their home in the kingdom (13.18); people come from the east and the west to join Abraham in the kingdom of God (13.18).

144 See the assurances to Jesus’ followers (often with associated exhortation), regarding their eschatological standing and reward in 6.20-23; 12.8; 12.32-4; 18.29-30; 21.12-19; 23.43. Also, see how in 21.20-36 the possibility of escaping the destruction of Jerusalem (21.21) and the eschatological woes coming upon the whole earth (21.28: redemption draws near, not judgment; 21.36) is held out for Jesus’ followers.
the proclamation of the early church in the post-easter period. As instructed by Jesus (Luke 24.47; note: beginning in Jerusalem), the disciples call their fellow-Jews to repentance, holding out opportunity for forgiveness of sins and for salvation, even while affirming that judgment is coming upon their generation (e.g. Acts 2.38-41; 3.19-20).  

There are hints in Luke, coming to fuller expression in Acts, of how the group forming around Jesus model the righteousness of the kingdom of God symbolised by the Lukan symbol of fruit. Jesus’ followers are the new recipients of the vineyard, which illegitimate tenants now occupy (20.16), who will give the owner of the vineyard his fruit in season.

As noted above, the parable portrays the work of the gardener as the only basis for the tree bearing fruit in the future. The gardener’s significance is not only that he gains time for the tree, but also that he will tend and fertilise the tree so that it might bear fruit. This coheres strongly with the Lukan portrait of Jesus. The reader has, since the beginning of Luke, been privy to testimony from angels and inspired individuals portraying Jesus as the one through whom God will bring redemption and salvation for Israel. Through the ministry of Jesus, God will grant to Israel to serve him without fear, bearing the fruit of ὑσιότης and δικαιοσύνη that he so desires (1.73-5).

The Lukan Jesus is the Messiah, announcing the day of God’s salvation and favour, proclaiming and enacting the coming of the kingdom of God (4.16-18; 9.20). It is Jesus who calls for repentance, defines the nature of repentance, and it is through his ministry that men and women come to repentance. It is Jesus who extends forgiveness of sin and welcomes sinners into the community of God’s people. The fruitfulness that God looks for comes out of doing the words of

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145 Cf. how Paul is proclaiming the kingdom of God to his fellow Jews in Rome, trying to persuade them about Jesus in Acts 28.17-27; even while indicating a movement to ministry among the Gentiles (28.28). The period of grace, with opportunity to avoid judgment, remains open within Israel, during the entire period which Luke-Acts narrates.

146 On repentance in Luke see 3.3, 8; 5.32; 10.13; 11.32; 15.7, 10; 16.30; 17.3-4, 24.47. However, the theme of repentance goes beyond specific instances of μετάνοια and μετανόης; “the concept of repentance is present everywhere [in Luke]” (Green, Theology, 107; italics original). As noted in N.T. Wright, Victory, 254; Young, “Luke”, 62, Lukan repentance involves embracing a new way of life, the nature of which Luke presents throughout his whole Gospel. See Nave, Role, for repentance as a major sub-theme in Luke-Acts and particularly his emphasis on repentance as “a necessary change in thinking and behaviour required of individuals in order to help fulfil God’s plan of universal salvation and to help establish a community embracing all people” (145) and how the substance of that is defined by Jesus’ teaching and the way of life of his disciples (166). Also, Green, Luke, 477 on how repentance throughout Luke involves “theological transformation” in mutual relationship with social transformation, “especially vis-à-vis persecution, possessions, and issues of social relations and status”.


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149 See e.g. 5.20; 5.29-32; 7.47; 15.1-2 (3-32); 18.9.
The all-importance of Jesus to the future of Israel is also emphasised in passages that speak of coming judgment. Those who hear but do not do the words of Jesus are a house destined for destruction (6.49). A wicked generation will be condemned on the day of judgment for their failure to recognise that one greater than Solomon or Jonah had come among them (11.29-32). Jerusalem will be destroyed for its rejection of Jesus’ ministry (13.34-35), for failing to recognise in Jesus’ arrival the time of God’s coming to them (19.41-4). The murder of the Son, the rejection of the capstone, leads directly to the destruction of those who currently inhabit the vineyard (20.15-18). Thus to see the gardener as corresponding to the Lukan Jesus is consistent with how he is positioned throughout the Lukan narrative, as Israel's only hope for a future, the only means of escaping the judgment otherwise coming to Israel. Will Israel recognise, within the parable, the one in whom the hope of Israel lies, or is he hidden from their eyes (cf. 19.42)?

My Interpretation and Other Scholarship
Most scholars understand the Barren Fig Tree as a parable warning Israel of coming judgment, and calling the nation to urgent repentance. Most see thematic coherence within 13.1-9, recognising that the parable portrays aspects of the situation that lies (unstated) behind Jesus’ prior warnings (13.2-5), reinforces these warnings, and complements them by introducing a period of grace. My reading is thematically coherent with this scholarship. However, I have gone further than other scholars in demonstrating the potential for 13.1-5 and 13.6-9 to be brought into interpretive dialogue, a dialogue that is generative of meaning so that these textual segments say more in collaboration than what is said by both alone. The warnings (13.2-5) inform the parable to insist that the judgment it depicts is coming upon all Israel unless they repent, and (with reference to 13.1) that this judgment will take the form of Roman military action against Israel. The parable informs the warnings by alluding to the nature of Israel's sin and signalling a limit to the time available for repentance. The parable also signals that the repentance called for in 13.3-5 is possible only because of Jesus’ ministry among them, and must take the form of an appropriate response to that ministry. It is through the collaboration of these two textual components that the Lukan Jesus’ prophetic aims (in 13.2-9) are realised.

151 A similar point is made in the Lukan Sower, where producing a crop is linked directly to those who hear and persevere in the word of God, as proclaimed to them by Jesus (8.11-15).

152 See N.T. Wright, Victory, 333-4 for application of this passage to the nation of Israel as a whole. While aspects of his reading have been critiqued, there is in my view good reason to see in this parable a warning to the nation of Israel, particularly given the symbolic use of "house" elsewhere in Luke to refer to the Temple (6.4; 11.51; 13.35; 19.46), symbol and synecdoche for the whole nation.

In bringing Story and Plain Speech into dialogue, and having reference to the narrative events immediately preceding the parable (13.1), I have also provided insight into the Rhetorical Dynamics of 13.2-9 that goes beyond what has been said in other scholarship. I have shown that the parable is designed (in collaboration with Plain Speech) to subvert the paradigm by which the audience understand the time in which they live, a paradigm which supplies no rationale in which Israel's repentance is necessary. For Jesus’ message to be received, this paradigm must be dismantled or subverted. Thus Jesus combines prophetic warnings and parable to construe Israel’s present situation in a new way, so that the audience is given a new perspective on themselves (as sinners), on Rome (as the agent of God’s just judgment on Israel), and on Jesus (as the Messiah among them, upon whom the hope of the nation rests). In this way Jesus seeks to open the possibility of repentance for his audience, while also alluding to how his presence and ministry among them creates the potential for them to produce the fruit of justice and righteousness God requires of them.

I have also given more emphasis than most scholars to how the proposed actions of the parable’s gardener correspond to the Lukan ministry of Jesus, arguing that such a reading is coherent with the Lukan portrait of Jesus.154

THE RICH FOOL (Luke 12.13-21)

Jesus knew that man was more than a dog to be satisfied by a few economic bones -

Martin Luther King155

Setting

This parable features in the early stages of the Lukan travel narrative, where Jesus experiences intensified hostility from the religious elite (11.14-23; 11.37-12.3) and a mixed response from the

154 Scholars are generally hesitant to link the gardener to Jesus in a substantive way. Tentatively recognising a potential correspondence between the two are Bovon, Luke II, 276-7; Snodgrass, Stories, 263: a possible self-reference; Jeremias, Parables, 170-1: the disciples may have heard it this way; Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on Luke, Homily 96: a reading with “reason on its side not unbelitting right arguments”. Forbes, God, 92 sees in the period of grace an “allusion to Jesus’ messianic ministry”; similarly Nave, Role, 178; Noland, Luke II, 719 (tentatively); Carrol, Luke, 280; Wenham, Parables, 198-9; Snodgrass, Stories, 264; Heininger, Metaphonik, 129: in the gardener’s offer to care for the tree, “Anspielung auf die Tätigkeit Jesu enthalten sein mag”. The hesitancy evident here is partly due to a nervousness around allegory (see the discussion in Snodgrass, Stories, 262-3; Poser, “Umkehr”, 35-7, as an example of a scholar rejecting allegory, and her subsequent non-allegorical reading). However, to identify this correspondence is not to turn the parable into an allegory (many details remain as mere narrative detail), but only to recognise how a major motif in the Story corresponds to a pronounced element in the narrative in which it is set (further on my views in this regard, see Chapter IV, Section II). Some scholars focus more on the intercession of the gardener, which only corresponds to what is known of Christ in the wider NT (some find potential theological problems with this, e.g. Blomberg, Interpreting, 269: it risks setting Jesus “at odds with God the father”; Bailey, Peasant, 84-5), thus reading much into the parable that is foreign to the immediate context. This diverts attention away from the gardener’s proposed actions to bring the tree to fruitfulness, which is where we find a point of correspondence with the surrounding Lukan narrative.

155 King, Strength, 70.
crowds (11.14-15). The question of Jesus’ identity features prominently. Jesus’ teaching makes recurring reference to a coming day of accountability, judgment and reward. Recognising the realities of death and of judgment at the coming of the Son of man, what constitutes “life” is redefined having regard to an eternal horizon.

Having warned the crowds (11.29-36), denounced the Pharisees and legal experts (11.37-52), and pronounced judgment on “this generation” (11.50-51), Jesus turns to instruct his disciples on how to live well in the present age (12.1-48). The disciples will experience persecution in this age, but can expect divine assistance, and vindication and reward in the age to come (12.4-11). To follow Jesus involves radical trust in divine faithfulness and renunciation of wealth in order to secure eternal treasure (12.22-34). The disciples are called to persist in faithful service, refusing temptations of the age, so as to secure a good standing on the day the Son of Man comes (12.35-48). As the subjects of divine favour, they do not need to be afraid.

The immediate narrative setting of the Rich Fool is a request from a man in the crowd for Jesus to instruct the man’s brother to grant him his share of the family inheritance. Jesus’ replies forcefully, putting a question to the man and to the listening crowd, concerning himself (12.14). A warning against greed follows, justified with a contrast between life and the abundance of possessions (12.15).

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156 See Jesus’ claim to act by divine power/authority, in the Beelzebul controversy (11.14-23); his claim to be a sign to this generation (11.29) and one greater than Solomon and Jonah (11.29-32); his presenting himself as sole grounds for good standing before God (12.8-9).

157 See reference to “the judgment” (11.31,32); the accountability of “this generation” for the prophets’ blood (11.50-1); division of humanity (12.8-10); the son of man coming at ὠράξει ὡς δοκεῖτε (123.40) ἡμέρας ἡ ἡμέρα τῶν προσδοκόντων ἑν ἑν ἥμερᾳ ἡ ἡμέρα ἕως γινώσκει (12.46) bringing punishment and reward (12.57-8); warnings of judgment (12.57-13.9). Forbes, God, 80 sees a “motif of judgment and accountability” in 12.1-13.9; Tannehill, Narrative, 150 sees references to an “eschatological crisis and critical need for repentance”. On the importance of this for the ethical teaching of the section, see Johnson, Literary, 144, 151-2: Lukan teaching on possessions occurs “most frequently in contexts that are intrinsically dramatic, those of crisis and response”, including “eschatological dangers”; Wheeler, Wealth, 65: the “appeals” of ch 12 are “directly eschatological”.


159 Cf. Green, Luke, 489: 12.4-12 relates to “faithfulness in situations of life-threatening persecution”, while 12.15 “speaks of faithfulness with respect to life-threatening possessions”.

160 See Rindge, Jesus’, 220-4 on anxiety in 12.4-34; also Spencer, “Fear”, 229-49, emphasising the passage’s creational and pastoral theology.

161 On inheritance laws for Israel see Num 27.1-11; 36.7-9; Deut 21.16-17; (from a later period) Mishnah, Baba Batra, 8.1-8; Bovon, Luke II, 195: a request for division of the inheritance was possible even if viewed negatively; Green, Luke, 488.

Most commentators understand Jesus’ response as a refusal to get involved in the situation. But there is more going on here. In language recalling Moses’ early encounter with his fellow Israelites and their rejection of him, Jesus asks who made him judge and divider (κριτὴν ἢ μεριστήν) over the two brothers (ἐφ’ ὑμᾶς). Jesus’ question involves a subtle shift of emphasis, away from the dispute, to the standing of both brothers before Jesus. The question is particularly pointed when addressed to a man who has demanded Jesus rule in a particular way against his brother, but who does not appear to accept Jesus as judge over himself. Jesus’ question has been generally understood as implying a negative answer. However, I suggest that within the Lukan narrative this question - concerning Jesus’ identity and authority - can be understood to raise the crucial issue of the hour for this man and the crowds. The Lukan Jesus is the one who will judge and divide; where does his authority come from to do these things? The man concerned with his inheritance, symbolising many of his generation, fails to recognise that one greater than Solomon (renowned for his authority to judge and divide) stands before him (cf. 11.31).

Thus Jesus refuses to side with the man against his brother. Instead, he tells a parable, pointing to an alternative possibility for resolving the situation.

163 Jesus does refuse to give the ruling the man asks for, but it is going too far to say that “Jesus refuses to get involved in the dispute” (Bock, Luke II, 1149), since his reply has clear implications for the situation (see further below). In essence Jesus seeks to resolve the matter by altering the viewpoint of the man seeking his help, rather than by giving a directive to his brother.


165 On the textual tradition see Metzger, Textual, 135; Baarda, “Luke”; Bovon, Luke II, 197. On μεριστής, see BDAG, 633; Silva, Dictionary III, 280-3; Nolland, Luke II, 685: it “is not a separate designation but only a particular function of a judge…[that] appears here because of the particular request”.

166 To translate ἐπὶ in 12.14 “between” (e.g. NIV; Bock, Luke II, 1148; NRSV is better with “over”) seems unhelpful, especially when use of ἐπὶ + accusative as a “marker of power, authority, control of or over someone” is well attested (see BDAG, 365 (9.c)). “Between” detracts from the way the question positions both brothers in relation to Jesus rather than to each other.


168 Nolland, Luke II, 684-5, 688 rightly observes the “irony” of the man wanting to “make use for his own ends of a perceived status and authority in Jesus without facing the claim upon his own life implicit in that status and authority” (685).

169 E.g. Marshall, Luke, 522; so that “at a deeper level it is suggested that he has a more important mission to fulfil”.

170 The question follows on from Jesus’ claim that he will preside in judgment over the ultimate division of humanity (12.8-9) and Jesus will subsequently portray himself as one bringing division (12.51: διαμερισμὸς), and as one causing a house/family to divide (12.52-3: διαμιστήσω). Cf. Acts 10.42. Thus Jesus’ question (12.14) may be understood as introducing the important question of where his (claimed) authority to divide and to judge comes from.
Story

A wealthy man’s large estate produces a harvest of unexpected magnitude. Having a “good head for agribusiness,” he decides to replace his present storage facilities with larger ones and store his grain and other possessions there. This plan, he says to himself, will put in place all that is needed for him to enjoy a long and happy life. But before he can carry out his plan, God intervenes, calling the man a fool. That very night the man’s life is demanded of him (as a loan called up), the fate of his possessions to be decided without him.

Audience Engagement

In its Lukan arrangement, this Story is Jesus’ response to the man who sought his assistance to resolve an inheritance dispute. It is also addressed to a wider audience of disciples and a crowd. The audience will be mixed in socio-economic terms. How will they hear the Story?

Those from landowning families in the crowd (such as the man in 12.13) will perceive an attractive scenario unfolding in the Story (the large harvest) and relate to the need to respond appropriately. The Fool’s question (12.17: τί ποιήσω…;) creates anticipation and engagement as the audience recognise the importance of this question, wonder what will happen next, and perhaps begin to formulate their own possible answers (what would they do?). Landowners (and any aspiring landowners) will perceive the Fool’s building plans as a prudent solution, as well as an exciting one. This is a similar story to the one they are living or hope to be living. Having sympathised with the Fool’s plans, they will “experience the narratorial judgment that follows…the stinging...

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171 On χώρα see BDAG, 1083-4; Metzger, Consumption, 70: “enormous acreage”; Hedrick, Parables, 154n41-2. Rindge, Jesus’, 162: depicting the land as subject highlights the prominence of possessions in the Story.


173 Hedrick, Parables has details of ancient storage facilities and argues for the verisimilitude of the barn destruction-rebuilding plans (147-8) and that inadequate storage reflects an unusually large harvest, not poor management (154-5).

174 See Reiser, “Spaßkultur”, 446 for ἀναπάύον, φάγε, πίν, εὑροίνου (12.19) as “Vertreter einer Lebenshaltung, die in der antiken Oberschicht seit Urzeiten verbreitet war”, citing literary and archeological evidence from the ancient world (439-444); also Ameling, “ΦΑΓΩΜΕΝ”, 35-43 for many ancient parallels, including from funerary inscriptions; Johnson, Luke, 199: “proverbial expression of a hedonism divorced from the expectation of future life and judgment”; Bovon, Luke II, 201, observing how ancient inscriptions of this kind are frequently followed by reference to “the brevity of life and the inexorability of death as justification for these imperatives”.

175 See Bailey, Peasant, 67; TDNT I, 194: for ἀπαίτεω as “to call in debts”; BDAG, 96 for classical usage reflecting the thought of “life as a loan”. On the unspecified subject of ἀπαίτοῦσιν see Bock, Luke, 1153, who sees a Semitic idiom for God, though noting the possibility of reference to “angelic execution”.

176 Note how αὐτῷ… (12.14) alters to πρὸς αὐτοῦς (12.15 and again 12.16), which must include the crowd (12.13) and the disciples (12.22).

177 Metzger, Consumption, 72: the problem “introduces an element of suspense” eliciting curiosity and awakening anticipation; Rindge, Jesus’, 235: the soliloquy facilitates audience identification with the Fool so that his question becomes their own.

178 S. Wright, “Parables”, 223: the force of the Story lies not in the man being “especially wicked” but in his being “typical” of an entire class of people and a system; “his thought processes are normal”.

174
‘parallel experience’ of God calling [them] a ‘fool’.

They may not immediately understand why (see below). The Story has no ending, so that the audience must supply it. Does the Fool have time to respond and avoid such a foolish end?

For the poor, the parable features an elite they know well, and reminds them of the dilemma of theodicy, since God appears to prosper the rich man who ignores the poor and devotes himself to his own pleasure and security. Perhaps they already know the typical answer to the man’s question (12.17) even before hearing of his selfish plans (12.18-19). The Story’s ending will perplex and engage them. There may be some satisfaction for them in the man’s death. But they will wonder at the Story’s final question (12.20b). Is Jesus alluding to a new form of economic justice, for them?

Significance

Reference to possessions in abundance is found in each segment of this pericope: (i) 12.13-14: the man from the crowd has a share in a family estate; (ii) 12.15: περισσεύειν… ύπαρχόντων; (iii) 12.16-20: ἀνθρώπου τινὸς πλουσίου εὐφόρησεν ἡ χώρα… πολλὰ ἀγαθὰ κείμενα εἰς ἔτη πολλά; (iv) 12.21: θησαυρίζων… πλουτῶν. This emphasis on possessions, in abundance, gives thematic coherence to the pericope as a whole. Notable also are the parallels between the Story and the events that precipitated its telling. Jesus frustrates the man’s plans to obtain his share of the inheritance and denounces those plans (12.13-15), events paralleled in the divine frustration of the Fool’s plans and denunciation of him (12.20), emphasising a gulf between human and divine

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179 Dinkler, “Thoughts”, 394.

180 On how the lack of an ending may leave open the possibility of the Fool’s repentance, see Metzger, Consumption, 82; Rindge, Jesus’, 201n19, 236.

181 While the Fool came “innocently” to a large harvest (emphasised e.g in Ringe, Jesus’, 237; Bailey, Peasant, 64; Bock, Luke II, 1151) he is - before that harvest - a very wealthy man, the owner of a very large estate. Nolland, Luke II, 686 rightly observes that “for the Lukan reader the mention of wealth will already produce a rather negative set of resonances”. To the extent the poor in the audience perceive that his vast landholdings are made up of what were previously smallholdings, the Fool’s situation prior to the harvest evokes the injustice and poverty of their lives. In a limited good economy (Malina & Rohrbaugh, Synoptic, 400-1) his wealth speaks directly of their poverty. He is a figure “familiar to, and despised by, the Galilean peasants” (Beavis, “Foolish”, 65). For attitudes toward the rich in first century Palestine see further in Chapter VI, concerning the Hidden Talent.

182 The Fool, as described in the Story, is selfish in the way he plans to use his wealth, in that the unexpected harvest - by his own description more than sufficient for his needs - is only to be used for his benefit. Beyond that we cannot know the precise rationale for his plans. That he stores grain with intent to drive up prices (e.g. Schottroff & Stegemann, Jesus, 97: Moxnes, Economy, 88-9) goes beyond what is in the Story (so Kollmann, “Das letzte”, 566).


184 Beavis, “Foolish”, 65 suggests it will go to other wealthy persons; Scott, Hear, 138, thinks the intent is that the wealth will now be used for the wider community. Neither is known for certain from the text. Gorringer, “Zealot”, 269 points out it was the role of Joshua to divide the κληρονομία (translating נחלת) (e.g. Josh 13.7). Messianic expectations anticipated “final restoration and just division of ‘eres Israel” (269). He argues that in 12.14 Jesus is refusing to be this form of Messiah, “in favour of a different kind of kingdom of justice” (270). As the Lukian narrative proceeds (see below) the form of Jesus’ economic justice becomes clearer.

185 See Derrett, “Fool”, 134-9 on how the dispute between the brothers concerns the superfluities (rather than necessities) of life.
perspectives on possessions. The question with which the Story ends (ἀ δὲ ἡτοίμασας, τίνι ἔσται;) contains a striking parallel to the events that precipitated its telling:

- 12.13: The man’s demand of Jesus, concerning allocation of property [after his father’s death]
- 12.20: God’s demand (of the Fool’s life) and question concerning allocation of his property [after his death]

These literary parallels signal that in the parable the Lukan Jesus is speaking to the circumstances of the man in dispute with his brother (12.13), even if a wider audience is listening, strengthening the literary unity of the pericope as a whole.

The pericope also weaves narrative, Plain Speech and Story into a carefully structured rhetorical piece, where individual textual segments mutually inform to provide the rhetorical direction and force of the whole. Jesus’ explanation for not intervening in the man’s dispute with his brother (12.15) has two components:
1. 12.15a is a strong warning, with a double imperative, against πλεονεξία. It is an unusually strong way to critique greed, calling for further explanation. It also creates an antithesis that is very difficult for someone driven by greed to accept, confronting a worldview where abundant possessions define life’s substance and goal. Thus the rhetorical purpose of the parable is to enable the man to grasp a statement (12.15b) that is so contrary to his own thoughts that he is otherwise unable to receive it.

The parable is generally - and rightly - understood to concern the subject it narrates (wealth and life). This is a Single Indirect Parable, whose central motifs do not correspond to some other

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186 Metzger, Consumption, 67: the “strong double imperative” is unparalleled elsewhere in Luke.

187 On πλεονεξία see e.g. BDAG, 824: “the state of desiring to have more than one’s due, greediness, insatiableness, avarice, covetousness”; TDNT VI, 266-74; Silva, Dictionary III, 780-1; Metzger, Consumption, 68: an insatiable desire for more, with connotations of associated social disruption and aggressive grasping at honour or power. For the widespread critique of πλεονεξία in classical writings see references cited in Horn, Glaube, 60; Rindge, Jesus’, 124n3-4; Snodgrass, Stories, 751n15; Schottroff & Stegemann, Jesus, 96: in Hellenistic ethics “a greater evil hardly seems possible”.

188 The more usual critique of πλεονεξία in classical writings is that it is the source of all other evils. See Rindge, Jesus, 124n4 for classical and early Christian references, and his observation that “such critique is usually neither informed by nor framed within a discussion of death” (124).

189 On the link between 12.15 and the parable see e.g. Metzger, Consumption, 69: Jesus is the “embedded or intradiegetic narrator”, thus “within the context of the Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition, Jesus parable would be expected to further clarify” 12.15; Snodgrass, Stories, 399 recognises the particular significance of 12.15: the parable “functions as a commentary on the second half of 12.15”: Horn, Glaube, 59-60: 12.15 looks back to 12.13-14 and provides an “Einleitung und entscheidendes Stichwort” (59) in regard to the parable that follows; Nolland, Luke II, 688.
reality. It is important to recognise that the only basis for this crucial interpretive decision is the signals provided by the parable’s immediate literary context (12.13-15, 21). The parable’s Lukan frame, decisive in a contextual reading, signals that it explores the relationship between life and abundant possessions, matters portrayed directly (rather than metaphorically) in the parable, as a means of substantiating Jesus’ warning against greed. The importance of the parable’s frame is also seen in that the meaning of the Story - of itself - is less obvious than generally assumed. Because the increase in the Fool’s wealth may be perceived as divine blessing, and as his decision to enjoy his wealth is not without support in Jewish writings, it may not be obvious to the audience why he is a fool. This crucial point is only clarified as the Story is brought into dialogue with what immediately precedes and follows it. Also, the Story concludes without giving the audience positive ethical direction, leaving them to wonder what Jesus might see as an alternative course. The Story speaks to the dilemma of wealth and mortality, a dilemma frequently discussed in ancient Jewish and Greek writings, where we find a “contested conversation in which conflicting perspectives are offered regarding proper use of possessions in light of the finality and inevitability of death”. Recommendations include “enjoyment”, “generosity”, “alms”, “gifts to God”, “hospitality” and estate planning. The audience will not know from the Story alone exactly where Jesus’ emphasis lies. Hence the importance of reading the Story in dialogue not only with 12.13-15, but also with 12.21, which draws on language and motifs of the Story, even while focusing it around particular ethical concerns. Beginning with οὕτως, 12.21 is dependent on the Story (and thus to be read in dialogue with it), explicitly recalling its final scene (12.20) to

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190 See Snodgrass, Stories, 15: a Single Indirect Narrative addresses “the reader indirectly by telling of another person but directly by treating the subject at hand”. While other scholars do not necessarily use this category, the parable is widely seen to refer to matters of wealth, life and death as portrayed directly in the parable (see further on other scholarship below).

191 If the parable is taken out of its literary context, its various motifs can be (and have been) assigned metaphorical significance, leading to alternative readings. E.g. Scott, Hear, 138-9: the miraculous harvest is “a metaphor for the kingdom”; N.T. Wright, Victory, 331: “Israel is like a rich fool...”; Jeremias, Parables, 165: the death of the man refers to “an approaching eschatological catastrophe, and the coming Judgment”; similarly Crossan, “Parable”, 296-7. Is this a parable for Jesus’ followers in times of unexpected fruitfulness in ministry, warning against false confidence and/or falling into dissipation (e.g. with reference to 12.35-48)?

192 E.g. Scott, Hear, 134, citing OT references to divine provision of bountiful harvests.

193 See Noble, “Rich”, 315: the man’s decision to enjoy his wealth is “not always condemned [in wisdom literature]” (citing Eccl 2.24; 3.12,22; 5.18; 8.15; 9.7-10; and Sir 14.11,14,16), so that the man’s denunciation as a fool “creates the need for the additional information”; Metzger, Consumption, 76-7: audience assessment of the man will depend on which of Israel’s traditions (wisdom, prophetic or later apocalyptic) they draw a connection to; Rindge, Jesus’, on the varied use of the term “fool” in relation to possessions in a range of classical literature (227-30), and on the theme of enjoyment of possessions in Qoheleth and Ben Sira (43-85).

194 Rindge, Jesus’, 157; see the survey at 43-157, examining Qoheleth, Ben Sira, 1 Enoch, Testament of Abraham, and select writings of Lucia and Seneca. Similarly Hays, Luke’s, 265: “The Writings give voice to diverse convictions”.

195 Rindge, Jesus’, 118-121 (summary of findings).

196 Hence Blomberg, Interpreting, 267: without 12.15, “the parable is left entirely ‘in the air’”.

197 On the importance of 12.21 for a Lukan reading of the parable see Metzger, Consumption, 83-4; Rindge, Jesus’; 197: in 12.21, the man’s plans are interpreted “theologically and construed as a theological act” (italics original; see also 208-9); Noble, “Rich”, 315-6.
emphasise the fate of the rich man, and explaining that he is a Fool because he is ὁ θησαυρίζων ἑαυτῷ (12.21a) but impoverished where it really counts (12.21b).

Thus the contextual function of the parable and its Rhetorical Dynamics emerge as narrative, Plain Speech warnings, and Story interact and inform each other, opening a new perspective on the man’s dispute with his brother, on abundant wealth, and on life itself.

**Changing the Face of the Matter**

The man’s willingness to break relationship with his brother in order to gain his share of the family inheritance, and his wanting nothing more of Jesus than help in doing so (12.13), suggests wealth carries great importance to him and is closely associated with, or even equates to, the substance of life in his worldview. Jesus’ refusal to take the man’s side suggests he perceives these things differently. In what follows Jesus exposes and subverts the paradigm by which the man understands his situation, seeking to free the man from its power, so that he may consider other possibilities for his life, and other possibilities with his brother. Jesus begins with a sharp warning against greed, implicitly naming greed as the motivation behind the man’s plan. To substantiate this warning Jesus subtly shifts the focus away from greed to the goal and likely consequence of greed, obtaining possessions in abundance (in the man’s case, beginning with his share of the inheritance). Jesus also introduces a new subject, life (ζωή), into the situation, setting it in absolute contrast to wealth: “even when someone has more than he needs that person’s life does not consist of his belongings”. By introducing “life” into the situation, Jesus raises the rhetorical stakes, so that the man’s request becomes a matter of his very existence and (in the Lukan context) of his salvation.

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198 The suggestion by Bailey, *Peasant*, 61 that the man’s action reflects a “broken relationship”, and a desire to finalise “total separation” is somewhat speculative, but there has clearly been a disagreement between the brothers, and if Jesus were to side with the younger brother against the older, a broken relationship would surely follow.

199 Similarly Forbes, *God*, 86: “Jesus has not arbitrated in the family situation, but has brought a new perspective to the situation”; Bailey, *Peasant*, 70-1.


202 Within the wider Lukan narrative, ζωή can rightly be seen as a “metaphor for salvation” (Green, *Luke*, 489); “quintessential life… as offered to humanity in the call to follow Jesus” (Edwards, *Luke*, 370), though this emphasis may not be clear in 12.15 as the term can mean simply one’s life in this age (e.g. 16.25), and it lacks the accompanying αἰώνιος (e.g. as in 10.25; 18.18,30) that clearly signals participation in the messianic age.
Despite the Story’s close Proximity to the circumstances to which it speaks (it concerns acquiring wealth, as does the man’s request to Jesus), it still creates Distance from these circumstances, because it is someone else’s story. This Distance allows the audience space to process Jesus’ warning (12.15). And there is a crucial point of Difference between Story and Underlying Circumstance. The Fool has wealth on a grand scale under his control, even before the abundant harvest; the man in dispute with his brother (12.13) does not - at least not yet. This Difference is crucial to the way the parable functions. The man in dispute with his brother comes to Jesus desiring the honour and wealth of a landowner. Jesus tells a parable that paints a picture of where this man’s ambition and greed may well lead him, allowing the man to view a possible - and in his mind very attractive - future for himself. The greed that drives this man to relentlessly seek control of his share of the family inheritance may make him a very wealthy man one day. He may well obtain his share of the inheritance, and with time and careful management perhaps he will then acquire more land. Perhaps one day he will (like the Fool) own an entire χώρα, and perhaps God will bless it with abundant crops. What then? The Story paints a future scenario for his life in concrete narrative terms. It is the best of all possible futures the man could possibly contemplate. To the extent the man recognises this scenario as his dream, he will then hear his own condemnation in the denunciation of the Fool. In God’s surprising intervention (within the parable), the man is led to see that the ultimate dream for his life will, in the end, leave him with nothing, his possessions in the hands of others. The plan that brings this man to Jesus and the paradigm that lies behind it, in which obtaining wealth is of utmost importance to life, are the plan and paradigm of a fool! By placing the denunciation of the Fool in the mouth of God, the Lukan Jesus indicates that the new perspective he is opening on the man’s situation, is the divine perspective.

Reading the parable in dialogue with 12.15b (insisting life and abundant possessions are not the same thing), gives particular definition to the Fool’s error. He is a fool because life and abundant possessions are conflated in his worldview. This is demonstrated in his elated sense of achievement at the increase in his wealth and the lifestyle he thinks this will afford him. In obtaining these things, he feels he has obtained all that is good (12.19: ἔχεις πολλὰ ἀγαθὰ, all that is required to enjoy life to the full (12.19). In stark contrast, he is subsequently portrayed as

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203 See Green, Luke, 488-9 on how the desire for wealth and status are intertwined in the man’s request.
204 See Bennema, “Rich”, 106-7 on the relatively extensive characterisation of the Fool, and for how this characterisation is designed to “effect transformation” on the audience, who in evaluating the character, are led to “self-evaluation” (108); also Dinkler, “Thoughts”, 398: denunciation of the Fool’s plan, having been affirmed by the audience, invites “readerly transformation”.
205 Hock, “Parable”, 192-5 cites as “part of the general intellectual currency of the Graeco-Roman world”, a tripartite division of τὰ ἄγαθα into those that contribute to the happiness of the soul (ψυχή, e.g. virtues), the body (e.g. health) and externals (e.g. wealth) (190). Noting the man speaks to his ψυχή (12.19), he argues his foolishness is wrongly understanding wealth as τὰ ἄγαθα of his soul; thus he “neglected his soul which became impoverished” (195). This is the deceiving and impoverishing force of greed. It is a helpful insight, supportive of my reading of the parable, though whether “all would immediately know” these things (192) is open to question, given a Jewish audience, including at least some without a Hellenistic education.
separated from his possessions (12.20), and so having nothing, a motif of the Story reinforcing how the substance of life must lie elsewhere. The Fool faces death and eternity without any of the many things that have thus far defined his life in its entirety. Understanding the parable this way highlights a strong parallel between the Fool and the man who came to Jesus. Standing before Jesus, who is able to grant him life eternal (see further below), he is satisfied with asking for nothing more than a share in an inheritance, an outcome we may assume he has come to equate with a full and happy life.

The Plain Speech pronouncement of 12.21 reinforces that despite the Fool's apparent success in life, his life is a failure. In a powerful act of rhetorical subversion, the fabulously wealthy man is described as μὴ...πλουτῶν where it really counts. Divine and human perspectives on what it means to be truly rich are strikingly juxtaposed, so that the lie of abundant possessions - that they constitute life or enable life to be most truly and most fully lived - is exposed. Abundant wealth is seen to deceitfully mask a great poverty in the life of one who has accumulated it to himself.

In 12.21 there are also hints of an alternative. Ο θησαυρίζων ἑαυτῷ (12.21) evokes the Fool's barn building strategy and supporting rationale (12.18-19). These two passages bracket the parable's final question (12.20b), which alludes to an "other" obtaining the Fool's wealth (12.20b), perhaps hinting that he might have shared his wealth with others earlier. This alternative becomes explicit in 12.21b, where being εἰς θεόν πλουτῶν, a likely reference to almsgiving, suggests an alternative to the Fool's plans. The allusion to generosity to God (12.21) forms a segue to the subsequent discourse (12.22-34), where in direct contrast to the plans of the Fool, divestment of wealth and giving alms (12.33) is associated with obtaining the kingdom (12.31-2) and storing eternal treasure (12.33).

Thus the Story, in dialogue with accompanying Plain Speech, insists abundant wealth and life are not the same thing, even while portraying how easily they can be conflated. The parable's focus on the consequences of greed (having abundant wealth) is not ultimately a change of subject (from greed), but a rhetorical tactic by which Jesus substantiates the warning against greed (12.15a). In 180

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206 The double use of ψυχή in 12.19-20 heightens the contrast.

207 On 12.21 as a reference to almsgiving see e.g. Horn, Glaube, 65; Snodgrass, Stories, 400; Rindge, Jesus', 190-4, 203-9 (referencing Jewish texts, but noting "the relative dearth of material on alms in Greco-Roman texts" (193)); Noble, "Rich", 315-6. Noble examines the use of εἰς + accusative in Lucian, Philostratus and Rom 10.12, finding it is used to "designate the role of recipient beneficiary" (313; see the analysis in 308-13). "The object of εἰς is the beneficiary of the wealth", so that we should understand εἰς θεόν πλουτῶν in 12.21b as, describing "a transfer of wealth to God" (319). Thus 12.21b has the sense of "but are not generous to God" (319), and the contrast in 12.21 is between beneficiaries (ἔοιτυ vs εἰς θεόν) (316-7).

portraying how abundant wealth can lead directly to absolute impoverishment, Jesus exposes the great lie by which greed exercises its power. Greed flourishes through deception, by insisting that to obtain abundant possessions, and the life they facilitate, is to obtain what matters in life, and to experience life to the full. In this way the one having abundant possessions is given a false sense of accomplishment and success, a false sense of possessing all that which is valued and important, leaving no rationale or motivation to actively seek out true and eternal life, the life of the kingdom of God. Jesus thus puts a new face on abundant possessions, exposing their power to deceive a person where it matters most, concerning the nature and essence of life itself.

What then should this man do? What should others who are rich in the audience do? What about the poor in the audience? The Story is an unsatisfactory one for the poor, who know they are not typically part of the answer to God’s question (12.20b). What does Jesus have in mind for them? Answers to these questions come as we bring the parable into dialogue with the wider Lukan narrative.

The parable, so understood, has much in common with the eschatological woes (6.24-26), and with Jesus’ question in 9.25 (τί γὰρ ὁφελεῖται ἄνθρωπος κερδήσας τὸν κόσμον ὅλον ἕαυτὸν δὲ ἀπολέσας ἢ ζημιωθείς (ζημιωθείς)). These passages all insist that “life” cannot be equated with wealth and all it provides in this age, but must be understood with reference to what lies beyond one’s earthly existence. Further, these passages warn that to seek after and/or possess abundant possessions risks exclusion from the kingdom of God. These points are further reinforced in the Rich Man and Lazarus. In this way these passages (including the Rich Fool), lay an essential foundation for Jesus’ teaching elsewhere on wealth, and especially his call to renounce wealth so as to obtain true life and eternal reward. In exposing a popular life dream as a strategy for missing out on everything that really matters, the parable (in dialogue with its frame) has the power to open

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209 By “absolute impoverishment” I refer to how the Fool is portrayed - at the point of imminent death - as about to separated from his possessions, alone, and not rich toward God. Presumably if he dies, there is no chance to remedy this dire situation. His poverty is total and irreversible.

210 Cf. similarly Nolland, Luke II, 688: “the greedy person is confused about life, since a humanly meaningful and satisfying life has very little to do with how extensive one’s possessions are”; Calvin, Harmony, 147-8: in 12.15b Jesus “point[s] out the inward fountain and source, from which flows the mad eagerness for gain. It is because the general belief is, that a man is happy in proportion as he possesses much and that the happiness of life is produced by riches. Hence arise those immoderate desires…”.

211 Note how the command to not seek actively to obtain (ζητέω) food and drink (12.29), so typical of the normal way of life (12.30), precedes (and I suggest is a pre-requisite for) the imperative to seek actively to obtain the kingdom of God (12.31). How much more for the superfluities of life!

212 Beavis, “Foolish”, 65-8 thinks the owner’s death would be seen as murder, in retaliation for his “own social violence” (68). Because another rich man will assume ownership (66), the parable illustrates the futility of violence and revenge. This reading is based on elements absent from the Story.

213 Similarly Luke 8.14 attributes πλούτος the power to choke the life out of those seeking to respond to Jesus’ word.
the way for Jesus audience to “hear” and obey his subsequent teaching regarding an alternative use of possessions (beginning in 12.22-34) and an alternative orientation for their lives. Concern for the poor, for example, is not the central focus of the parable, but the parable prepares the way for Jesus’ subsequent imperatives concerning almsgiving (by exposing the ultimate futility and risk of accumulating abundant wealth unto oneself).214 In what follows I explore subsequent Lukan discourse concerning the relationship between wealth and life, and between wealth and community, issues at the heart of the 12.13-21.

Wealth and Life

As noted above, the Lukan Jesus insists that questions of wealth (posed by the man’s request) and life (a topic introduced by Jesus) must be considered together. Within the wider Lukan narrative, gaining (or losing) eternal ζωή is often closely related to economic decisions.215 To obtain eternal life a ruler, possessing great wealth like the Fool, must adopt the opposite wealth management strategy to that of the Fool, divesting himself of his wealth in almsgiving (18.18-22). The Fool anticipates the Rich Man of 16.19-31 whose suffering in the lonely torment of Hades is explained with reference to him having received many good things in his life (16.25).216 The Fool’s question, τί ποιήσω; (12.17), evokes similar questions elsewhere in Luke, by people facing life-determining choices, that involve use of possessions.217 Appropriate use of wealth is inextricably linked to escaping coming judgment and obtaining the life of the kingdom of God.

The Lukan Jesus speaks of these matters with pastoral as well as prophetic intent. Nickelsburg observes how both Luke and 1 Enoch contain a harsh critique of the rich, on moral/ethical grounds, and an associated threat of divine judgment and status reversal in the age to come.218 However, Luke differs from 1 Enoch in that Jesus engages personally with the rich, explicitly calling them to

214 E.g 12.33; cf. 16.9; 16.19-31; 18.22; 19.8.

215 Re the close connection between ζωή and wealth in Luke, see e.g. (i) 10.25-28: the love linked so inextricably to obtaining life involves providing economic assistance to others in need; (ii) the prodigal squanders his wealth in ζῶν ἀγαθάς (15.13) and then becomes as one alive from the dead to his family in a move from destitution to economic security (15.24); (iii) 17.33: the abandonment of household goods is necessary to save one’s life on the day of the Son of Man; (iv) 18.18: the ruler must renounce his possessions to possess life; (v) 18.30: those who have left houses for the sake of the kingdom will receive ἐν τῷ ζῷῳ τοῦ ἐρχόμενου ζωήν σου ἐκ τῶν ζωήν ὑμῶν. See Nolland, Luke II, 686: in Luke one’s “attitude” toward possessions is closely correlated to “one’s openness to what God is doing in and through Jesus”; also Johnson, Literary, 144-158: in Luke dispossession of possessions is a sign of the response of the heart to God, and concretely to God’s visitation in the person of Christ.

216 The Rich Man having ἀπέλαβες τὰ ἄγαθα σου ἐν τῇ ζωῇ σου (16.25), has a parallel in how the Fool ἔχεις πολλὰ ἄγαθα (12.19), and in how life and possessions are combined in 12.15.

217 See e.g. similar questions in 3.10 (all of John’s answers concern use of possessions); 10.25 (the answer depicts use of resources to assist the needy); 18.18; 16.3 (answered in debt forgiveness, by one facing an imminent end to his life position).

218 See Nickelsburg, “Revisiting”, 595-98 on how both texts contain: (i) highly negative portrayal of the rich (though Luke’s portrayal is more mixed in my view); (ii) the juxtaposition of rich and poor; (iii) “post-mortem, other-worldly judgment” (601) together with reward as the means of “reversal” for the rich and poor. This situates Luke more closely to 1 Enoch than to other wisdom texts on this matter (similarly Hays, Luke’s, 127).
repentance. Lukan repentance means renunciation of wealth (to varying degrees) and giving to the poor, on a scale not envisaged in other comparable contemporary literature. Jesus is holding out a path to salvation/life for the rich; the right use of their wealth is (at least part of) what it means for them to take their place in the kingdom of God.

The man’s request (12.13: διδάσκαλε, εἰπὲ τῷ ἀδελφῷ μου μερίσασθαι μετ’ ἐμοῦ τὴν κληρονομίαν) has much in common with that of the lawyer (10.25) and the ruler (18.18), who also address Jesus as teacher and seek to secure an inheritance. However, the ruler and the lawyer recognise Jesus as one having authority to grant an inheritance of life in the messianic age. There is thus a great irony in the man’s request that Jesus help him gain a share of the inheritance (12.13). The Lukan Jesus, having authority not merely to judge/divide but also to confer a kingdom, authority to grant eternal life, is asked for nothing more than help to obtain a piece of land! The man’s oblivion to Jesus’ true identity and authority represents his greatest failure. Jesus’ reply, in parable and Plain Speech, points the man to the path of an eternal inheritance.

Wealth and Formation of the People of God

Within each segment of 12.13-21, there is (explicit or implicit) reference to an “other”, who stands as counterpart to the main subject. The man who solicits Jesus’ assistance risks loss of relationship to his brother (12.13). The Fool is portrayed alone amidst his great wealth, and not knowing the other who will inherit his possessions. Failure to be rich toward God implies the neglect of those who might benefit from almsgiving (as above). The “other” within this pericope provides an important link to the wider Lukan narrative and its theology, where wealth is closely associated with the formation, or loss, of relationship/community. In a remarkable parallel to the circumstances which gave rise to the Rich Fool, the younger brother in the Prodigal Son seeks his

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219 E.g. (i) 11.39-41; so Green, Luke, 472: in “counselling almsgiving…[Jesus] opens the door for repentance on the part of the Pharisees”; (ii) as evident in Jesus’ command to the rich ruler (18.22); (iii) as illustrated in Zacchaeus’ generosity and reparations (19.1-10). See Nickelsburg, “Revisiting”, 598 for how this is a minor theme at best in 1 Enoch; Luke is “much more hopeful that the rich among his audience…will heed his admonitions” (599); also Schottroff and Stegemann, Jesus, 91-2.

220 Hays, Luke’s, 70-188: in Luke “renunciation of possessions takes multiple forms” (depending particularly on vocation and extent of wealth) so that “a coherent ethical principle” (renunciation of all) is worked out in a “range of contingent applications” (185).

221 Similarly Metzger, Consumption, 189-193: Jesus’ wealth ethics were “out of step with mainstream voices” (192).

222 10.25: διδάσκαλε, τί ποιήσας ζωήν αἰώνιου κληρονομήσως; / 18.18: διδάσκαλε ἀγαθε, τί ποιήσας ζωήν αἰώνιον κληρονομήσως.

223 Hays, Luke’s, 129 rightly sees in 12.33 “the climactic contrast with the intention of the petitioner in 12.15”.

224 See (i) 12.13-14: the older brother; (ii) 12.20: those who will gain the Fool’s possessions; (iii) 12.21: God as beneficiary, symbolising the recipients of alms.

225 The rich man’s isolation is emphasised throughout the passage: (i) διελογίζεται ἐν ἑαυτῷ (12.17); (ii) the first and second person singular future verbs in 12.18-19 portray a lonely future; (iii) the fourfold use of ἐγώ (12.17-20). It is only as his end is announced that there is an allusion to others in the Story (12.20: τίνι ἔσται). Cf. Kollmann, “Das letzte”, 566: “Er ist allein mit sich selbst und seinem Reichtum beschäftigt”.

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share of the family inheritance (15.11-13). This he gains, undoubtedly against his father’s wishes, but loses his place in the family, being restored only through financial destitution. A wealthy tax man, characterised in his wealth as “the lost”, is now found enjoying table fellowship with Jesus and his followers and declared a son of Abraham, giving half of his possessions to the poor and making reparations for past fraud (19.1-10).226

Jesus’ teaching concerning wealth is designed so that those with wealth will use money to “make friends” (16.10). The right use of wealth in Luke makes an essential contribution to community formation.227 As the Luke-Acts narrative progresses, it becomes clear that Jesus’ wealth ethic is in part designed to facilitate the formation of a particular community, the eschatological people of God. There are hints in Luke of how the right use of possessions facilitates the common life of Jesus’ earliest followers (8.1-3) and their mission (9.1-4; 10.1-7). In Acts it becomes clear that the promised provision of the disciples’ needs (e.g. Luke 12.30-1) comes (at least in part) through the renunciation of wealth by the rich (e.g. Acts 2.44-47; 4.32-37; 5.1-2; 6.1-7; 11.27-30).228 Thus, Jesus is not merely imparting wisdom to inform a way of life amidst the ordinary and age-old dilemmas of life. Rather he is giving instruction concerning wealth that will play a crucial role in the formation of an eschatological community of people marked out by the Spirit among them, and bearing the name of Jesus.229 This community is drawn from the rich and the poor. Renunciation of wealth, and it being put at the disposal of the community, makes it practically possible for the poor to participate in the shared life of the community.230 In this way the parable contributes to the Lukan

226 On Jesus’ encounter with Zaccheaus as involving repentance and receiving salvation see Harris, Davidic, 130-43. Other examples in Luke: (i) the cancelation of debt results in love for a creditor by a former debtor (7.41-2); (ii) the recovery of lost wealth becomes the occasion for a village celebration (15.9, see Moxnes, Economy, 62); (iii) a manager’s alleged mismanagement of his master’s estate leads to that manager losing his place in his master’s household (16.1-2); the steward’s shrewd use of his master’s money secures him a place in others’ homes (16.3-7); (iv) wealth disparities are mirrored in spatial separation of rich and poor before and after death (16.19-31); (v) the rich man must πάντα ὡς ἐξεῖς πωλήσων καὶ διδός πτωχοῖς if he is to join the community of Jesus’ followers (18.18-30). See Johnson, Literary, 158-161: while Luke deals with possessions in a literal sense, he is also capable of using them in a metaphorical sense, including to symbolise “human relations in a dynamic of separation and unity” (161).

227 Green, Luke, 471: giving alms “was an expression of genuine social solidarity, of embracing those in need as if they were members of one’s own kin-group”.

228 See Hays, Luke’s, 190-232 on these passages, and their continuity with Lukan theology. The early chapters in Acts portray a community that might be understood to model a variation of the ancient concept of friendship, in that through shared faith (209), shared meals (192-3) and giving by the rich, “inter-class relationships blossom”, in the “restructuring of friendship relations across class lines” and without reciprocity expectations (209), so that rich and poor participate together in a community of the people of God. Hays, Luke’s, 195-201 argues the early chapters of Acts refer to privately owned possessions being made available for use by the whole community, not common ownership of all private goods (similarly Pilgrim, Good, 151-2). On the relationship between these passages and the Qumran and Essene communities see Hays, Luke’s, 46-8, 195-200, 228-232.


230 Cf. Kuecker, “Spirit”, 84-8 on the Lukan use of ἰδιος and how “Luke portrays the early community members as claiming the community itself as their possession (ἵδιος), a move which… appears to be related to the unwillingness to designate physical possessions as one’s own (ἵδιος)” (88).
Jesus’ good news for the poor. The good news for the rich is that the very act of divesting their wealth will help them find their place among the people of God.231

**Parable and Kingdom**

Rindge has demonstrated how the language and themes of the Rich Fool situate it within Jewish and Hellenistic wisdom traditions concerning wealth and its proper use, particularly in light of the reality and uncertain timing of death.232 But we cannot ignore how the Lukan parable is placed in the mouth of one who came proclaiming and inaugurating a kingdom, the fullness of which means life and reward for some and judgment for others. Thus while the parable contains language and themes frequently found in the wisdom tradition, Luke places it in the service of a prophetic agenda.233 This gives a sharper edge to Jesus’ parable, since the right use of wealth is not only about living well in this age, but is directly related to participation in the kingdom (or not) and to favour and reward on the day of its fullness (or not).

Having told this parable Jesus turns to his *disciples* to further explain and argue for the alternative to wealth accumulation. The exacting wealth ethic that follows is not wisdom for every-person. Rather, it is the way of life of τὸ μικρὸν ποίμνιον of Jesus (12.32), of every age, who will take such risky and unusual measures, because they are children of the Father (12.32), recipients of a kingdom (12.32; cf. 22.28-30), living in the hope of eternal reward (12.33).234

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231 Cf. Hays, *Luke's*, 121: 11.41 can be read as “indicating that almsgiving actually ameliorates the problem of what is within”; thus almsgiving “can reintege the sinful Pharisees into covenant relationship with God” (121) and “reestablish membership in the covenant community” (129). Cf. Tobit 12.9 re how almsgiving leads to forgiveness of sin (also Sir 3.30) and “a full life” (though limited to life in the present age).


233 See Nickelsburg, “Revisiting”, 601 for how the “use of sapiential forms [in Luke and 1 Enoch] does not, in and of itself, indicate a non-apocalyptic worldview” (602). Both texts “presume a dualistic world view that is based on revelation” (even if embodied in sapiential literary forms rather than apocalyptic visions), which distinguishes them from other sapiential texts (570). This coheres with how “the characterisation of Jesus” in Luke 9-19 is “highly prophetic” (Johnson, *Literary*, 111-2, and 151-2 re 11.37-12.12), and more generally 12.13-21 is an example of how Lukan passages concerning wealth and possessions are “used by the author to directly express the pattern of the Prophet and the People” (170). Verhey, *Great*, 41 rightly sees “the eschatological transformation of conventional wisdom”, and Bloomquist, “Rhetorical”, 170 the “apocalyptizing of wisdom discourse” in Luke 12.

234 Similarly Pilgrim, *Good*, 113; Schottroff and Stegemann, *Jesus*, 73; Wheeler, *Wealth*, 64, emphasising faith as “absolutely central to the reality perspective on which this passage relies”, including faith in “Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom”, so that “only those who believe Jesus can be expected to follow his counsel” (67). The importance of assurance of eternal reward for Lukan wealth ethics is seen by comparing 12.33 (ὤν παδίωρον ἐν τοῖς ὀμόσαροις) with Tobit on the rewards for almsgiving: treasure for the day of need (4.9; also Sir 40.24); preservation from death (4.10; 12.9); “fullness of earthly life in the present world” (12.9, as translated in Fitzmyer, *Tobit*, 293).
My Interpretation and Other Scholarship

It is widely agreed that the Fool’s actions are to be understood negatively, though scholars vary regarding why. The Fool is generally critiqued because: (i) he places his hope/trust in wealth and/or is not aware of God or his own mortality; (ii) his is a selfish lifestyle marked by greed, “overconsumption and hedonism”; (iii) he lacks concern for others, especially the poor. The Story, by itself, can be pressed in any or all of these directions. The Fool’s thoughts (12.17-19) can be understood so as to support either (or all) of the three emphases. Taking guidance from 12.15b, none of these issues, in isolation, is the primary focus (as discussed above). Rather, understood in dialogue with 12.15b, the overall intent of the Fool’s thoughts is to signal that in having obtained abundant possessions, he thinks he has obtained all that gives life its full substance and true meaning, all that is necessary to live life to its fullest.

Scholarship on the Rich Fool is often influenced by theological themes from elsewhere in Luke, which may easily overshadow the particular theological concerns and insights of the parable as signalled by its Lukan frame. While the Fool’s soliloquy might be seen to allude to his finding security in wealth and using it to finance a hedonistic lifestyle, he is not criticised for either of these, but for equating life and abundant possessions (12.15b) and thinking himself rich when his life is about to be reduced to nothing (12.21). The poor and the “other” are at the margins of the Story, but not its immediate concern. The parable is not an illustration of greed, but, I have argued, is designed to substantiate a warning against greed (12.15a). It does this - in collaboration with 12.15b and 12.21 - by focusing on the goal of greed, abundant possessions, and by exposing the

235 Scholars often identify all or some of the following issues, so they are classified in what follows according to their major emphasis.
237 Metzger, Consumption, 84; Malherbe, “Christianisation”, 133; Bock, Luke II, 1152: the man “concludes that he can now live in total leisure and self-indulgence”; Blomer, Interpreting, 267: the man is condemned for “the accumulation of wealth solely for his own enjoyment”; also scholarship cited in Rindge, Jesus’, 181n81.
239 Pointing in this direction are: Bailey, Peasant, 67, noting the wordplay in 12.19-20: the man thinks his εὐφορέω (many things) will produce εὐφραίνω (the good life) but in reality his position is that of an ἄφρων (without mind, spirit, emotions), so that “his formula for the good life is utter stupidity”; Snodgrass, Stories, 399: “life does not consist of ‘stuff’… the real issue is the focus of life”; Nolland, Luke II, 687, observing “in the exultation of [12.19] a foolish confidence that in securing his economic future, the farmer has secured the future of his life itself as well”.
240 The man in the Story is already rich as the Story begins, and is not portrayed as seeking to increase his wealth. Having unexpectedly received a bumper harvest, as Kollmann, “Das letzte”, 566 rightly observes, “besteht sein Ideal nicht länger darin immer mehr haben zu wollen, sondern darin, sich in Ruhe mit Hilfe des erworbenen Reichtums etwas gönnen zu können”. Similarly Evans, Luke, 520: “the story is not naturally one of avarice”. Thus contra e.g. Green, Luke, 489-90; Rindge, Jesus’, 197, the Story is not to be understood as an illustration of greed. The focus of the Story is on the abundance of possessions (which is where greed leads), not greed itself. This distinction is important for understanding the rhetorical strategy of the parable, which exposes the bankruptcy of the man’s life goal, in order to discredit greed as a viable strategy for life (rather than portraying greed itself).
lie that abundant possessions constitute life, the lie by which greed exercises its power over people’s lives.

Rather than focusing only on the theology of this parable, the main concern of most scholarship, I have explored its Rhetorical Dynamics, documenting how it works to commend Jesus’ perspective to his audience in a way Plain Speech alone could not. Using a rhetorical technique similar to that of an OT juridicial parable, the Rich Fool narrates a life dream recognisable by many in the audience as the ultimate outcome for their lives, only to have it denounced by God as the life of a fool. The divine verdict applies equally to those among Jesus’ audience who have inwardly delighted in the Fool’s success and approved of his plans. When what is normal and admired has been exposed as foolishness, the way is open for an audience to consider new possibilities for their lives, and for the use of their wealth. By exposing and negating a popular life paradigm in this way, the Rich Fool also prepares the way for Jesus to speak of using wealth in new and unusual ways (throughout the remainder of Luke).

By reading the parable in constant dialogue with the narrative circumstances that gave rise to its telling, I have demonstrated (to a greater extent than others), how 12.13-21 may function as a well integrated rhetorical unit. The narrative events of 12.13-14 help set the interpretive direction of the parable and make its implications concrete and precise. In turn, I have shown how Story and Plain Speech may mutually inform to open a new perspective on the dispute between the man who sought Jesus’ assistance and his brother, subverting the worldview that lies behind that dispute. My assessment of how the parable speaks to its wider narrative audience (rich and poor in the listening crowd) illustrates that the importance given in my reading to the parable’s highly situational circumstances and audience (12.13-14), does not make the parable any less relevant for others present, or (as I will argue in Chapter VIII) for the contemporary reader.

241 More typical are Scott, Hear, 129: “the question about inheritance has little to do with the parable”; Snodgrass, Stories, 396: “Not a great deal is at stake with vv.13-15”.  

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Chapter VI
NEW TESTAMENT PARABLES (2)

The Hidden Talent
The Two Sons
The Sower

Documents make distinctive choices…\(^1\) The fulcrum of interpretation and analysis, for narrative as much as for all other kinds of canonical writing in formative Judaism, is the document. - Neusner\(^2\)

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\(^1\) Neusner, “Parable”, 2.

\(^2\) Neusner, Rabbinic, 223.
THE HIDDEN TALENT (Matthew 25.14-30)

Money and silver refer to the preaching of the gospel. - Jerome

Setting

Jesus has just proclaimed imminent judgment upon “this generation” (23.36), Jerusalem (23.37-9), and the Temple (24.1-2). Having spoken his last words to the city, Jesus leaves, turning now to the disciples, to whom he will soon entrust the business of the kingdom (28.18-20). On the Mount of Olives Jesus speaks privately with his disciples (24.3; cf. 26.1), who ask him when Jerusalem will be destroyed, and regarding the sign of his coming and of the end of the age (24.3). Jesus replies with an extended discourse concerning things to come.³

Throughout the discourse, the coming of the Son of Man is repeatedly asserted.⁴ This “coming” will follow a long period of Jesus’ absence,⁵ the duration of which is uncertain, during which time Jesus’ followers will experience great trouble (24.9-14). This combination of absence, delay, uncertainty, and trouble, will severely test the disciples’ love and faithfulness, thus calling for endurance (24.9-14, 21-24). The disciples will be tempted to follow false Messiahs (24.5, 23-4) and to join the rest of humanity going about business as usual (24.38-41); for those who succumb to such temptation, the Son of Man’s coming will be unexpected and catastrophic (24.38-44).

Throughout the discourse, humanity is divided between those who align with and are loyal to Jesus, and all others, a division that will become fixed and final at the return of the Son of Man. It is to this situation, that the parables that follow (24.42-25.30), including the Hidden Talent, are

³ There is a lack of consensus around the extent to which Jesus’ subsequent discourse relates to each question. The main views are: (i) the discourse relates entirely to events leading up to and including the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD (most notably N.T. Wright, Victory, 339-68); (ii) the discourse is split so that 24.4-35 relates to first century events and 24.36-25.46 relates to the parousia (e.g. France, Matthew, 889-94); (iii) 24.1-35 anticipates the events of the first century and the parousia either through a double fulfilment (e.g. Cranfield, Mark, 401-2) or through depicting the entire post-easter period as a time of “messianic woes” so that it concerns past, present and future (e.g. Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28, 331). In my view the extensive use of symbolic language and the vagaries of apocalyptic prophecy makes it difficult to be dogmatic. My assumption in this chapter is that much of 24.4-35 speaks to the destruction of the Temple and the period leading up to it, but without exhausting its prophetic potential so that elements of this section also anticipate the parousia and events leading up to it. I assume 24.36-25.46 to have an eschatological focus, seeing 24.36, with its focus on the unknown timing of the Son of Man’s coming and the implications of that, as the beginning of a new section. However, my reading would work within either of the above three scenarios. For the extensive literature on Matt 24-5, see the biographies in Nolland, Matthew, 954-6; Luz, Matthew 21-28, 178-80. For the structure and flow of thought see esp. Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28, 326-33; France, Matthew, 889-894; Luz, Matthew 21-28, 178-83; Lambrecht, Treasure, 183-7; Carter, Matthew, 466-9.


⁵ While “delay” features prominently in 24.36-25.30, the sense of a significant period of Jesus’ absence is also present in the first part of the discourse. See especially how the woes of 24.4-8 are only the beginning of the birth pangs, ὅλως οὐκ ἔταν ἐκτίν τὸ τέλος (24.6); the need for endurance (24.13); the magnitude of the task entrusted to the disciples, the completion of which precedes the end (24.14).
designed to speak. They answer the question: “What is the kingdom of God like during the period of waiting for the Son of Man, and at his return?” (cf. 25.1). The parables are designed to prepare the disciples to conduct themselves well during this period.

The parables of 24.42-25.30 are thoroughly integrated into the wider discourse, and their meaning emerges in dialogue with it. Readily identifiable correspondences between prominent parable motifs and central aspects of the events described in the preceding discourse strongly argue that the parables all speak of the absence, delay, and coming of the Son of Man. In turn, the parables further develop the parenetic focus of the earlier discourse, exploring issues of entrusted responsibility, the ethical dilemmas of the delay, rewards and punishment. Plain Speech accompanying the parables makes its own important contribution. The imperatives calling the disciples to be awake/alert and ready, because the timing of the Son of Man’s coming is unknown, help establish the ethical direction of the parables. However, the metaphorical nature of these imperatives means they do not make entirely clear - of themselves - what it means to keep watch or to be ready. Clarity on this important matter only emerges as parable and imperative are brought into dialogue.

The Hidden Talent has strong connections to the parables that precede it. All the parables of 24.42-25.30 speak to the circumstances of the disciples during the Son of Man’s absence. Shared themes and motifs are particularly evident between A Faithful or Unfaithful Slave? (24.45-51), the Ten Virgins (25.1-12), and the Hidden Talent (24.45-25.30). Further, the imperative of 25.13 acts as a hinge connecting the Hidden Talent to the Ten Virgins and to what precedes both parables. The imperative gains its rhetorical force from the preceding Ten Virgins (hence 25.13: οὖν…), and also introduces the Hidden Talent, which further substantiates it (hence 25.14: γὰρ…). Because

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6 On these correspondences see Hultgren, Parables, 277-8; Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28, 402; Scott, Hear, 220, and below (under “Significance”).

7 Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28, 369: despite its descriptive nature, “much of [24.4-35] is parenesis”, with imperatives in 24,4,6,16-18,20,23,26,32.

8 See directly 24.36, 42, 44; 25.13 and metaphorically 24.39, 43, 50.

9 For the integration of the Hidden Talent into its immediate literary setting, having regard to structural, thematic, linguistic factors see e.g. Heiligenthal, ‘Gott’, 87; Scott, Hear, 219-20; McGaughey, ‘Fear’, 236-8; Donahue, Parable, 96-8; Tárrech “Parabole”, 270, 274-6; Locker, “Reading”, 163-7 (though he allows 25.31-46 to dominate).

10 Note: (i) the lead figure is absent for a long/delayed time period, of unknown duration; (ii) those waiting for him have responsibilities during that period of waiting (as the Ten Virgins is told, it appears the virgins have a role of some nature in the wedding celebrations, even if the precise nature of that role is hard to define historically (see Zimmermann, Puzzling, 270-7 for details)); (iii) the conduct of those waiting divides them into two groups, one good/wise/faithful the other foolish/wicked; (iv) the lead figure returns/arrives; (v) the slaves/virgins’ fate relates directly to their prior conduct - one group is commended, welcomed, rewarded, while the other are excluded and punished; (vi) the stories are structured to give emphasis to the foolish/unwise, thus suggesting a warning function (so Nolland, Matthew, 1020: “emphasis falls on the negative case”, despite the presence of “a positive counterpart”).

11 See further Black, Sentence, 276-81 on Matthean use of οὖν and γάρ in expository discourse, noting how γάρ often appears in Matthew following and confirming an imperative.
this imperative (25.13) mirrors that of 24.42,44,50, the Hidden Talent is presented as speaking
directly to the central concern of the whole section (24.36-25.30), the kingdom of God during the
Son of Man’s long absence, and at the time of his return. Like the Ten Virgins, the Hidden Talent
emphasises events at the time of the Son of Man’s return,\textsuperscript{12} but with the aim of enabling the
disciples to live well \textit{while awaiting that day}, their conduct during that time of waiting being directly
related to their standing on that day.

Despite the parable’s high level of integration and alignment with its literary context, it is not
overwhelmed by its context, nor simply a repetition of what prior parables have already
established. Rather, I will argue the parable makes a unique contribution to our understanding of
the delay in the coming of the Son of Man, and of what is required of Jesus’ disciples while
awaiting that day.

\textbf{Story}
A wealthy man, before departing on a journey, entrusts significant wealth\textsuperscript{13} to his managerial slaves
\textit{(οἱ δοῦλοι)}.\textsuperscript{14} To one he entrusts five talents, to another two talents and to another one talent,
each according to their ability.\textsuperscript{15} The first two slaves, having “internalised the master’s interests”,\textsuperscript{16}
begin immediately to do business with the wealth entrusted to them, doubling its value. The third
slave dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money there.

After a long time, the master \textit{(ὁ κύριος)} returns and settles accounts. The first two slaves present
their master with double the wealth entrusted to them. They are commended as good and faithful

\textsuperscript{12} \cite{Heiligenthal_87}
\textsuperscript{13} \cite{Meier_349, Powell_907, Hultgren_275}
\textsuperscript{14} \cite{Glancy_72, Martin_15-22}
\textsuperscript{15} \cite{Glancy_76}
\textsuperscript{16} \cite{Glancy_76, Luz_251}
slaves, promised responsibility for greater things, and welcomed to feast with the master. The third slave explains that while he understood his master’s typical business aims and practices, he was unable to contribute as his master expected, due to fear. Having hidden the talent in the ground, he returns it to his master, describing it as “what is yours”. The master rebukes the third slave, calling him wicked, negligent, and lacking in ambition, and insists the slave should have at least deposited the money with bankers and earned his master interest.

The master commands that the third slave’s talent be taken from him, and given to the slave with ten talents, explaining that those who have used his money to increase his wealth will be given more. In contrast, those who have earned him nothing will have even the capital entrusted to them taken away. The third slave, being worthless, is to be thrown out into a place of darkness and torment.

Stock Imagery
There is widespread use of κύριος in the LXX to refer to Yahweh, and of δοῦλος to describe the patriarchs, leaders, kings, prophets, and priests of Israel as standing in a relationship to Yahweh characterised by trust, obedience, and alignment with (and active commitment to) the divine will and purpose. The imagery is suggestive that the parable speaks of the responsibilities of persons standing in relationship to God, and of the outworking of the divine will and purpose through human agency. The ambiguity over the identity of the master (κύριος is God in the LXX, but in Matthew corresponds to Jesus), is Christologically suggestive.

Socio-Economic Realities
This Story evokes socio-economic realities within first century Galilee. The master’s extreme wealth, his capacity to increase it, and his reputation for exploitation, situate him among the

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17 On the link between joy and festivities see Gundry, Matthew, 506; France, “Ready”, 188; Kamlah, “Kritik”, 29. On the link between joy and virtuous behaviour, and on joy in the age to come, see Keener, Matthew, 600n200.
18 While ὀκνηρός can mean lazy (e.g. Prov 26.13-16 LXX), that is less likely contextually (note this slave’s own characterisation of himself as fearful). “Hesitating, anxious, negligent” (TDNT V, 166-7), and “possibly implying lack of ambition” (Louw and Nida, 88.250) seem more appropriate.
19 Similarily Blomberg, Interpreting, 217: “everyone who has’ or ‘has not’ earned something during this period of stewardship” (italics original); also Herzog, Parables, 159: the proverb depicts “the powerful becoming more powerful through successful execution of their orders”.
20 On master-servant imagery see e.g. Münch, “Gewinnen”, 245; Weiser, Knechtsgleichnisse, 22-7; Harris, Slave (173-5 for LXX usage); Roth, “Master”, 388-96; Martin, Slavery. While the imagery can refer to Israel as a whole, the metaphor applies particularly to Israel’s leaders, and in the NT often refers to leadership of the Jesus movement.
21 Roth, “Master”, 392-3 observes the “functional equivalence between God and Jesus” that is “prominent” in this and similar parables, so that κύριος is “a term through which Jesus and God are brought into close contact”.
22 In my analysis of socio-economic conditions in first century Galilee and wider Palestine I have drawn particularly from Stegemann and Stegemann, Jesus, 104-125; Amal, Jesus, 97-155; Adams, Social, 82-182; Herzog, Parables, 53-73; Freyne, Galilee, 73-113; Horsley, Galilee, 202-221; Kloppenborg, Tenants, 284-322.
wealthy, landed, urban elite, a position of power and privilege within a highly stratified society.\textsuperscript{23} The doubling of the master’s wealth suggests the slaves invested his money in commercial enterprise. What follows are examples of the forms this commercial enterprise \textit{may} have taken, together with observations on how such enterprise reinforces or exacerbates social stratification and economic inequality:

3. Lending for interest.\textsuperscript{24} This morally dubious practice\textsuperscript{25} was resented for its exploitation of those in need, such as the small landholder who borrowed to survive times of economic hardship. With tiny economic surpluses even in good years, debt was often the beginning of a downward spiral for the small landholder, leading eventually to loss of land ownership.\textsuperscript{26} Loans from the wealthy elite, secured against land, were often made with the deliberate aim of gaining ownership of the land (on default), and thus contributed to growing landlessness among the lower classes.\textsuperscript{27}

4. Buying land, perhaps from debt-distressed owners, who then may have become permanently alienated from their ancestral lands. If that land was then leased to tenant farmers, the burden of lease payments (on top of tithes, tribute and royal taxes) often made tenant farming economically marginal, and even more vulnerable to economic shocks.\textsuperscript{28}

5. Trading luxury foreign goods. With limited markets for profit-driven trade in first century Palestine,\textsuperscript{29} cross-border trade tended to be controlled by an elite group of traders (of dubious

\textsuperscript{23} On social stratification in first century Palestine see Herzog, \textit{Parables}, 58-66; Stegemann and Stegemann, \textit{Jesus}, 126-36.

\textsuperscript{24} Adams, \textit{Social}, 127 cites evidence for how, among the small minority of persons having opportunities to create wealth, lending and charging interest were prevalent and “usury played a major role”. Kloppenborg, “Jesus”, 296-7 suggests “extremely high-risk maritime loans”, or loans by persons in a position to be able to charge exorbitant interest (citing Brutus’ loan to the city of Salamis at a 48% interest rate (Cicero, \textit{Letters to Atticus}, 5.21.10-12, 6.1.5-7)).

\textsuperscript{25} On ancient Jewish attitudes to interest see the discussion of the sources in Adams, \textit{Social}, 104-14; to which might be added Josephus, \textit{Against Apion}, 2.208: not demanding usury (along with other virtuous practices) “unite us in the bands of society, one with another”.

\textsuperscript{26} See e.g. Adams, \textit{Social}, 104: the vagaries of agrarian life meant “solvency became a perennial challenge” and loans to survive times of hardship could result in “severe and permanent loss”; Herzog, \textit{Parables}, 172; Horsley, \textit{Galilee}, 215-9.

\textsuperscript{27} See Arnal, \textit{Jesus}, 139-42 on the prosperity of the wealthy elite at the time, and for how the growing importance of money as a form of wealth led to increasing availability of loans. Also, “the main reason for lending money… would have been longing to acquire land… Money lending would have been an extraordinarily effective means for acquiring land” (139-40); citing Synoptic evidence, evidence from papyri and inscriptions and ancient loan documentation.

\textsuperscript{28} See also Herzog, \textit{Parables}, 72 for how increasing demand for monetary lease payments (rather than a percentage of harvest) increased the vulnerability of tenants to financial stress; also Kloppenborg, \textit{Tenants}, 307 on the “exploitive nature of tenancy and… the social dependence it created”.

\textsuperscript{29} On the limited extent of trading markets in the early decades of first century Galilee see Adams, \textit{Social}, 93-5; Arnal, \textit{Jesus}, 115-33; Applebaum, “Economic”, 662; Rohrbaugh, “Peasant”, 33-4; Moxnes, \textit{Economy}, 67. Noell, “Marketless”, 92-7 argues for greater levels of trade than scholars such as Rohrbaugh have recognised, together with the emergence of a market-based economy in first-century Palestine, including in Galilee under Herod Antipas. However, he also recognises that “market institutions… were regulated and manipulated for the Roman State and its benefactors” (97), with associated negative economic implications for the lower classes (97-101), an assessment that supports Rohrbaugh’s main arguments about how the characters of the parable would be perceived.
moral standing\textsuperscript{30} having foreign contacts and servicing a local urban elite, whose enjoyment of luxury goods may well have been resented by those struggling for survival.

While we cannot know exactly how the slaves increased their master’s wealth, I have outlined these possible scenarios to demonstrate how the master stands at considerable socio-economic distance from the parable’s audience, the later being located in the lower socio-economic strata and organising their lives “with the goal of survival” (see below).\textsuperscript{31} The master is clearly not one of them, and they will not naturally identify with him. His greedy pursuit of additional wealth may well have made him an unsavoury character in the eyes of a non-elite audience. To the extent the audience perceive the master’s business practices to have contributed (even indirectly) to impoverishment of the general populace, their dislike for him will be intensified.\textsuperscript{32}

A similar point may be made concerning the reference to bankers. With financial institutions and markets undeveloped at the time, placing money with individual bankers\textsuperscript{34} meant assuming risk of...

\textsuperscript{30} See Adams, Social, 96 on the reputation of traders in Second Temple Judaism; also the close association between trading and sin in Sirach 26.29-27.2.

\textsuperscript{31} Adams, Social, 99-100.

\textsuperscript{32} Josephus’ account of John of Gischala’s wealth accumulation (Josephus, Jewish War, II.591-2; Josephus, Life, 74-6) is helpful. After obtaining a monopoly on Galilean olive oil exports to Syrian Jews, so they might avoid having to use unclean foreign oil, John amassed an immense sum of money by selling the oil for 8-10 times what he paid the Galileans for it. While this situation involves greater profits to that achieved by the first two slaves in the Hidden Talent, in the eyes of a comparatively poor audience the two situations may still be grouped together as the shameless pursuit of massive wealth increase. Even if Josephus exaggerated details in order to discredit John, what is important for my argument is that telling how a man used “clever” business practice to accumulate great wealth was a means of discrediting that man, not of holding him up as a model citizen whose business practice was to be emulated. Josephus’ account assumes his audience would view John’s business practice and its outcome in negative terms. Note the use of κακουργία to describe John’s business activities (Life, 76). Also, the distinction Josephus makes between piety (εὐσεβία) and undisguised αἰσχρόκερδεια (BDAG, 29: “shamelessly greedy for money, avaricious, fond of dishonest gain”) when discussing John’s motive (Life, 75) strongly suggests that these things stand in stark contrast in the worldview of the time.

The general view of scholars is that debt servicing, taxation and tributes, tithes, and lease payments all contributed to a regular transfer of wealth from the region’s predominantly rural population to the urban elite. No doubt this was heavily resented. For quantitative estimates, see e.g. Herzog, Parables, 81: wealth transfers to the “top 2 percent of the population” were 50-67% of annual production; Oakman, “Debate”, 350: 60% of annual agrarian production ended up “in the storehouses of the ‘wealthy decile’”; Horsley, Galilee, 219: tithes, tribute and royal taxes accounted for one third of agrarian output. In regard to taxation, see Stegemann and Stegemann, Jesus, 112; Freyne, Galilee, 97; Adams, Social, 178-81; Udoh, “Taxation” for Roman and Herodian taxation in Galilee under Herod Antipas; Udoh, Caesar, 207-43 for taxation in Palestine generally during 6-70 AD. See Horsley, Galilee, 216-221 on the contribution of taxation to small farmer indebtedness and subsequent loss of land.

\textsuperscript{33} While the Jewish τραπεζή is understood to have played an important role in first century Palestine in currency conversion (e.g. Hutt, “Approved”, 595-8), little is known of their involvement in deposit taking and lending. Matt 25.27/Luke 19.23 may be the sole literary reference to first century Jewish bankers paying interest on monetary deposits. See Hutt’s assessment of the evidence (598-600); also Hamilton, “Temple” on the role of the Temple; Frier, “Interest”, 424.
capital loss, and engagement with a world that was both unfamiliar to the general populace and morally distasteful in that it involved persons of unsavoury character and the charging of interest.

Socio-Cultural Factors

Drawing on anthropological studies, Rohrbaugh identified aspects of the worldview of peasant societies that can help us understand how the events of this Story would have been perceived by an ancient audience drawn predominantly from the lower classes. Most importantly:

1. **Limited Good**: land and wealth exist in finite quantities, so that any increase in the landholdings or wealth of one person “automatically means a smaller share for others.”

2. **Use Value**: production and exchange normally have the purpose of survival and meeting the needs of family and village and not of amassing wealth.

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35 Nolland, Matthew, 1018; Gundry, Matthew, 509; Tárrech “Parabole”, 298; Weder, Gleichnisse, 204; Steinmetz, “Matthew”. 174, think bank deposits in antiquity were risk-free. This seems unlikely. See e.g Temin, Roman, 178 on how Roman banks at that time were not regulated or guaranteed by the state, and also how depositors (in the first century BCE) could pursue bank owners (not just the banks) to recover deposits (implying the need to do so at times). Cf. Cicero, On Pompey’s Command, 7.19 on how as a result of losses by wealthy Roman citizens in Asia (following the Asiatic war), “all credit failed in Rome”, because of “payments being hindered”, and so “drawing many along with them into the same vortex of disaster”, which is in all likelihood a reference to bank failure (due to loans not being repaid), leading to loss of deposits. France, Matthew, 955 rightly sees that putting money with the bankers “may have been no less risky than the commercial ventures attempted by the other two slaves”.

36 See Hutt, “Approved”, 596-8 for the poor reputation of the τραπεζί in first century Jewish society, including on account of their sometimes serving as toll collectors (598).

37 Rohrbaugh, “Peasant”, 33-35; these findings are drawn from studies of peasant societies in the twentieth century, though Rohrbaugh does explore evidence of similar ideas in ancient literature. It is important to emphasise that I am not in agreement with Rohrbaugh’s reading as a whole (see below) which depends heavily on Rohrbaugh: (i) amending the Matthean form of the parable and rejecting the Matthean arrangement of the parable; and (ii) appealing to the Gospel of the Nazoreans. My argument in what follows is only that Rohrbaugh’s socio-cultural analysis may contribute to how we understand the Initial Audience’s engagement with this parable, and in this small way contribute to a literary and contextual reading.

38 Rohrbaugh, “Peasant”, 33; similarly Moxnes, Economy, 76-9; Malina and Rohrbaugh, Synoptic, 400-1. Rohrbaugh is reliant here on the work of anthropologist George Foster (Foster, “Peasant”, 293-315). For responses to Foster’s work see Gregory, “Image”, 73-4 (and his alternative model (74-81), which in my view has similar socio-cultural consequences to Foster’s model). For Foster’s subsequent defence of his proposal see Foster, “Second”, 57-63, emphasising *inter alia* that his model describes peasant perceptions of their world (62), which is all that Rohrbaugh’s argument requires.

39 Rohrbaugh, “Peasant”, 34; citing Aristotle’s distinction between (practical) use of objects and their exchange for profit. Thus “exchange was never the primary orientation of peasant labour”. Similarly, Adams, Social, 95: “most individuals [in first century Judea] did not function within a capitalist framework of profit-seeking, but rather the majority of exchanges worked to retain existing hierarchies and foster solidarity among groups”. Similarly, with regard to financial transactions: “many individuals had no framework for profit gains, since they produced what they needed for survival and the maintenance of their household and its network” (99-100).
3. **The Evil Rich**: commerce and wealth accumulation are evil, as (by association) are those who practice them, not least because this can only be achieved through a commensurate reduction in the wealth of others in a limited good world.40

This worldview analysis contributes to my argument that the master’s wealth accumulation practices locate him at some socio-economic distance from Jesus’ audience and in all likelihood mean they would view his wealth accumulation as outside the bounds of honourable behaviour. An audience drawn from the lower socio-economic strata of an agrarian society would feel a strong sense of distance from, and dis-taste toward, one who “tramples on the values of the rural population”,41 and would understand the third slave’s reluctance to get involved.42

Other scholars observe how the subsistence existence of peasants means their livelihood is constantly threatened by factors outside their control, so that they will take an inherently conservative attitude toward economic and financial matters.43 Their strategy becomes “defensive”, designed to “protect that which they have”44 and maintain the status quo; they are “conservative and skeptical of changes, since their basic interest is to protect their subsistence”.45 “Conservatism in its root sense, simply to hang on to what one had, was imposed by force of circumstances”.46 To the extent Jesus’ audience shared this economic conservatism, they would understand the third slave’s risk averse strategy, that guarantees he can return his master’s money (but no more).

40 Rohrbaugh, “Peasant”, 34-5: thus “profit making is both evil and socially destructive... rich people are inherently evil”. While the OT and Second Temple Jewish literature describe the rich in more varied terms than Rohrbaugh, nevertheless a strong association between wealth and evil is a recurring feature throughout, especially in literature from the Second Temple period (see the overviews in Adams, *Social*, 183-207; Hays, *Luke’s*, 25-49, noting the “pervasiveness of this negative characterisation of the rich” (32); Blomberg, *Neither*, 33-85, 91-101, noting “riches are regularly, though not exclusively, seen as ill-gotten” (101) in Second Temple literature). Sir 31.8 provides a striking contrast to the behaviour of the master: μακάριος πλούσιος, ὃς ἐὑρέθη ὄμομος καὶ ὃς ὀπίσω γυμνοὶ ἕκω ἐπιτιμήσατο. What makes it particularly likely that the Matthean narrative audience would view the master negatively is that not only is he rich, but he is (despite his riches) still actively pursuing greater wealth, which would normally be associated with greed and/or covetousness. Also, Rohrbaugh’s argument is strengthened if we see the master as a stock (or stereotypical) figure within the parable, associated with greed and exploitation, which means for example that these associations are not negated by the existence of some (but less typical) rich and godly persons in Jewish history.

41 Stegemann and Stegemann, *Jesus*, 17.

Snodgrass, *Stories*, 534 rejects Rohrbaugh’s argument on the grounds the money was not left for safekeeping but “for investment”; thus his actions will be seen as a “dereliction of duty”. However, in my view, even if the money is entrusted for investment (and even if this is recognised by the audience), the important point made by Rohrbaugh is that the slave’s non-participation still appeals to an audience that cannot accept the legitimacy of the master’s wealth accumulation plans, because they associate dramatic wealth increase with greed and exploitation. The third slave’s behaviour is familiar to the audience and coheres with their worldview (even if they recognise it is not consistent with his master’s intent).

42 See Erdkamp, “Agriculture”, 564 on the effect of “consideration of minimalization of risk” on land use by peasant farmers in the ancient world; also Jongman and Dekker, “Public”, 116 on the economics of risk avoidance for the “subsistence peasant” in regard to agriculture.

43 Moxnes, *Economy*, 77; also agrarian economies “traditionally resisted attempts at change” (78).

45 Moxnes, *Economy*, 80, citing studies by James Scott.

MacMullen, *Roman*, 27, on peasant societies in the Roman world: “The central characteristic of villages [is] their conservatism. They and their population hovered so barely above subsistence level that no one dared risk a change...People were too poor, they feared to pay too heavy a price, for experiment of any kind”.

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In summary, socio-economic and cultural factors mean that an audience such as the disciples, on hearing the parable, will see the master and the first two slaves as representatives of a wealthy urban elite, socially distant from them and involved in a world of commercial enterprise they considered objectionable because of the economic disruption and hardship it created within the communities from which they were drawn. This hardship had intensified in Galilee, in the early decades of the first century, a time of considerable social and economic change, with growing concentration of land in the hands of the elite, increasing monetisation, and improved taxation collection, all contributing to increasing outflows of wealth from the region. Thus, the parable evokes a “topical issue”, with all the intensity of feeling that accompanies present, pressing and much discussed issues, so that the sense of abhorrence toward this man and his capitalist pursuits would be even more pronounced. On the other hand, it was normal within the ancient world to bury valuables and money. The actions of the third slave fit with ancient agrarian socio-cultural norms, so that he is, at the very least, a familiar figure for his audience.

**Audience - Identity**

Stegemann and Stegemann argue that the “overwhelming majority of the members of Jesus’ following came from the rural lower stratum”, including the twelve (except Levi) whose economic situation was “modest if not downright miserable”. The lack of information makes precise

47 See especially Arnal, *Jesus*, 132-50, who emphasises “relatively sudden changes” in the decades leading up to the public ministry of Jesus; also Horsley, *Galilee*, 219: the “process of steady erosion of the people’s position on their land accelerated” in early Roman times; Freyne, *Galilee*, 313, finding evidence of intensification in Galilee (in the early decades of the first century) of processes that had been in train in Palestine in general for a considerable time.

48 See Kloppenborg, “Growth”, 32-50 on the prevalence of large estates and growth in tenant farming in Palestine by the first century, and the contribution of this to increased landlessness, debt, and un/under-employment (also Stegemann and Stegemann, *Jesus*, 104-10; Josephus, Antiquities, 17.304-7). The precise extent to which this affected Galilee is known with less precision (Horsley, *Galilee*, 207-16).

49 On the extent of monetisation in Antipas’ Galilee see Arnal, *Jesus*, 134-46: the “Galilean economy was not especially monetised by the time Antipas came to power but became increasingly so from that point onward”; also Freyne, *Galilee*, 103-8, noting particularly the presence of coins from Tyre in northern Galilee, reflecting trading links with that city. On how monetisation increased social stratification and exploitation of the poorer classes see Freyne, *Galilee*, 104; Arnal, *Jesus*, 138-142; Herzog, Parables, 72-3.

50 Arnal, *Jesus*, 143-50 argues taxation was a topical issue in Galilee at the time of Jesus, and increasingly resented, as agents based in Tiberius and Sepphoris pressed further into rural Galilee to enforce collection far more effectively than had been possible in the past when tax collection relied on agents making periodic visits from Jerusalem. These two cities became a “practical and proximate home base [for Roman and Herodian governments] to plunder the agricultural wealth of this underexploited region”.

51 E.g. Deut 33.19; Josh 7.21; Matt 13.44; 3Q15: of the 64 items listed in the Copper Scroll, 21 include instructions to “dig”; Josephus, Antiquities, 1.342; 16.316; Josephus, Jewish War, 7.114-5; 2 Baruch 6.7-10; Virgil, Aeneid 1.358-9; 2 Enoch 51.1-2; b.t. baba metzia 42a; Perry, Babrius, 465 (Aesop’s “The Miser”).

52 Stegemann and Stegemann, *Jesus*, 203 (see the analysis in 197-202). Some may have come from the retainer class (e.g. Levi - he is a “small leaseholder”, perhaps having rights to the Capernaum fishing harvest (200)).

53 Stegemann and Stegemann, *Jesus*, 200. Their assessment of the Synoptic data on the disciples’ occupations and housing is well argued in my view. To argue fishermen were prosperous one must demonstrate they were a major player in a market of a reasonable size, and that the market/industry structure allowed for profits to be retained by those who caught the fish. Thus Oakman, “Debate”, 352 rightly observes that “the key issue…is the elite control of production decisions and resources”.

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assessments impossible. However, to substantiate my assessment of how Jesus’ audience would have perceived the master and the third slave (above), all that needs to be demonstrated is that the disciples are located within the non-elite (lower-stratum) groups of the social pyramid. This seems highly likely. These groups contain persons having a range of occupations and social status, but who share in common their being situated at an enormous social and economic distance from the wealthy elite. In what follows I take these general considerations and, with attention to the narrative dynamics of the Story, assess the way Jesus’ disciples might have heard the Hidden Talent.

**Audience - Engagement**

As discussed above, the master’s wealth, and especially his pursuit of further wealth, would have carried associations of exploitation, greed and elitism for the disciples of Jesus. The master is not one of them, and they are unlikely to have viewed his desire to increase his wealth, and the actions of the first two slaves on his behalf to this end, in a favourable light. The disciples will initially align with the third slave, who in burying the money, operates according to the norms and practices of their world, where every safeguard is taken to protect money on which their livelihoods depend, and where voluntary assumption of economic risk is unthinkable.

The divergent responses of the slaves creates its own narrative tension. How will the slaves fare when the master returns? Perhaps the audience feel uneasy about the third slave, whose behaviour, despite being familiar, is out of step with his master’s aims. Is he putting himself at risk?

The middle scene (25.19-22) is drawn out with considerable repetition, increasing the narrative tension as the audience wait to hear what will happen to the third slave. The commendation of the first two slaves and their invitation to share in their master’s joy is unusual and will surprise the audience, reinforcing how, within the world of the Story, greedy accumulation of wealth is viewed favourably. The commendation and promotion of the first two slaves increases narrative tension concerning the fate of the third slave, whose course of action differs so markedly from that of the other two slaves.

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54 Even Wohlgemut, “Entrusted”, 113 (critiquing Rohrbaugh) must admit that in view of the social stratification and wealth inequalities of the time, “it is initially plausible that a story that describes the aggravation of an already inequitable financial distribution would have sent negative shock-waves through an underclass audience”.


56 Note the repeat of detail from 25.16-17, the separate treatment of the first two slaves despite near identical accounts, the fourfold use of πέντε τρόχλαια and threefold use of δύο τρόχλαια. Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 247: this has the effect of “slowing the [narrative] development and thus increasing the tension”; also Heiligenthal,“Gott”, 88.

57 Nolland, *Matthew*, 1017: “actual praise” of slaves was “rare” in the ancient world; the welcome to participate in the master’s joy “yet more striking”.

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The third slave’s caricature of his master as an exploitative man (25.24) is repeated (25.26) and will be remembered, astonishing the audience on accounts of its audacity. The audience will likely agree with the caricature - behind such splendid wealth and extraordinary increase must lie exploitation. This affront to the master, calling him a godless man, who exploits others (25.24), increases the narrative tension. How will the master respond?

Hearing the third slave described as πονηρός (25.26) will have shocked the disciples. Their man in the Story, with whom they identify, is declared wicked! They are faced with two very different evaluations of the third slave’s character and behaviour; that of the slave (25.24-5, with which the disciples concur) and that of his master (25.26-7). This provides a point of dissonance, and thus of interpretive inquiry, for the disciples, on which the whole function of the parable turns. Is the slave’s aversion to his master’s capitalistic cause, and the conservatism and lack of ambition underlying that aversion, to be classified as wickedness?

The disciples will hear in the master’s rebuke and censure further confirmation of the third slave’s description of the master. The portrait of a godless and greedy man is completed for the audience by the master’s desire for interest (25.27), his placing the slave’s talent where it can be most productive (25.28), and his chilling explanation of his economic philosophy (25.29, evoking the cause of the peasants’ suffering). Here a further line of interpretive inquiry is posed for the disciples - can such a figure represent the intentions and conduct of their own master and lord?
The final chilling scene of exclusion and punishment (25.30) has the effect of concentrating the audience’s mind on the third slave as the narrative comes to a close. The public nature of ancient slave discipline meant it served a “pedagogical function” within society\(^{64}\) so that the audience will “recognise the disciplined flesh of parabolic slaves as an antitype, a model to avoid”\(^{65}\). This shocking final scene gives added importance to how the audience evaluate the behaviour and worldview of the third slave (with which they are naturally aligned).

**Significance**

The “Ὤσπερ”\(^{66}\) with which 25.14 begins suggests a comparative element between Story and Underlying Circumstance. The strong parallels between major motifs of the Story (master, slaves, the master’s long absence and then his return to judge and reward/condemn) and the eschatological scenario depicted in its literary context (the Son of Man; the disciples; the Son of Man’s long absence and then return to judge and reward) must inform a literary reading of the parable. These correspondences argue strongly that the parable speaks of the kingdom of God, and specifically of the disciples’ responsibilities in the kingdom during the absence of the Son of Man, and their associated standing and reward/punishment at his return. The Story’s master-slave imagery confirms this interpretive direction; the parable depicts those among God’s people entrusted with enacting the divine will and purpose. In what follows, I will argue that the parable’s literary/narrative context can also inform how we understand two further motifs of the Story - the “capitalist” business aims of the master and the timidity of the third slave. As noted above, these two elements are crucial points of audience engagement and inquiry and thus vital to defining the function of the parable.

**Changing the Face of the Matter**

*The Ambition of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God*

Immediately preceding the discourse within which this parables features, Jesus indicates that the time is soon coming when Jerusalem will be desolate, the Messiah absent (23.38-9), and the temple destroyed (24.2).\(^{67}\) Jesus then speaks repeatedly of God’s action in salvation history being

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\(^{64}\) Glancy, “Slaves”, 80-3; thus “instructing the faithful by making an example of others who were not faithful” (83).

\(^{65}\) Glancy, “Slaves”, 90.

\(^{66}\) “Ὤσπερ” has no associated term of comparison (e.g. Nolland, *Matthew*, 1013), though as noted above, the literary context provides this.

\(^{67}\) Hence Davies and Allison, *Matthew* 19-28, 324 can speak of a “time of abandonment” for Jerusalem, but rightly distinguishing this from “rejection of Israel”; the focus is on the city and its leaders.

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outworked among *all the nations* (including Israel). Jesus’ followers will be situated among πάντα τα ἔθνη (24.9); the good news will be proclaimed ἐν ὅλη τῇ οἰκουμένῃ εἰς μαρτύριον πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν (24.14);69 πᾶσαι αἱ φυλαὶ τῆς γῆς will behold the coming of the Son of Man in Messianic power and authority (24.30); the elect will be gathered from the four corners of the world (24.31);71 the Son of Man will sit in eschatological judgment over πάντα τα ἔθνη (25.32).72 Thus the Matthean Jesus, whose ministry up to this point in the Gospel has largely been confined to Israel, anticipates the expansion of the kingdom of God throughout the whole world, and his own authority over all the nations of the world being firmly established. This is an agenda that is every bit as ambitious (for ὁ προφήτης Ἰησοῦς ὁ ἀπὸ Ναζαρὲθ τῆς Γαλιλαίας (21.11)!) as the commercial acquisitiveness of the master in the Hidden Talent. In this sense the master can be seen to correspond to Jesus. The point of comparison lies in the ambition that characterises both; their common commitment to an aggressive, expansive, acquisitive strategy of increase.

In the limited good world-view of the Galilean peasantry, the master grows rich through appropriation of the property of others. This has a parallel in the way that the universal expansion of the kingdom of God is described in Matt 24-5. This expansion will take place despite the opposition of false Messiahs (24.5) and false prophets (24.11), and despite the torture and murder of Jesus’ followers (24.9).73 This opposition is evidence of a great underlying conflict taking place between powers and kingdoms as the reign of God/Christ is extended throughout the world. This conflict culminates in the eventual triumphant return and rule of the Son of Man. It is widely recognised that in 24.29-31 the coming of the Son of Man is described in terms that allude directly to Daniel 7.13-14. Daniel’s vision depicts the permanent enthronement of the Son of Man over all

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68 While τα ἔθνη can refer to the Gentiles (thus not including Israel), Luz, Matthew 21-28, 193 rightly observes that “in the immediate context the dominant dimension is the universal”; also Treblico, Outsider, 169: πάντα τα ἔθνη in 24.9,14; 25.32 “clearly means ‘all the nations’”. On ἔθνος in Matthew generally, see Treblico, Outsider, 168-72 (and his wider discussion of the term in other literature at 150-76); Olmstead, “Gospel”, 130.

69 See e.g. Nolland, Matthew, 967: the double reference (to the whole world and all nations) gives emphasis to “the central role that universal mission has in... the post-resurrection period”. Runesson, Divine, 384-8 argues 24.14 refers only to a mission to the Jewish diaspora, which when complete will be a testimony to the nations. His argument largely rests on what he sees as implied by the Matthean redaction of Mark 13.10 (384n111). However, the Jewish diaspora are not explicitly referred to in 24.14; also it is not clear to me why 24.14 would envisage this kind of mission in the post-resurrection era, when - as Runesson himself argues - Matthew elsewhere envisages a ‘mission explicitly [and directly] targeting the nations’ in this same period. Runesson recognises this problem, noting ‘some tension in terms of what type of mission is envisaged here’ but suggests Matthew is reconciling “different traditions” (386). In my view the tension arises because Runesson introduces an idea here (mission only to the Jewish diaspora) that is not found anywhere in Matthew; the more natural reading is to see 24.14 signalling the coming mission to all nations (including Israel), anticipating 28.18-20 (see further below).

70 See Balabanski, “Mission”, 171 and Olmstead, Trilogy, 84 on πᾶσαι αἱ φυλαὶ τῆς γῆς in 24.30, also in the LXX in Gen 12.3; 28.14; Ps 71.17; Zech 14.17, so that we might find reference here to the Abrahamic covenant and anticipation of its fulfilment in the mission of Jesus among the nations.

71 Note the use of συνάγω (25.24) to describe the master, and ἔπισυνάγω (24.31) to describe the activity of the Son of Man.

72 See e.g. Heil, “Double”, 5 on how 25.32 (and likewise 25.9-14) includes “everyone without exception and thus indicates a scene of universal and final judgment”.

73 See 24.4-5,9-12,21-24.
the nations and also how his rule is established at the expense of the rule of the beasts (= kings of the earth), who are killed or have their authority taken away from them (Dan 7.11-12, 26). For the rule of God/Christ to be fully and finally established through the whole world means conquest and displacement of other powers and authorities.\(^74\) For Jesus to grant the disciples the kingdom (25.34; cf. 25.21b, 23b) means that he has first taken it from others. That the coming of the Son of Man will mean vindication and reward for Jesus' followers inevitably means the associated loss of position and power for those who have opposed Jesus’ disciples. Thus the ambitions of the Matthean Jesus, for the universal expansion of his kingdom, inevitably mean displacement of other authorities and powers, in a manner comparable to the exploitative dimension implicit in the master’s practice of wealth accumulation.

Thus, the parable, in dialogue with its literary context, speaks to the time of Jesus' absence and anticipates the expansion of the Jesus movement throughout the whole world during that time. But what of the disciples' role in these things?

The Disciples and the Mission of Jesus

In the discourse preceding the parable Jesus anticipates that his disciple will play a central role in the expansion of his kingdom. Situated among the nations and bearing the name of Jesus (24.9), the disciples will proclaim the good news of the kingdom throughout the whole world as a testimony to all the nations (24.14).\(^75\) This implies that Jesus will entrust responsibility for the expansion of the kingdom to his followers during his absence (as will become explicit in 28.18-20), giving the disciples a crucial role in realising the universal ambitions of Jesus. That the disciples will carry out the business of Jesus in his absence corresponds strongly to a central motif of the Hidden Talent: the slaves carrying out the business of their master, having been entrusted with his wealth during his absence. This correspondence gives further support to my argument (above) that the parable concerns in some way the expansion of the kingdom of God throughout the world.

These analogous elements, between parable and discourse, help set the interpretive direction for the parable, suggesting it is designed to help the disciples understand the remarkable responsibility Jesus will soon entrust to them, and to encourage them to follow the example of the first two slaves in aligning themselves with their master’s ambitions and working productively to

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\(^74\) See Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 359-60 on how τὸ σημεῖον τοῦ ισχίου τῶν ἄνθρωπο (24.30) most likely refers to how “the Son of man will raise an eschatological ensign, signalling muster for the eschatological battle” (359), arguing for the Hebrew נֵס (“ensign”) to lie behind 24.30; also Sim, *Apocalyptic*, 104-5: the imagery in 24.29-31 portrays the coming of the Son of Man “in terms of a military campaign…like the arrival of a mighty, heavenly army” to prevail finally and fully against the “evil forces” that have opposed the righteous. This military imagery reinforces the conquest dimension associated with the establishment of the kingdom of God and the reign of Christ throughout the whole earth.

\(^75\) See Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 343 on how the same group of people are referred to throughout 24.9-14 “those who endure the eschatological trial are precisely those who, whatever comes, remain faithful bearers of ‘the gospel’.”

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that end. But what of the third slave, the main focus of the parable? Is his behaviour intended to prepare the disciples for the task soon to be entrusted to them? And if so, in what way? Recourse to the narrative context of the parable helps answer these questions. The most recent Matthean narrative marker prior to the Hidden Talent has Jesus pronouncing the coming desolation of the Temple (and Jerusalem) and then departing in a highly symbolic manner from the city (23.37-24.1a). This is followed immediately by the disciples bringing the Temple buildings, in all their magnificence, to Jesus’ attention (24.1b). While the reason for the disciples’ action is not explicit, its proximity to Jesus’ pronouncement is striking, suggesting the disciples may be reacting to (and against) that pronouncement. The confidence and hope of the nation was nowhere more powerfully symbolised than in the Temple, the centre, symbol and pride of Israel. For Jesus’s inner circle, understanding him to be the Messiah (16.16), the Temple is also likely to have been intimately associated with their understanding of Jesus’ ultimate aims and mission. That the disciples bring the Temple to Jesus’ attention at the very point where he is signalling its coming desolation (and is about to shift topic to the spread of the gospel throughout the whole earth), suggests the disciples are yet to fully comprehend their master’s plans and expectations concerning the coming of the kingdom of God. Is the parable designed to align the disciples with their master in regard to these things?

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76 The third slave accounts for nearly half of the Story’s words (Greek) and 25.24-30 over 40%. Dietzfelbinger, “Gleichnis”, 225-8, applying Harnish’s model for a structural analysis of the parable, finds the third servant to be the “dramatischen Hauptfigur… die Schlüsselfigur” (228).

77 For ὁ οἶκος υἱῶν (23.38) as referring to the Temple see France, Matthew, 883-4; Luz, Matthew 21-21, 162; Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28, 321-3, but rightly noting that in Jewish writings and by close association it must refer to Jerusalem as well.

78 The link with 23.37-8 is made more concrete by omission of the Markan story of the generous widow (Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28, 334).

79 Matthew’s use of προσέρχομαι (24.1b) suggests a purposeful statement by the disciples, rather than a casual comment. It is unlikely they were playing tourist. Whilst Matthew lacks the Markan appeal to the beauty of the temple, he specifies that it was the temple buildings to which the disciples called Jesus’ attention, buildings known for their magnificence and visual splendour (e.g. Josephus, Jewish War, 5.184-226; Josephus, Antiquities, 15.391-402; Tacitus, Histories, 5.8).

80 See e.g. Luz, Matthew 21-28, 166: following the judgment pronouncement, the “disciples’ interest in the building stands out in prominent relief”; Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28, 334: Do the disciples bring the temple to Jesus’ attention “because they find it incredible that he could utter judgment against such an important and proverbially magnificent structure with so many profound associations?”; France, Matthew, 887: given the disciples have been in a position to admire the building for some days already, perhaps their action is a response to what precedes it: “can he really mean that such a splendid complex is to be abandoned?”

81 On the significance of the Temple for Israel see e.g. N.T. Wright, Victory, 406-12; the Temple was “the central symbol of Judaism, the location of Israel’s most characteristic praxis, the topic of some of her most vital stories, the answer to her deepest questions, the subject of some of her most beautiful songs” (406); Dunn, Jesus, 287-8, noting that intra-Jewish disputes about (and denunciations of) the Temple and its leadership underscore its importance within Israel; Safrai, “Temple”, 904-6; Grabbe, Judaic, 129-49; Sanders, Judaism, 47-72.

82 An understanding encouraged no doubt by Jesus’ dramatic entry into the Temple, his actions and ministry there and his being hailed as Son of David there (21.123-16), and that after being welcomed into the city as Messiah (21.1-10). For the Temple having a central place in Jewish eschatological hopes see e.g. Is 2.1-3; 56.6-8; Ez 37.26-7; ch 40-48; Mic 4.1-2; Tobit 14.5; Jub 1.17, 29; 1 Enoch 91.13; Sir 36.13-14; 2 Macc 1.29; Test. of Benjamin 9.2; 11QT 29.8-10; 47.1-18; also Chankuzhy, Jesus, 7-43; Sanders, Judaism, 293-5; Flusser, Judaism, 207-212.
As discussed above, the disciples will identify most closely with the third slave as they hear the Story, only to find themselves forced to question the validity of his actions and self-justification as the Story reaches its shocking and violent conclusion. This creates an important point of interpretive inquiry for the disciples. Are they like the third slave? Will they also suffer his awful fate? My proposal is that at this point in the Matthean narrative, the disciples are like the third slave in that they have a limited (predominantly nationalistic) understanding of the aims of Jesus, and do not yet share his ambition for the kingdom to be expanded throughout the whole world (see further below). The third slave fails to align himself with his master’s business aims and is labelled wicked, negligent and lacking ambition. Will the disciples, out of timidity, negligence or lack of ambition, similarly fail to align with the universal ambitions of Jesus? The parable is designed to impart new self-understanding to the disciples. In being manipulated by the Story into aligning with the third slave, the disciples may come to see their own timidity and comparative lack of ambition, and recognise them as incompatible with the aims of Jesus. They are being called to turn from these things and embrace the ambition of Jesus for the expansion of the kingdom of God throughout the whole world. The disciples are like the third slave. They must become like the first two slaves, personally aligning with their master’s ambitions and setting themselves to work to realise them.

The description of the third slave being thrown into outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth intensifies the parable’s warning. The fearful and lacking in ambition among Jesus’ followers risk exclusion from the kingdom of God.

Summary
I have argued that when the Hidden Talent is read with reference to the wider discourse in which it is set, it can be seen to be designed to awaken the disciples to the worldwide scope of the ambitions of Jesus, and to confront the disciples’ timidity and lack of ambition, exposing these

83 Wohlgemut, “Entrusted”, 113-5 rightly argues (against Rohrbaugh and others) that the third servant cannot ultimately be a “hero” (a point that coheres with my reading), but misses the rhetorical significance of initial audience identification with a character who is subsequently discredited within the narrative.

84 See Münch, “Gewinnen”, 248-9: the parable is designed to cast a similar attitude among the audience (to that of the third slave) in a new light (“Die Erzählung holt sie bei ihrem Urteil ab und nötigt sie dann, sein Verhalten - und damit ihre eigene Haltung - aus einem anderen Blickwinkel zu betrachten und neu zu bewerten”). Also Davies, Gospel, 357: Jesus was “challenging his own people…by mirroring their conduct in that of the servant with the one talent”. Cf. Vila, “Relationship”, 175: the narrative direction of the parable exposes the “inadequacy of [the third servant’s] self-understanding”.

85 Nolland, Matthew, 1015-6 notes the emphasis in 25.16 (ἡργάσωσαν ἐν αὐτῶις) on the slaves’ personal involvement (25.20): “the slave, not just the money, is on the job”. I note also how the first two slaves emphasise the doubling of the master’s wealth as their achievement (25.20,22: κερδάονω in the active sense, and at the end of the sentence for emphasis).

86 Elsewhere in Matthew this imagery describes the eschatological judgment and particularly the fate of those outside the kingdom (8.12; 13.41-2, 50; 22.12; 24.51; see further Migbisiegebe, “Entering”, 612-619). On outer darkness in Jewish apocalyptic literature, symbolising the final destination and place of punishment for the wicked, see the references in Davies and Allison, Matthew 8-18, 30n87. On darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth, see Luz, Matthew 21-28, 257; 25.30 “speaks clearly…of the darkness and the horrible pain of hell”. For the association of weeping and gnashing of teeth with eschatological fire (Matt 13.42, 50) and punishment (Matt 24.51) in other literature, see the references in Luz, Matthew 8-20, 11n28; Davies and Allison, Matthew 8-18, 31. Concerning the motif of divine violence in Matthew, and its relationship to Matthean theology and ethics, see Reid, “Violent”, esp. 249-50, 252-3.
things as incompatible with their calling and responsibilities in the kingdom of God. The associated Rhetorical Dynamics of the Hidden Talent are similar to the Rhetorical Dynamics by which the Good Samaritan is widely recognised to function. An audience will initially align with those characters in these Stories whose behaviour is eventually exposed as out of step with the kingdom of God, and will have a natural aversion to characters whose behaviour is eventually seen as a model for the way of life of the kingdom of God. The Hidden Talent thus provides Jesus’ disciples with a new perspective on the ambitions of Jesus (being universal in scope), exposes aspects of the disciples’ worldview (especially their limited ambition) as incompatible with the kingdom, and calls them to emulate the first two slaves in aligning themselves with Jesus’ ambitions.

Further meaning emerges as the parable is brought into dialogue with the prior imperative (25.13: Γρηγορεῖτε οὖν!) and prior parables. As noted above, 25.13 provides essential guidance that this parable (as with those that precede it) concerns the day of the Son of Man and the conduct of the disciples while they await that day. In turn, the parable informs how we understand 25.13 (and similar prior imperatives) by giving more precise definition to what it means to be watchful while awaiting the day of the Son of Man (25.13), emphasising the disciples’ responsibility for the expansion of the kingdom of God throughout the world and the proclamation of the good news to all the nations. Further the Hidden Talent is suggestive that the necessity of vigilance and faithfulness throughout the entire period of the delay (as emphasised in prior parables), may reflect (at least in part) the necessity of faithful labour, over a long period of time, to bring the mission of Jesus to completion. The disciples do not know the day of the coming of the Son of Man (24.3,36), but in faithfully carrying out the task entrusted to them they prepare the way for his arrival.

The Hidden Talent and Matthew's Wider Narrative and Theology
Having been first interpreted contextually (as above), the Hidden Talent can then be seen to make an important contribution to the development of the Matthean narrative and its theology (see below), even while being given depth and perspective in doing so.

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87 In the case of the Good Samaritan, a Single Indirect Narrative Parable, this behaviour (love of neighbour) is modelled directly in the parable (by the Samaritan). In the Hidden Talent, being a Double Indirect Parable, this behaviour (working for the expansion of the kingdom of God throughout the whole earth) is portrayed metaphorically in the parable (in the first two slaves’ successful investment of their master’s money).

88 Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28, 344 raise the intriguing possibility that the necessity of the prior proclamation of the good news throughout the world is why “the time of the end cannot be known beforehand”.

89 Recognising a causal link between the mission of Jesus’ disciples and the coming of the Son of Man are Nolland, Matthew, 967: “It is precisely universal mission that prepares for the universal scope and significance of the end”; Balabanski, “Mission”, 171-2: the Gentile mission is “an eschatological imperative” integral to the coming of the end; Keener, “Missiology”, 9; Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28, 344: “it is Christian proclamation which will encourage... repentance and so hasten the end”. 

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While the Matthean Jesus’ ministry is predominantly focused on Israel, it is also evident in Matthew that God is - in the ministry of Jesus - outworking his saving purpose for all the nations. Jesus’ birth and early ministry are presented so as to allude to a “dawning of light for the whole world, including Gentiles”. This becomes more explicit in 12.15-21 where Jesus is described as a source of justice and hope for the nations. People from these nations will come and take their place at the eschatological feast (8.11), as foreshadowed in Matthew by those Gentiles who sought Jesus out, and whose faith was commended by him (8.5-13; 15.21-8).

However, it is not initially clear in the Matthean narrative how Jesus’ ministry, small in scale, geographically confined, and focused on Israel, will bring salvation to the nations. Jesus initially ministers throughout Galilee, primarily to the Jewish populace, with his disciples accompanying him. The twelve are then called and sent out to proclaim the good news of the kingdom, but only to τὰ πρόβατα τὰ ἀπολωλότα οἴκου Ἰσραήλ (10.6). Jesus will describe his own mission in the same terms (15.24). The focus on Israel in the Matthean disciples’ initial experience of mission no doubt cohered with their own messianic expectations, centred on the redemption and restoration of Israel (perhaps to which the nations would then be drawn).

While the Matthean Jesus’ ministry is predominantly focused on Israel, it is also evident in Matthew that God is - in the ministry of Jesus - outworking his saving purpose for all the nations. Jesus’ birth and early ministry are presented so as to allude to a “dawning of light for the whole world, including Gentiles”. This becomes more explicit in 12.15-21 where Jesus is described as a source of justice and hope for the nations. People from these nations will come and take their place at the eschatological feast (8.11), as foreshadowed in Matthew by those Gentiles who sought Jesus out, and whose faith was commended by him (8.5-13; 15.21-8).

How "motifs of the return of the Diaspora and of the pilgrimage of the Gentiles were umbilically linked in Israel's sacred traditions". In my view the latter position is the stronger one. Decisive for me is the context.
It is not until the eschatological discourse (24-5) that, as we have seen above, Jesus speaks explicitly to his disciples about the expansion of his mission beyond Israel, and throughout all the nations.\textsuperscript{96} Having pronounced judgment on Jerusalem and the Temple, Jesus then sits with the disciples, those who are the foundation of the \(\text{ἐκκλησία}\) he will build (16.18), the beginning of the \(\text{ἔθνος}\) to whom he will entrust the kingdom of God and who will produce its fruit (21.43). To these disciples, Jesus speaks of the proclamation of the good news of the kingdom throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations (24.9-14). As will become more explicit in Jesus’ parting commission, at the climax and close of the Matthean narrative (28.16-20),\textsuperscript{97} it is \textit{these disciples} who will be entrusted with the task of carrying out this mission among all the nations of the world.

For the disciples to accept responsibility for the world-wide expansion of the kingdom of God their expectations concerning the nature of the kingdom of God, and concerning their responsibilities in that kingdom, must be radically altered. A new perspective is required that will subvert the disciples’ nationalism and conservatism. I am arguing that Jesus told the parable of the Hidden Talent to open up this new perspective for the disciples. The parable’s jarring imagery of aggressive capitalism confronts the disciples’ limited view of the kingdom of God, and points to the universal nature of Jesus’ ambition. The parable’s terrifying judgment upon the “minimalist”\textsuperscript{98} third slave, confronts the disciples’ conservatism, timidity, and lack of ambition, exposing the power of these things to prevent the disciples from carrying out their responsibilities in the kingdom of God. Thus the parable - in dialogue with the wider discourse in which it is set - makes an essential contribution at this point within the Matthean narrative, helping redefine the scope and nature of the mission of Jesus and preparing the disciples for the responsibility soon to be entrusted to them in relation to that mission.

Jesus’ universal aspirations are also anticipated in the growth parables of Matt 13, that contain motifs of multiplication, increase and expansion. In the Mustard Seed (13.32: τὰ \textit{πετεινὰ} τοῦ \textit{οὐρανοῦ}) and in the Wheat and the Weeds (13.38: \(\text{ὁ δὲ ἀγρὸς ἐστιν} \textit{ὅ} \text{κόσμος}\)), there are also

\textsuperscript{96} Olmstead, \textit{Trilogy}, 82-3 rightly sees this as an “important turning point” in Matthew: “for the first time in this narrative, the universal mission of the church finds explicit articulation”.

\textsuperscript{97} See Balabanski, “Mission”, 162-3 on verbal and thematic parallels between Matt 24 and 28.16-20, and for how these passages inform each other.

\textsuperscript{98} Peterson, \textit{Tell}, 155 aptly describes the third slave as “the play-it-safe, cautious, non-participating, non-servant” whose “self-serving minimalism is not an option… in Jesus’ kingdom”.

\textsuperscript{99} While views on this meaning of this imagery vary, I am persuaded by Bird, \textit{Jesus}, 72-76, who sees reference to the nations’ “incorporation in the ultimate reign of God” (76).
motifs that point more specifically to the expansion of the kingdom throughout the nations.\textsuperscript{100} France argues the Hidden Talent complements the Matthean growth parables (through a “creative fusion” as they are juxtaposed), explaining that the seemingly organic growth depicted in Matt 13 is in fact only achieved through the “enterprise and initiative” of Jesus’ disciples.\textsuperscript{101} That 13.12, which concerns what is given (δίδωμι) to the disciples, is repeated in 25.29, strengthens the argument for the Hidden Talent to concern the message/mysteries of the kingdom of God, as entrusted to the disciples, and with the intention and capacity for increase.

An aggressively acquisitive and expansionary kingdom, that comes at the expense of others’ domain (as I have argued is depicted in the Hidden Talent) coheres with the wider Matthean portrait of the kingdom of God. The birth of Jesus threatens the dominion of Herod (2.1-17), and John the Baptist announces the coming of Jesus with a withering attack on the religious leadership, who are warned of their end (3.1-12). The Devil appears to perceive that Jesus seeks the kingdoms of this world for himself and tries to trick him into gaining them by illegitimate means (4.8-10). There is a “violent” attempt to “overpower God’s reign” (11.11-12),\textsuperscript{102} even as it is breaking out at the expense of existing powers and authorities. The coming of the kingdom involves violence, forcible restraint of demonic powers and plunder of their domains (12.29), a struggle in which inactivity must be classified as a form of opposition (12.30).\textsuperscript{103} The prophetic words and actions of Jesus on arriving in Jerusalem signal that his kingdom will come at the expense of the existing leadership. Those who reject his invitation are to be destroyed, their city burned, and others invited to take their place (22.1-10). The vineyard will be taken away from the murderous tenants and leased to others (21.41). The Hidden Talent emphasises the importance of the faithful and costly witness of the followers of Jesus, in order for the kingdom of God to be so established.

\textsuperscript{100} Outside of Matthew, we should note John 4.37-8, where the disciples are told they will be sent by Jesus to do precisely as the third slave accused his master of doing, to θερίζειν ὃ οὐ ὑµὲν κεκοπίακατε. This refers to the spread of the gospel outside of Israel (in Samaria), confirming that among Jesus’ earliest followers this imagery could be used to portray the disciples’ involvement in the expansion of the kingdom of God beyond Israel.

\textsuperscript{101} France, “Ready” 187: thus “if the tiny mustard seed is, indeed to become a great bush, it will be because the disciples have been making it grow”.

\textsuperscript{102} See the discussion in Reid, “Violent”, 239-40, and the range of interpretive options for 11.11-12 in Davies and Allison, Matthew 8-18, 252-6.

\textsuperscript{103} More attention should be given to the remarkable parallels between (i) 12.29, describing the activity of Jesus, and the third slave’s description of his master (as one who plunders another’s property); and (ii) those in 12.30 who do not align with Jesus and refuse to actively participate in his mission, and the third slave who is condemned for similar failure. These parallels provide further support from within Matthew that this imagery may be used in the way I have argued for above. On 12.29 see the helpful treatment in Davies and Allison, Matthew 8-18, 341-3; France, Matthew, 481.
My Interpretation and Other Scholarship

In my reading of the Hidden Talent the parable’s literary context provides the crucial interpretive signals, while socio-historical data informs my understanding of the Story and the dynamics of its reception.\textsuperscript{104} The resulting emphasis on Jesus’ universal ambitions for the kingdom of God and the disciples’ responsibility for this task, together with my exploration of how the parable confronts the disciples’ timidity and lack of ambition to prepare them for this task, is unique within contemporary scholarship.\textsuperscript{105}

In the most common reading of this parable, its imagery and basic storyline are informed by the general eschatological framework of Matt 24-5, so that it is understood as a call for faithfulness, productive labour and/or good stewardship by Jesus’ followers, while they await his return. This faithfulness is usually defined in fairly general terms,\textsuperscript{106} as is the metaphorical meaning of the talents.\textsuperscript{107} My reading is thematically consistent with this approach. However, by examining correspondence between the parable and its literary context, I give far more specificity to the task entrusted to the disciples, and thus to how faithfulness is defined. Drawing on socio-cultural insights I have also explored the nature of the third slave’s failure, and the significance of this for the audience (who will identify with him), so that more definition is given to the parable’s Rhetorical Dynamics, and a more satisfactory explanation is provided for the narrative prominence of the third slave.

\textsuperscript{104} As far as I know, the combining of literary and socio-economic considerations in this way is not evident in other scholarship. Other scholarship drawing heavily on socio-historical research (see below) tends also to read the parable in isolation from its Matthean context, so that socio-cultural considerations dominate (rather than merely inform) the interpretive process.

\textsuperscript{105} Pointing in this direction, but not explaining how the parable achieves this, are: Perkins, \textit{Hearing}, 150-1: Jesus is confronting “the issue of paralysing fear in the face of a great mission”; Lischer, \textit{Parables}, 91: “a cautionary tale addressed to those entrusted with the Lord’s work, but who lack the courage to embrace its inherent value for the purpose of growth in the kingdom of heaven” (reference to the “Lord’s work” is consistent with my reading but too general); Davies, \textit{Gospel}, 358-9.

\textsuperscript{106} E.g. Jülicher, \textit{Gleichnisreden II}, 481: “müssen wir für seine weiteste Anwendung eintreten: auf Treue”; Snodgrass, \textit{Stories}, 534-5: Jesus’ followers are to be “faithful in their obedience until his return”; they will be held accountable for “their productivity in the kingdom”; Davies and Allison, \textit{Matthew 19-28}, 403-4: “to emphasise responsibility… the obligation incumbent on those confronted by the presence of the kingdom”; Hultgren, \textit{Parables}, 280: the parable exhorts “great efforts in the use of the gifts one has”; Wenham, \textit{Parables}, 84: “emphasises the need for work and productivity”; Oppong-Kumi, \textit{Matthean}, 322: “doing good works and the fulfilment of duty”. Locker, “Reading”, 163-8 and Heiligenthal, “Gott”, 90-1 appeal to Matt 25.31-46 to argue the parable calls for charity toward the needy, but the discourse prior to the parable, together with its plot and imagery, make it unlikely this is the sole or main focus.


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Some scholars argue this parable is a critique of Jesus' Jewish contemporaries, or early rabbinic Judaism. Dodd saw a critique of the “pious Jew” who in his “meticulous observance of the Law” makes the religion of Israel “barren” because sinners and Gentiles have no benefit from such religion. Harrington sees a contrast between the conservative and protective attitude of rabbinic Judaism (toward their religious heritage), and the “enterprising and successful Jewish-Christian missionaries”. I am of the view the parable could have functioned in this way if it was directed toward the religious leadership. What prevents this at a literary level is that it is addressed to the disciples. What these readings share with mine is their recognition of the parable’s ability to expose and confront any narrow (e.g. nationalistic), minimalist, conservative understanding of the kingdom of God, something which may well have characterised the worldview and religious outlook of the religious leaders and the disciples alike.

Kähler argues the parable was originally addressed to “potentielle Nachfolger”, of whom “außergewöhnlich viel, ja alles verlangt, u.U. sogar die Verletzung des Gesetzes”. Kähler's reading illustrates how the Plasticity of the parables, together with the multi-faceted nature of the Gospel narratives, creates many possibilities for interpreting a parable, having reference to a wide range of possible (non-contextual) Synoptic texts in support. His proposal also demonstrates how non-contextual readings may divert attention away from the particular concerns of a parable’s immediate literary context.


110 Dodd, *Parables*, 151; he sees also a critique of a Judaism that sought to preserve the nation from being subsumed within Gentile culture (152). Cf. Cadoux, *Parables*, 106-9 who also highlights lack of concern for the Gentiles. He sees reference to putting the money with (presumably Gentile) bankers as exposing Jewish hypocrisy in dealing with Gentiles “for the sake of their purses” while “leaving the Gentile’s religion to itself” (108).

111 Harrington, “Polemic”, 297.


113 Kähler cites Luke 9.57-62; Mark 1.16-20; 10.17-22; Matt 13.44, 47-50, which provide the crucial interpretive signals.

114 Similarly, scholars finding general existential principles in the parable (e.g. Tärrech “Parable”, 304: exhortation to lead a life of “gain avec risque”; Fiedler, “Talente”, 272: “Nur der im Leben verwirklichte Glaube ist echter Glaube”) detract from the more specific contextual concerns of the parable.
Some scholars feel the third slave is a positive figure whose behaviour is to be emulated in some way. Rohrbaugh argued the parable is designed to expose and critique the exploitation he sees depicted in (and evoked by) the parable. For the Story to be read this way, its strong and obvious correspondences with elements of its literary context, that argue the parable’s concern is not money or commerce, must be ignored, and its “metaphorical world” set aside “in favour of a literalistic reading”. Also, the Story’s final verses must be excluded from the Story, so as to avoid the slave being classified as a negative figure.

Other scholars regard the capitalist master as incompatible with the Synoptic/historical Jesus. As with Rohrbaugh’s, this reading gives inadequate weight to the metaphorical aspect of the parable. An unusual comparison may be required to provoke an audience to inquiry, to expose things about themselves previous unacknowledged, and to open perspectives they have previously been unwilling to entertain. What is important is to find the right “point of comparison”. I have shown how the master’s behaviour may illustrate an essential aspect of the kingdom of God that coheres with Matthean contextual concerns and wider theology.

While my reading is unique within contemporary scholarship, a central feature of my argument (that the parable anticipates the disciples’ role in the spread of the Gospel throughout the nations) coheres with some patristic readings, which understand the parable (and its Lukan counterpart) to portray the faithful proclamation and transmission of the gospel of Jesus by his disciples and their

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115. Heil, “Was erzählt”, 362 rightly articulates a crucial interpretive question for this parable: “Wessen Verhalten soll als Norm illustriert werden, an die sich die Adressaten ausrichten sollen?”


117. Meier, *Marginal V*, 356. In my view there are no contextual signals in Matt 24-5 to suggest that this parable is a Single Indirect Parable having as its *ultimate* concern the subject it narrates - the use of money or other financial resources, or economic injustice and exploitation. In a literary reading, parallels between these central aspects of the parable and contextual elements (as identified above) argue for these matters to have metaphorical rather than literary significance.

118. This is recognised by Rohrbaugh, “Peasant”, 32, whose reconstruction of the “originating structure” excludes 25.29-30. His argument, at a crucial point, is justified by appeal to his truncated reconstruction of the Story (being clearly incompatible with the Matthean version) (38). Also Herzog, *Parables*, 155, including only 25.14b-28; Ford, *Parables*, 33-4 (only 25.14-28); cf. Van Eck, “Question” whose reading of the Lukan version depends heavily on the slave not being punished. See Münch, “Gewinnen”, 247 on how “Eine Interpretation der Parabel muss ernst nehmen, dass der Erzähler das Urteil des Herrn über seinen Sklaven stark macht”; also Kloppenborg, “Jesus”, 298 on how “regardless of the sympathy the story might engender for the servant”, the slave/master exchange “deprives the third servant… of the rhetorical high ground”.


120. Gundry, *Matthew*, 508, rightly refusing to regard the parable as a literal portrait of Jesus; similarly France, *Matthew*, 956 on the need to distinguish between “the message conveyed and the vehicle”.
successors in the post-Easter period. For example, Eusebius of Caesarea sees reference in the Lukan version (19.11-27) to the world-wide spread of the gospel as a result of evangelistic proclamation. The slaves represent the disciples, entrusted with the “preaching of the kingdom… the saving word of the gospel”. These things being “announced to all men”, God’s church was “set apart from all the nations through the work of these friends of the Saviour and of those after them who possess the same zeal” so that after a “short time, the church began to fill the entire world.” My reading of the Hidden Talent shows that this same emphasis can be argued for in a reading fully informed by the parable’s Matthean literary context.

THE TWO SONS (Matthew 21.28-30)

In the shadows and just out of the picture, however, stands another son… the good child whose initial response is matched by his performance in the vineyard. - Richard Lischer.

Setting

Following his celebrated arrival in Jerusalem, Jesus enters the Temple, the spatial domain and power-base of the Jerusalem elite, disrupting the Temple market, healing the sick and teaching (21.1-23). The Temple elite rightly regard Jesus’ actions as a direct challenge to their authority and move quickly to publicly discredit Jesus. They demand to know the nature and source of Jesus’ authority (21.23), thus setting a “clever trap” for Jesus. Lacking official status at the Temple, however, stands another son… the good child whose initial response is matched by his performance in the vineyard. - Richard Lischer.

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121 E.g. Tertullian, Praescription, 26: by means of a parable Jesus had shown the disciples that they should not “keep back in secret, fruitless of interest, a single pound, that is, one word of his”. This they did, proclaiming the whole gospel “in the church… in synagogues and public places”. Jerome sees reference in Matt 25.14-15 to how “when [Jesus] was about to ascend to the Father as a victor after the resurrection, he called the apostles and delivered to them the evangelical doctrine”; thus the “money and silver refer to the preaching of the gospel and the divine words”, passed on by the apostles to others (Commentary on Matthew, IV, 25.14-15, 26-8). Cyril of Alexandria similarly sees the talents as spiritual gifts given to the disciples and their successors that they may be “lights in the world, holding the word of life”, whose faithfulness (their having “multiplied the talent tenfold or fivefold”) is seen in their “winning many men” to be “partakers in the grace given by Christ” (Commentary on Luke, CXIX). Origen, discussing this parable, warned against two forms of inactivity in regard to the word of God: “ne pas approfondir la connaissance de la vérité par la discussion ou bien ne pas transmettre la parole de Dieu aux autres” (Manns, “Parable”, 350).


124 Lischer, Parables, 88.

125 Within the Matthean narrative ταῦτα (21.23) is a reference to all these events (so Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28, 159; Smillie, “Response”, 460; Carter, Matthew, 423).

126 On Jesus as a challenge to the authority of the Temple elite see e.g. Evans, Matthew, 366: the Temple elite had “sole jurisdiction over the Temple”, and any authority to act in it must be obtained from them; France, Matthew, 797-8: Jesus’ actions (especially his Temple protest) assume an authority greater than that of the Temple authorities; Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28, 159 and N.T. Wright, Victory, 495-6, emphasising (rightly in my view) the messianic claim implicit in Jesus’ actions in Matt 21.1-23, which these guardians of Israel can hardly ignore. All these factors contribute to the Temple elite’s unease.

127 The question creates a public dilemma for Jesus: either he can claim human authority (which undermines his own actions and risks his ministry being shut out of the temple) or claim divine authority and risk charges of blasphemy and/or sedition (see Evans, Matthew, 366; Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28, 159).
Temple, Jesus appears vulnerable. He responds with a question of his own, concerning the
baptism of John, forcing “a humiliating profession of ignorance” from the Jewish ruling elite.
Jesus then refuses to answer the elite’s original question (21.27), situating himself as one who is
not subject to their authority.

There is more to Jesus’ question than skilful rhetoric. The reference to John carries particular
force for a Jerusalem audience, since John was widely known and honoured among the people of
that region, having made “a profound impression on a large segment of Judaism”. Scholars
generally understand Jesus’ question as positioning himself in relation to John, as one having an
authority derived from John, or having an authority similar to John’s. This may well be part of
the point. But more should be made of Jesus’ specific reference to John’s baptism. Jesus is recalling a
recent event that Matthew suggests was widely known in Judea and Jerusalem: John baptising
many Jews in the Jordan, including Jesus (3.5-17). John’s baptism was a sensitive subject for the
Temple elite, especially when raised publicly, since they had not been baptised by him. Their
refusal now to publicly affirm the divine origins of John’s baptism, is an implicit “denial of [John’s]
prophetic authority”, having the potential to undermine the Temple elite’s legitimacy as leaders of Israel in the eyes of the crowd.135

In recalling John’s baptism, the Matthean Jesus also (indirectly) answers the Temple elite’s questions concerning his authority. While baptising, John gave testimony concerning the coming Messiah (3.11-12), and received Jesus as one greater than himself (3.13-14). Jesus himself is obediently baptised by John (3.14) and his identity as Messiah and (beloved) son of God is made known at that time in the giving of the Spirit and by the φωνὴ ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν (3.13-17).136 Jesus’ question recalls these events for the reader of Matthew. Thus while Jesus refuses to answer the Temple elite’s question directly, he points to the answer John the Baptist has already provided.137

Following this tense encounter in which the Temple elite lose face, and where Jesus subtly points to his Messianic identity and authority, Jesus moves from direct speech to parable, creating rhetorical space for his audience, even whilst intensifying his critique of them.

**Story**138

A small landowner asks each of his two sons to go and work in the vineyard that same day. The first son, in an affront to his father, refuses but then later regrets his decision and goes obediently to work. The second son replies respectfully,139 but does not go. Jesus asks which of the two sons did the will of their father, and his audience identify the first son.

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136 Similarly N.T. Wright, *Victory*, 495-7, emphasising John as Elijah (“after him comes the king” (497)) and the giving of the Spirit at Jesus’ baptism.

137 Recognising the significance of this literary link is Nolland, *Matthew*, 856: “in the Matthean framework… to ‘believe [John]’ would naturally result in finding one’s way from John to Jesus and therefore having no need to ask the initial question. This outcome could be seen as based explicitly on John’s testimony to Jesus”, or the congruence of their ministry and call for repentance.

138 I am working with the form of the parable with the strongest textual support, though my reading would work with either of the two major textual variants. On textual issues see Metzger, *Textual*, 45-7; Olmstead, *Trilogy*, 167-76; Elliot, “Parable”; Cameron, “Matthew’s”, 193-7; Oppong-Kumi, *Matthean*, 186-200; Minns, “Parable” (arguing for Irenaeus’ use of the text of Codex Bezae). Arguments that Matthew’s theology or narrative concerns led to the text being altered in a particular way cannot be decisive as such arguments have been made for both major variants. That “if the first son obeyed, there was no reason to summon the second” (e.g. Metzger, *Textual*, 46; Gundry, *Matthew*, 421) is not a good argument; he may always have intended to ask both (Elliot, “Parable”, 73). The most important factors in deciding between the two major textual versions are: (i) the weight of textual support, which favours that used in NA28; and (ii) the “inferiority of form” of the second most frequently attested option, as indicated by its “diversity of readings at the close of the parable” (Metzger, *Textual*, 45-6).

139 The ἐγώ, κύριε (21.30), literally “I [will], Sir”, shows “significant deference” (Snodgrass, *Stories*, 269, 675, n47 citing OT and other parallels); “complete devotion” (Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 30); cf. Acts 9.10. There is irony in the use of a phrase that in the LXX is so frequently associated with YHWH’s faithfulness/integrity, including in the keeping of his word.
Socio-Cultural Insights

A Jewish father had complete authority over his family/household and was responsible for maintaining order within it. Children, as inferior members within the family, were expected to show "absolute loyalty and deference" to their father. The family was also an economic unit where members of the household depended on each other for survival, and sons contributed labour from an early age. The first son's refusal dishonoured his father. The second son's polite answer may have been his way of avoiding such disrespect, but his subsequent lack of obedience threatens family order (and potentially survival?). Having been ignored or insulted, the father would be expected to take action to restore personal honour and order within the family.

Imagery

As discussed above (the Barren Fig Tree), a man and his vineyard are stock imagery, symbolising the relationship between God and his people Israel. The Story describes a traditional smallholder whose family worked the land themselves and where the father addressed his sons personally and directly (21.29), perhaps a reminder of how Israel's God is personally “involved” with his people “and has plans and hopes for” them. The Story’s “family” imagery stands in contrast to the “more recent pattern of the urban elite in the Hellenistic period, when wealthy landowners employed slaves or tenants to farm their estates”, perhaps pointing back to a time of prosperity and peace when each lived at the foot of their own vine, and/or alluding to the eschatological hope of similar circumstances in the last days.

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140 Osiek and Balch, Families, 38-9. On the social norms of ancient families see Balla, Child-Parent, 6-111 (examining Greek, Latin and Jewish (pre-Rabbinic) sources); Balch, Wives (classical sources); Gäbel, “Gottes Willen”, 475; Yarbrough, “Parents”, 49-57 (biblical, second temple, rabbinic and classical sources); Reinhartz, “Parents” 77-81 (Philo); Hoehner, Ephesians, 720-725. Cf. Sirach 3.8, which calls for a father to be honoured ἐν ἔργῳ καὶ λόγῳ, something both sons failed to do.

141 Hultgren, Parables, 220: an “act of rebellion…an affront to the father”; Gäbel, “Gottes Willen”, 474 rightly points to “dessen barsche Antwort und Gehorsamverweigerung”; similarly Luz, Matthew 21-28, 30; Nolland, Matthew, 861; Hagner, Matthew 14-28, 613: “culturally this was unacceptable”; Langley, “Two Sons”, 232-3. Foster, “Tale” 31, misses how cultural issues inevitably inform any story even if they are not the parable’s specific target.

142 Contemporary eastern cultural norms suggest the second son’s polite reply without intent of obedience was a way to avoid dishonouring a respected person (see Langley, “Two Sons”, 232-3). It is difficult to trace this idea to ancient sources.


144 Kloppenborg, Tenants, 30.

145 See 1 Kings 4.25, “a proverbial image of security and peace” (Cogan, 1 Kings, 213).

146 See Micah 4.1-4, esp 4.4: the language is “traditional and the imagery specifically Israelite…the undisturbed cultivation of the vine is the preeminent sign of national and private security” (Anderson and Freedman, Micah, 408).
Audience Interaction

Jesus speaks directly to οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ οἱ πρεσβύτεροι (21.23), “Jerusalem’s aristocrats... the highest representatives of temple and nation... that rule Jerusalem”.147 A crowd is present and also listening (21.26). Jesus engages the Temple elite with a question (21.28a: Τί δὲ ὑμῖν δοκεῖ;). Having their opinion sought, the Temple elite become “entangled in the concerns of the story about to unfold”, increasing their sense of ownership of what follows from it.148

The man with two sons is a familiar OT trope, with varied usage, having connotations of sibling difference, rivalry, and resolution.149 The trope will further engage the audience, who will listen to see how the family dynamics unfold in this instance. The Story’s opening scene is both familiar and connotative for the audience, but moves quickly into unexpected and unsettling territory.

The disrespectful elements in both sons’ responses will have surprised the audience, who are unlikely to identify completely with either son, or automatically feel the Story is about themselves (surely they would not have acted this way!). The full significance of the parable is not felt in the telling of the Story alone.150 The audience may have expected a final scene involving a corrective response from the father. But the Story breaks off unresolved and a judgment is sought from the audience, forcing them to engage more deeply. Jesus’ question is a specific one, asking for one son to be selected, and concerns the doing of the will of the father. Only one answer is possible,151 though it would have been a partly unsatisfactory way to evaluate the Story for the audience, who will know that neither son fully honoured his father. What is Jesus’ intent in telling this Story?

Significance

Jesus’ response to the Temple elite (21.24-32) combines question, statement, Story, question, and Plain Speech proclamation, and all within a unified rhetorical event and toward a single prophetic aim. In asking the Temple elite about John’s baptism, Jesus is refusing to speak about his authority and credentials on the terms his opponents demand. Instead, his question raises the issue of responsive faith (see 21.25b), in relation to the prophet John, an issue he will soon return to

147 Luz, Matthew 21-28, 29. Concerning the different elements of the Jewish leadership, see Meier, Marginal III, chs 28 and 29; N.T. Wright, New, 181-212; Le Donne, “Jewish”, 199-217; Bond, “Political”, 219-247.

148 Olmstead, Trilogy, 99; Langley, “Two Sons”, 241: the form “more or less forces the participation of the audience”; also Hagner, Matthew 14-28, 612: the question “involves the listeners... in active engagement with a parable that will be applied to them”.

149 See Lyke, King David, 30-70.

150 Recognising this are Langley, “Two Sons”, 242: because of a range of possible meanings for the parable, “it becomes more difficult for the adversary to discern in what direction Jesus is heading”; Luz, Matthew 21-28, 30: “it is not easy to apply the parable to [the Jewish leaders]...an additional explanation is needed”.

151 Since Jesus’ question focuses on doing the will of his father, there is only one answer, even if the first son’s entire interaction with his father was far from ideal (see Luz, Matthew 21-28, 3; Nolland, Matthew, 862). Langley, “Two Sons”, 235 regards the question as a “Semitic correlative comparison”: thus the question is “Which son was more obedient, and which was less disobedient?”
This not only alters the terms of the debate, but also subtly broadens its scope so that both Jesus and the Temple elite are now under scrutiny (since both were confronted by John’s call to repentance and baptism). The parable maintains this strategy, with its focus on response to authority rather than the origins of authority. Whatever the precise grounds on which the Temple elite perceive their own authority as legitimate (institutional? patrilineal?), and Jesus’ authority illegitimate, Jesus is insisting that the matter must be settled with reference to faith and obedience, in relation to the last and greatest prophet of Israel, John the Baptist (cf. 11.11). Linguistic parallels within the pericope reinforce these thematic emphases (and provide the basis for the pericope’s coherence). The Temple elite’s failure to μετεμελήθητε ὑστέρον and believe (21.32) stands in contrast to the first son who ὑστέρον... μεταμεληθεῖς and obeyed his father (21.29). Jesus accuses the Temple elite of not having believed in John (21.32: οὐκ ἐπιστεύσατε αὐτῷ), the very point they were afraid to reveal in 21.26-27 (τί οὖν οὐκ ἐπιστεύσατε αὐτῷ;).

The Story is introduced by Τί δὲ ὑμῖν δοκεῖ; (21.28), a Matthean “redactional formula of connexion”, signifying that the Story “continues the previous dialogue”. The matter of the moment is still the identity and authority of Jesus. Lacking an obvious correspondence to the circumstances at hand, the Story creates Distance for the audience, so that they hear and evaluate the Story in an unguarded way, and pass judgment on it freely (21.31a). Their willingness to answer Jesus’ question regarding the Story (21.31) stands in contrast to their unwillingness to answer Jesus’ earlier question (21.27) and illustrates how the distancing effect of a parable plays such an important role in creating the social and psychological freedom for new ways of thinking and seeing to emerge.

Reading the parable in dialogue with its Matthean frame, Langley provides a (partially) helpful explanation of how the Story contributes to Jesus’ encounter with the Temple elite. The parable portrays the father instructing his sons to work in their vineyard. There are four possible responses, with two represented by characters in the parable:

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152 See Häfner, Verheiße, 396: “Die Konsequenzen, die die Gesprächspartner vermeiden wollten, lassen sich durch die von Jesus erzählte Parabel doch nicht verheimlichen”.

153 Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28, 166; similarly Luz, Matthew 21-28, 26; Olmstead, Trilogy, 99; Hagner, Matthew 14-28, 612-3.

154 As Langley, “Two Sons”, 241 puts it, Jesus appears to use the parable to “move forward onto new ground”, but in fact soon “circles back toward unfinished business” (i.e. the question of his authority and identity). See also Smillie, “Response”, 485 on how the Two Sons and the following parables all constitute one long answer to the question of the authority of Jesus (21.23).

155 The table that follows is adapted from Langley, “Two Sons”, 236. Here I refer only to the initial part of his argument (finding its subsequent developments less persuasive). Langley, rightly seeing that neither son has responded perfectly to his father, then argues that it does not matter which son the audience identify as having done the will of the father (since either way, the other son is portrayed in a comparatively bad light). This argument fails to account for the specific nature of Jesus’ question, which concerns the doing (τοῦ ἔω) of the father’s will, and the strong likelihood it will direct the audience to the first son. However, Langley’s overall argument is not in the end dependent on this point - either way the contrast shown below is still created.
Langley points out that when the Temple elite, in response to Jesus’ question, identify one son (A) as having done the will of the father, they also highlight - in comparison - the disobedience of the other son (B). This then sets up the rhetorical grounds for Jesus to argue, on the basis of the rabbinic hermeneutical principle of *qal wāḥômer*, that a third son (C), having twice refused his father, is worse than both son A and son B. Hence, once his opponents have made their choice, Jesus then applies the “no/no member of the series to his audience… the chief priests and the elders are the son who is neither initially nor subsequently obedient”, having twice refused to believe in John (21.32). The contrast Langley identifies between the less than ideal behaviour of both sons and the (far worse) recounted actions of the Temple elite is an important and striking feature of the Matthean arrangement of the parable, portraying the Temple elite in an extremely negative light. The contrast is a rhetorically compelling one since the audience has already committed to one “pole” of the contrast (in their assessment of the first son) and the facts of the Temple elite’s response to John (the other pole) is a matter of public (or literary) record.

In what follows, I build on *this aspect* of Langley’s work, accepting that the parable sets up a basic contrast between the two sons and the Temple elite, but exploring its Rhetorical Dynamics further, and arguing that the parable also sets up an implied contrast accentuating the perfect obedience of Jesus.

### Changing the Face of the Matter

As noted above, 21.23-32 is a tightly structured pericope. My argument is that after Jesus dismisses the Temple elite’s challenge to his authority (21.23-27), he then executes a skilful counterattack, exposing the illegitimacy of the Temple elite and subtly pointing the crowd toward

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profession of Obedience</th>
<th>Actual Obedience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Son x)</td>
<td>[Yes]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Son A (21.28b-29)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Son B (21.30)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Son C (21.32)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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157 Langley, “Two Sons”, 238-242. Langley is careful to establish the use of this rabbinic principle prior to and contemporary with Jesus’ ministry (238-9).

158 Langley, “Two Sons”, 237; citing the use of a similar form of argument in rabbinic parables. Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 31 also identifies this contrast: the Temple elite are seen to be “worse that both sons in the parable”. Similarly Häfner, *Verheißeine*, 395: “Sie gehen über das falsche Verhalten des Jasagers hinaus und verhärten sich trotz des guten Beispiels der Sünder in ihrer Verweigerung”.

159 This is recognised by Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 26: “a single pericope”; Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 171: 21.32c “draws the threads of the narrative together…it thus makes an effective conclusion”.

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the true leader of Israel standing among them (21.28-32). That the parable functions this way, in collaboration with its Mathean frames, can be argued as follows.

A New Perspective (1): The Illegitimacy of the Temple Elite

Each segment of the pericope - debate, Story and associated Plain Speech - describes, or alludes to, the Temple elite’s inadequate response to John the Baptist:

1. In response to Jesus’ question (21.25a) the Temple elite acknowledge (among themselves) that they did not believe John (21.25b), and the crowd may have been reminded of their leaders’ refusal to be baptised by John.

2. The second son’s behaviour may be an allusion to the Temple elite coming to be baptised by John (3.7) and then not doing so after his rebuke.

3. In 21.31b-32, Jesus explicitly rebukes the elite for their persistent failure to believe John, contrasting them with οἱ τελῶναι καὶ αἱ πόρναι who did.

The significance of each textual segment is intensified as they are allowed to mutually inform. As in Langley’s analysis, by reading the parable with reference to 21.31-2 the Temple elite may be seen to be worse than both sons. Further, reading the three references to the elite’s failure to believe (21.25b, 32) in dialogue with the parable (where obligations are to a father), suggests that the Temple elite’s failure to believe John ultimately constitutes a stubborn refusal to do the will of God, the father of Israel.161

Jesus’ appeal to John also highlights division within Israel. The crowd are said to regard John as a prophet, while the Temple elite admit among themselves that they did not believe him (21.25-6). Further, οἱ τελῶναι καὶ αἱ πόρναι, having believed John, are said to go on ahead into the kingdom of God, while the Temple elite stand outside in their refusal to believe (21.31b-32). The latter contrast makes for a provocative critique. If the Temple elite are spiritually inferior not only to the crowds, but also to the despised tax collectors and prostitutes,162 then they are wholly unfit to lead the nation.

160 The phrase ἐρχομένους ἐπὶ τὸ βάπτισμα αὐτοῦ (3.7) is able to carry this meaning (hence NRSV: “coming for baptism”); also the Syriac Peshitta (Syr⁰) reads this way. In favour of this reading is John’s response (3.7: τίς ὑπέδειξεν ὑμῖν φυγεῖν ὑπὸ τῆς μελλόντος ὀργῆς;) which seems unusual if the Pharisees and Sadducees had merely come to watch.

161 Within Matthew, Jesus repeatedly refers to God as πατήρ (see 5.16,45; 6.1,4,6,8-9,14-15,18,26,32; 7.11,21; 10.20,29,32-3; 11.25-7; 12.50; 13.45; 15.13; 16.17,27; 18.10,14,19,35; 20.23; 23.9; 24.36; 26.29,42,53; 28.19).

162 Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28, 169: Jesus places the leaders “beneath both the unjust and the unchaste”. Gibson, “Telōnai”, 430 argues the unusual pairing of the two groups is because they are “prime examples of the type of Jew who collaborated with the occupying forces of the Roman government”. On the role and reputation of tax collectors see Friedrichsen, “Temple”, 107-9; Schottroff and Stegemann, Jesus, 7-13; Donahue, “Tax”, 42-61; Dormeyer, Markusevangelium, 192-3. On prostitution in the ancient world, see Keener, Matthew, 508-9, citing Jewish, Greek and Roman sources.
In discrediting the Temple elite, Jesus significantly enhances his own honour and the public perception of his authority. Is the Matthean Jesus also making a more specific point about his own authority and identity?

Jesus’ identity features prominently in this section of Matthew. He has arrived in Jerusalem as ὁ κύριος (21.3); ὁ βασιλεύς σου (21.5); ὁ υἱός Δαυίδ (21.9,15); ὁ προφήτης (21.11). He has received the praise due to Israel’s God (21.9,16). All this points strongly to Jesus’ messianic identity. As discussed above, the question of the Matthean Jesus concerning John’s baptism (21.25) reminds the reader of Jesus’ own baptism by John, and of John’s testimony (and the heavenly testimony) at that time concerning Jesus’ identity. The Matthean Jesus is described at that time as one greater than John (3.11), the one bringing the eschatological outpouring of the Spirit and judgment (3.11-12), the beloved Son of God (3.17). Thus to recall John’s baptism is to recall (for the Matthean reader) events that speak of the messianic identity and authority of Jesus. The issue in 21.25 (as with 21.1-24) is still the identity and authority of Jesus.

The Matthean account of John baptising describes Jesus’ baptism in terms that may be seen (at a literary level) to connect this event to central features of the parable of the Two Sons. Jesus not only comes requesting that John baptise him (3.13), thus recognising and honouring the divine will in his words, but also insists on being baptised despite John’s protestations (3.14-15a), and then is actually baptised (3.15b-16a), thus honouring the divine will in his actions. Thus Jesus - at John’s baptism - was obedient to the Father in word (requesting baptism) and in deed (being baptised, even despite John’s objection). Jesus is the Son who said “Yes” to God his Father and then matched his subsequent actions to his words, and in this way has fulfilled all righteousness (3.15; cf. 21.32). In this sense Jesus stands in contrast to both sons in the parable and is vastly superior to the Temple elite who have twice refused the divine will. Thus the parable, as arranged within Matthew, helps establish a contrast that accentuates the perfect obedience of Jesus, portraying him as the faithful and obedient Son of God.

Reading the Two Sons in dialogue with 21.25 in this way, and having regard to how it also portrays the Temple elite (as above), is suggestive of the overall significance of Matthew’s arrangement of

163 The reference to Jesus’ messianic identity is an indirect one, as might be expected given the intensity and danger of the situation. However, I suggest that the connection is recognisable for the careful reader of Matthew. Also, in my view, it is too much to suggest that an Ideal Reader would understand the connection to have been made by the parable’s Narrative Audience (the Temple elite and the crowds), for whom John’s ministry was recent, widely known, and of great importance. Proclamation of the dawning of the messianic age and of the coming of the Messiah was scarcely news to be forgotten. The baptism of a messianic figure by the great prophet John was surely an event discussed in these circles for a long time after the events themselves.

164 Note τηλερύσασι πάνταν δικαιοσύνην (3.15) and ἐν ὀδῷ δικαιοσύνης (21.32), so that in 21.32 we might well find an allusion to Jesus having done what the Temple elite refused to do.
the parable within 21.23-32. Understood this way, the parable sets up a double contrast between the behaviour of the Story’s two sons and the behaviour of the characters that feature before (Jesus) and after (the Temple elite) the parable. This can be portrayed using an extended version of Langley’s analytical structure:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Profess Obedience</th>
<th>Actual Obedience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jesus at John’s baptism (21.24-5)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contrast</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Son (21.28b-29, 31a)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Son (21.30)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contrast</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temple elite at John’s baptism and afterward (21.32)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Within the overall structure of the pericope, the parable functions to accentuate the obstinacy of the Temple elite (they are inferior to both sons having twice refused to believe John) and to accentuate the perfect obedience of Jesus (he is superior to both sons, honouring the divine will in word and deed at his baptism by John). Thus in 21.25, Jesus invokes the testimony of the last and greatest prophet of Israel to commend himself as the Messiah, the true leader of Israel. Reading 21.25 in dialogue with the parable, Jesus is seen to be the beloved and obedient son, who has honoured his father in every way (in word and deed) and with whom the father is well pleased. As such, Jesus has every right to teach and heal in the Temple, while the parable casts a dark shadow over the legitimacy of the Temple elite.

**Jesus’ Rhetorical Aims**

Jesus speaks to the crowd and the Temple elite in this way in order to open up new possibilities for their lives. These events play out publicly, before a crowd, that until the arrival of the Temple elite, had been listening to Jesus teaching (21.23; cf. 21.26, 46). In exposing the Temple elite as unsuited to lead Israel, Jesus is making an urgent appeal to the Temple crowd to stand aside from their leaders and the unbelief that characterises their response to John and to Jesus. The crowds are urged to join the tax collectors and prostitutes, going on ahead of their leaders into the kingdom of God, which Jesus (as promised by John) is proclaiming and enacting.

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165 Langley, “Two Sons”, 242 identifies within his structure the implied possibility of a son who both says and does the will of the father (236), but argues Jesus “leaves no room” for this response since there are none having “need no repentance” (237). He overlooks the possibility that Jesus might have, ultimately, been pointing to himself, as the one who has obeyed the father in all things.
Is Jesus also appealing to the Temple elite? While it is possible to regard the Temple elite as having excluded themselves from the kingdom, and thus facing judgment without hope, in my view it is better to read this parable as a final, urgent warning to them. Matthew has located the parable soon after Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem, where the lines of conflict between Jesus and the Temple elite are being drawn, but where a decisive struggle is not inevitable. Jesus’ attempt to alter the Temple elite’s view of themselves can be seen as a prophetic appeal designed to open up the possibility of them redeeming past error through regret and the obedience of faith. The parable - considered in dialogue with its Matthean frame - holds out this hope to the Temple elite, in its portrayal of the first son, who despite having dishonoured his father is still able to become the son who “did the will of his father” (21.31a). The first son models a way forward for the Temple elite: they must regret not having believed John and do the will of the Father by believing all he said about Jesus to be true. The end stress of the pericope on μεταμέλομαι and πιστεύω (21.32b) identifies the leadership’s error, even while also describing their means of redemption.

The use of προάγω (21.32) does not have to mean exclusion. The more natural sense of the word, indicating “a relative rather than an absolute advantage”, leaves the Temple elite’s future ambiguous, suggesting their own response will be the decisive factor. But the time is short. A father dealing with his sons will soon become a landowner condemning rebellious tenants (21.41), and then a king destroying those who have refused his invitation (22.7). Jesus issues an eleventh hour call for the Temple elite to cease their hostility toward him, leave their unbelief behind, and in the obedience of faith enter into in the kingdom of God.

Excursus: Parable and Frames; Obedience and Faith

Scholarship on this parable often emphasises the importance of doing the will of God (rather than merely professing to), noting how this theme features elsewhere in Matthew (especially 7.15-27; 19.16-22;

166 Contra Olmstead, Trilogy, 101-2, 107-8, 128-30, 138, who emphasises how the double opportunity for repentance and its refusal in 21.32 anticipates the development of the same motif in the two subsequent parables, where the judgment motif is more pronounced and appears more certain, arguing this parable pronounces judgment on the Temple elite and anticipates how others will take their place in the kingdom of God. But even explicit announcement of judgment may be designed to bring repentance (e.g. Richards, “Another”, 12: in Matthew, “everywhere the threat of judgment has a hortatory aim”). For a reading of the three parables that coheres with my reading of the Two Sons, see Oppong-Kumi, Matthean, 272: “It is not too late; change is possible”: the parable is intended to “win them back” (272), observing how all three parables in 21.28-22.14 employ the Matthean semantic strategy of “oppositional rhetoric”, which involves “conciliatory as well as threatening criticism”, so that “the possibility remains that the [Jewish leaders] will... seek entrance into the kingdom of God” (231).

167 Luz, Matthew 21-28, 30: “in itself” προάγω does not correspond to the “absolute opposition” in the Story or 21.31-32. Similarly Olmstead, Trilogy, 101; Snodgrass, Stories, 273; France, Matthew, 805 and 805n17. Nolland, Matthew, 863 rightly sees how προάγω “highlights the possibility of following those who go ahead”. Elsewhere in Matthew, προάγω has the normal sense of going ahead, and being followed (2.9, 14.22, 21.9, 26.32, 28.7). Contra those arguing for exclusion (mainly on contextual grounds): Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28, 169; Olmstead, Trilogy, 101; Gundry, Matthew, 42; Luz, Matthew 21-28, 31-2; Blass et al, Greek, 128.
The parable is thus seen as a rebuke of the Jewish leadership for professing devotion to the Law and to God, but not practising it. If read in isolation, the parable could easily function this way. However, this reading distances the parable from its Matthean narrative context, where the issue at hand is the authority and identity of Jesus, and from 21.31b-32 with its threefold reference to πιστεύω which (together with use of πιστεύω in 21.25) makes faith a central element of the pericope. This lack of coherence is not adequately resolved in scholarship arguing this way (in my view).

Hindering a resolution of the relationship between the parable and 21.31b-32 is the widely held expectation that the Plain Speech that follows a parable should summarise or distil the main point of the parable. The two different speech forms are expected to say essentially the same thing. I have earlier argued that a collaboration is to be expected between the two, which may take various forms, and in which meaning emerges as the two are brought into dialogue with each other. This collaboration is illustrated in this pericope. The Temple elite’s refusal to believe John’s testimony (21.25, 32) is characterised within the parable as an act of disobedience. The Temple elite’s persistence in unbelief stands in contrast to the regret modelled by the first son’s μεταμελέομαι (21.29), which the Story makes clear is not obedience itself but the necessary precursor to it. The parable identifies the need for obedience, and the Plain Speech that follows gives definition to the nature of the obedience required - to believe.

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168 Hultgren, Parables, 224 (citing Matt 7.21-27; 25.31-46); Snodgrass, Stories, 272-5; Olmstead, Trilogy, 102-5; Donahue, Gospel, 88-9; Martens, “Produce”, 157; Morris, Matthew, 536; Hagner, Matthew 14-28, 614; Weder, Gleichnisse, 236-7; S. Wright, Storyteller, 73-4. Häfner, Verheißene, 391-3 argues that these scholars undervalue the emphasis throughout 21.28-32 on a change of mind: “Nicht der Gegensatz von Reden und Tun ist hier bestimmend, sondern die Änderung eines einmal gefaßten Entschlusses” (400). This is sometimes countered by the above scholars arguing that μεταμελέομαι in 21.32 carries the theological significance of μετανοεω (e.g. as called for by John (3.8-10)) rather than the more usual sense of regret or change of mind as per 21.29 (e.g. Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28, 171: “in contrast to v. 29... it bears religious meaning and comes close to μετανοεω”). There seems no reason to make a contrast with the use of the term in 21.29. For the more usual sense see Kittel, TDNT IV, 626-9: μεταμελέομαι is “distinct in class” to μετανοεω (626); thus in Matt 21.30-32: “the son changed his mind (not in a religious sense), but the elders of the Jewish people maintained their resistance...In Mt. 21.30,32, then, μεταμελέομαι is not equivalent to μετανοεω” (628). Similarly Luz, Matthew 21-28, 30 suggests the sense of “he was sorry” in 21.29,32; “of course, the word does not have the theological weight of μετανοεω”.

169 E.g. Snodgrass, Stories, 274, citing Matt 23.3, and suggesting the issues may be the leadership “emphasising ritual purity and the traditions of the elders rather than mercy and love”.

170 Merkel, “Gleichnis”, 258-60 recognises the contextual concern with the authority of Jesus: in the parable “Jesus wendet die anscheinend offengebliebene Vollmachtsfrage von der rein theoretischen auf die praktische Ebene” (259).

171 Scott, Hear, 82-3 sees how the participle μεταμεληθηκε in 21.29 becomes the main verb in 21.32, so that “the ‘not regretting’ of the Jewish leaders becomes the description of what they did, the main action that prevents them from taking the real action, to believe”. This emphasis on οὐδὲ μεταμεληθηκε as what the Temple elite are “doing” (that is, otherwise put, their persistence in unbelief) and the importance of μεταμεληθηκε as a precursor to belief to helpful for understanding the relationship between the parable and 21.32.

172 Seeing this connection is Bruner, Matthew, 375: “the decisive doing of the people of God is believing... Doing God’s work is first of all and fundamentally, believing God’s true messengers. What Israel’s leadership failed to perform was not a lack of meticulous obedience to rules...Its failure was the refusal to believe God in God’s authorised ministers - then (John), now Jesus” (italics original); Gäbel, “Gottes Willen”, 476: “Der Wille Gottes fasst sich, über alle Ethik hinaus, in der Forderung zusammen, seinen Gesandten Glauben zu schenken”. Similarly Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28, 166: the Temple elite “disobeyed God by not believing John”; Hagner, “Righteousness”, 117-8: in Matt 21.32, “the implicit appeal to the chief priests and Pharisees in this passage is not that they should do a better job at being righteous, but that they too should believe in, and accept the gift of, the dawning of the kingdom of God now inaugurated by Jesus, of whom and of which John was the forerunner”.

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The possibility of such meaningful and contextually coherent collaboration of Story and accompanying Plain Speech points beyond claims of thematic dissonance between this parable and its frames. In this collaboration a theological insight emerges regarding the nature of faith, which is seen first and fundamentally to be an act of obedience to those speaking the word of Israel’s God. As we consider Story and Plain Speech with reference to their Matthean narrative circumstances (21.23-27), it also emerges that the fundamental concern of faith is the identity and authority of Jesus.

The Two Sons and Matthew's Wider Narrative and Theology

Reading 21.23-32 as a call to believe John’s testimony concerning Jesus coheres with the general use of πίστις elsewhere in Matthew. Πίστις in Matthew features mainly in contexts that concern the person, identity and authority of Jesus, and the conviction or otherwise people have in this regard, precisely the issue in the pericope in which the Two Sons is placed. For example, the Roman centurion, for his description of Jesus as one ὑπὸ ἐξουσίαν is commended for possessing a faith not found in Israel (8.9-10). The faith of the paralysed man’s friends prompts Jesus to forgive his sins and heal him, so that the Temple elite might know ὅτι ἐξουσίαν ἔχει ὁ υἱός τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἀφιέναι ἁμαρτίας (9.2-6). A demonstration of Jesus’ authority over the forces of nature accompanies his rebuke to those having only a little faith. Thus faith in Matthew frequently refers to a conviction (or otherwise) that recognises the authority of Jesus, so that we should not be surprised to find πιστεύω being used in the same way in 21.23-32.

I have argued that 21.23-32 alludes to Jesus as the son who is obedient to the father. This coheres with the wider Matthean portrait of Jesus as “son”, and as the son who does the will of God his father. The Two Sons features as part of the opening scene in a section describing encounters between Jesus and the Jerusalem elite (21.23-22.46). In the final scene of that section, Jesus asks the Pharisees: τί ὑμῖν δοκεῖ περὶ τοῦ χριστοῦ; τίνος υἱός ἐστιν; (22.42), before going on to implicitly claim to be greater than the son of David (22.43-5). In between are two parables that feature father and son (21.37-39; 22.2). This is the issue of the moment as Jesus appears in Jerusalem: whose son is Jesus and accordingly, what authority does he have? The attentive Matthean reader, seeking an answer, is pointed back (by Jesus’ question in 21.25) to the opening scenes of Jesus’ public ministry where Jesus is proclaimed by a heavenly voice to be ὁ υἱός μου

173 See Matt 8.23-26; 14.22-33: in both instances there is explicit concern with the identity and authority of Jesus: ποταμὸς ἔστιν οὐτός...; (8.27) and ἄληθως θεοῦ υἱός ἐστί (14.33). Elsewhere the disciples are described as ἄληθος οὐτός (6.30, 16.8, 17.20) for their failure to recognise the identity and authority of Jesus. In 9.28-9 faith amounts to conviction concerning the power/authority of Jesus to heal.

174 Jesus is Son of Abraham (1.1); Son of David (1.1, 9.7, 12.23, 15.22, 20.30-1, 21.9); Son [of Mary] (1.21-25); the carpenter’s son (13.55); Son of God (2.15, 3.17, 4.3-6; 8.29 11.27, 14.33, 16.16, 17.5, 24.36, 26.63-4, 27.40-3 27.54, 28.19), and repeatedly Son of Man.

175 Jesus’ use of πατήρ (and especially πάτερ μου) to refer to God is prominent in Matthew and moreso than Mark or Luke. On Jesus as obedient Son of God see Moberly, Bible, 189-224; Allison, “Embodiment”, 126-8: Jesus in Matthew “is the fulfilment of God’s will, Torah incarnate” (128), emphasising the exemplary nature of this perfect obedience.
ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν ᾧ εὐδόκησα (3.17), and also to the transfiguration where the heavenly testimony is repeated (17.5). This obedience is demonstrated in the temptation narrative where Jesus, as “the obedient son”, embodies the obedience God required of his people Israel, and is supremely showcased as Jesus goes to the cross in submission to the father’s will (26.39).

**My Interpretation and Other Scholarship**

Throughout church history, a salvation-historical reading of the parable, anticipating persistent Jewish unbelief and Gentile inclusion in the people of God, has featured prominently.

In modern scholarship the most common reading understands the Story to portray “those who were lax in the law but came to obey God through John’s ministry...[and] the chief priests and elders...who, despite their religious profession, disobeyed God by not believing in John”. Thus the Temple elite correspond to the second son; the tax collectors and prostitutes to the first. This reading is difficult to reconcile with the parable’s Matthean frame. The coming (21.32: ἔρχομαι) of John, and his ministry/baptism is the subject in the passages either side of the parable. Matthew does not give us reason to think that either the Temple elite (consistent in their refusal to believe), or the tax collectors and prostitutes, altered their initial response to John or were insincere in their public response to John, so as to correspond to the actions of the sons in the parable. The structure of 21.32, with its “double” response, and the clear verbal echoes with 21.29 (21.29: ὑστερον δὲ μεταμεληθεῖς; 21.32: δὲ... μετεμελήθητε ὑστερον) strongly connects the Temple elite with the actions of the first son, but in a negative, contrasting manner (hence οὐδὲ in 21.32) rather than as a comparison. As Luz has argued, “it is not easy to apply the parable” to the Temple elite.

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176 Hays, Gospels, 118; Jesus thus embodies the destiny of the nation.

177 Modern scholarship also reading the parable this way includes Weder, *Gleichnisse*, 238 (emphasising Gentile inclusion); Ogawa, “Paraboles”, 126-7. See Luz, *Matthew* 21-28, 32 and Davies and Allison, *Matthew* 19-28, 171-2 for details of this scholarship and their convincing critique. Of particular importance is that Matthew’s contextual depiction of a “divided Israel” (Davies and Allison, *Matthew* 19-28, 172) argues against reading the parable as pointing to the Gentiles.


179 That the accompanying Plain Speech (21.31-32) does not combine easily with the parable is widely seen, and has led some to claim that 21.31b-32 does not apply to the parable (see e.g. Luz, *Matthew* 21-28, 27-31; Gundry, *Matthew*, 424; 21.32b; Ogawa, “Paraboles”, 122-5; also the discussion in Richard, “Another”, 8-10; Luumann, *Entering*, 159-61).

180 Corresponding to the coming of the father in the parable (21.28.30: προσέρχομαι).
elite and the tax collectors and prostitutes181 (i.e. in a comparative way, rather than by way a contrast as I am proposing); “the differences are too great”.182

This parable is often also understood as a critique of those who profess but do not practice the will of God (see Excursus above).

It is generally agreed that a christological dimension is not explicit within the parable.183 My reading recognises this, as I am not claiming the parable itself, on its own, is christological. Rather, I have sought to demonstrate that: (i) the identity and authority of Jesus is a central theme within Matt 21, and within the pericope in which the parable features; (ii) consistent with this theme, Jesus’ recollection of John’s baptism was intended to subtly remind the reader of John’s testimony (and the heavenly testimony) concerning Jesus’ identity at that time; (iii) the parable helps create a contrast within the pericope that accentuates the perfect obedience of Jesus, reinforcing (within the wider Matthean narrative) that Jesus is the Son who does the will of the Father in all things. In this way the parable makes its own important contribution to subtly presenting Jesus as the Messiah, the true leader of Israel, who - in contrast to both sons and the Temple elite - has honoured and obeyed the Father in word and in deed, and thus has every right/authority to teach and minister in the Temple. While I recognise that the parable is not explicitly christological in content, I am arguing that its Matthean literary function ultimately has christological intent.184

THE MARKAN SOWER (Mark 4.1-20)

My analysis of this parable does not follow the pattern of previous case studies. This is because the literary arrangement of the Markan Sower is particularly complex and its narrative circumstances culturally opaque (from the point of view of a modern Western reader). Accordingly, what follows contains an extended discussion of the Sower's narrative context and literary arrangement and then an outline in broad terms only (given space constraints) of the implications of this for reading the parable contextually. I also compare and contrast the Markan literary arrangement of the Sower with that of Matthew and Luke.


182 Luz, Matthew 21-28, 31: “Where is the opposition between speaking and acting that is an essential part of the parable? Have [the Temple elite] ever said yes to the proclamation of the kingdom of God by John and Jesus... And did the tax collectors and prostitutes, who obeyed it, at first verbally reject it?”

183 Excetions, identifying a possible christological element are Crowe, Obedient, 216-9, but noting the tenuous nature of this reading (219): Weder, Gleichnisse, 237, but acknowledging: “Darin liegt jedoch nicht das Hauptinteresse der Parabel”; Lambrecht, Treasure, 99-100, but also acknowledging Christology is not explicit in the parable.

184 Lischer’s justifies a similar observation that “in the shadows and just out of the picture... stands another son... the good child whose initial response is matched by his performance in the vineyard” (Lischer, Parables, 88), on the grounds it is a reading that “allows the story-teller to enter our camera’s viewfinder”, so that we see “three sons instead of two”. I am (in summary) arguing in the same direction on the grounds that the identity and authority of the “third son” is central to the section of the Matthean narrative within which the parable is set, and that Matthew’s arrangement of the parable is structured so that we may see a contrast between the characters in the parable and the main character(s) of the textual segments that precede and follow the parable.
Mark’s Narrative Setting

The Markan Sower features at a time of popularity for Jesus. Large crowds gather to Jesus, amazed at his healings and exorcisms, wondering at his identity, and listening to his teaching. Jesus has selected an inner circle of disciples to be his companions, and to expand his ministry. However, serious opposition is emerging from the Pharisees (2.6,16,24; 3.6), local Herodian authorities (3.6), and scribes from Jerusalem (3.22), with the latter publicly maligning Jesus by saying that he is in league with Satan (3.22). This is a serious accusation, able to ruin Jesus’ public ministry, if substantiated. Others, probably Jesus’ family, have concluded that Jesus is out of his mind (3.21).

The use of ἐξίστημι to describe Jesus (3.21) has been a puzzle for scholars. Used figuratively, the term is an apt description of someone situated outside mainstream social and religious life. I suggest that this is precisely the way Jesus is portrayed in Mark 1-3:

1. Despite the Markan Jesus being a popular and charismatic religious figure, he operates without the authorisation of the religious establishment, and in acting outside the normal parameters of Jewish piety and religious observance appears to undermine central tenets of contemporary Judaism. Hence the Jewish elite’s hostility toward someone they regard as unorthodox, in league with the devil, and leading people astray.

2. Prophetic (1.3), divine (1.11), and demonic (1.24; 3.11) testimony all characterise Jesus as a highly unconventional individual.

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185 See Edwards, Mark, 119 re οἱ γρηγοροί; their coming from Jerusalem and their frequent association with the Chief Priests in Mark (8.31; 10.33; 11.18,27; 14.1,43,53; 15.31) “signifies official opposition” (italics original); also Marcus, Mark I, 192, 519-24.

186 See Rohrbaugh and Malina, Social, 158-9 on the authorities’ actions as “deviance labelling” in the ancient world. Note that ἔλεγον is iterative imperfect; thus “typical and repeated charge against Jesus” (Boring, Mark, 107).

187 With most scholars I take οἱ παρ’ αὐτῷ (3.21) to be a reference to Jesus’ family. See the discussion of interpretive options in France, Mark, 166-7, and the examples he cites of the phrase being used to refer to family/household elsewhere in Koine Greek, arguing for a similar reading here. Painter, “When”, 507-8 argues the phrase refers to the disciples, but must have Jesus departing from the house (not in the text) to make logical sense of the flow of events (in my view οἱ παρ’ αὐτῷ μὴ δέχῃτο φρόνεσθαι (3.20) most likely refers to Jesus and his disciples, so that ἔξηλθον (3.21) is awkward if a reference to the disciples). The ἔλεγον γὰρ (3.21) could refer to οἱ παρ’ αὐτῷ or could be an impersonal plural “people were saying”, though see Cranfield, Mark, 134: it is unusual for a plural verb to be understood as indefinite when the context contains a plural subject (also Marcus, Mark I, 270-1).

188 On ἐξίστημι see BDAG, 350: “be out of one’s normal state of mind”; TDNT II, 459 for ancient references where it is used figuratively in this sense; Marcus, Mark I, 271: “lit. ‘he has stood outside’ (of normal human sanity); cf. modern slang expressions beside oneself or out of it”; Josephus, Antiquities, 10.114: the Jerusalem elite, rejecting Jeremiah’s prophecies, despised him ὡς ἐξεστηκότα τῶν φρενόν τού οὖν; Collins, Mark, 227 for examples of similar characterisation of Socrates (Plato) and Hannah (Philo).

189 E.g. Marcus, Mark I, 279: “It is difficult to fathom this surmise”; Hooker, Mark, 115: “Mark gives no explanation for their belief”; France, Mark, 167; Gundry, Mark, 171.

190 I use the phrase “contemporary Judaism” throughout to refer (collectively) to the various Jewish religious groupings mentioned by the Gospel authors. In regard to Jesus undermining central tenets of contemporary Judaism in Mark 1-3, I note his claim to have authority to forgive sins (2.5-11); his company keeping with sinners (2.15-16); his rejection of normal fasting disciplines (2.18); his activity on the Sabbath (2.23-3.6); his provocative defence of these activities (2.10,17,25-28; 3.4-5).
3. Recurring questions follow Jesus’ unusual actions, characterising him as someone whose identity cannot be defined within established, mainstream categories.191

4. Jesus is making no apparent contribution to the economic maintenance of his family (e.g. by perpetuating the trade of his father), and making no obvious preparation for marriage and having children, the normal and expected roles of a son. Instead, Jesus is establishing himself in a vocation independent of his family and creating around himself a kinship group of non-family members (the disciples).195 An inner circle of twelve (3.13-19) come away (ἀπῆλθον) from normal social roles and kinship groups (cf. 1.16-20) to be Jesus’ closest companions. They are chosen ἵνα ὠσὶν μετ’ αὐτῶ (3.14). Their functional role in the ministry

191 See: τι ἔστιν τούτῳ; (1.27); τι οὗτος οὕτως λαλεῖ; (2.7); ὅτι μετὰ τῶν τελωνῶν καὶ ἀμαρτωλῶν ἔσθεῖς; (2.16); οὐ δὲ σοὶ μαθήτας οὐ νηπεύουσιν; (2.18); τί ποιοῦσιν τοῖς σκέπτοις ὅ σύκ ἔχεστιν; (2.24); and statements such as οὕτως οὐδέποτε ἐξενέγησεν (2.12). Hooker, Mark, 111 also identifies how in appointing twelve followers (not including himself), Jesus is in a sense “standing over against the nation”.

192 See Adams, Social, 18-22 on social and economic dimensions of first century Jewish family life, on the productivity of children and the need for multiple sons for an adequate labour pool (59-61), and on the significant contribution to a family’s economic life expected of male sons (61-65); Tuckett, “Family”, 69-71 on how an individual leaving their family to join another social group “would inevitably threaten the economic welfare of those left behind”, especially in rural communities; Peskowitz, “Family/ies”: “Jewish families in Galilee are characterised in part as a working group” (31), where “the interconnections of work and family provided the daily experiences of most free men and women” (33), citing evidence from Galilean residential excavations and Tannaitic literature (28-34); Kraemer, “Jewish”, 108: a son “could be counted on to remain in the family sphere…to provide for their mothers in old age”, something particularly important given the prevalence of widows. Thus Jesus’ actions were highly unusual and also potentially created economic uncertainty for his family, especially if Joseph was dead, since widows were especially vulnerability without the support of their sons (most scholars assume Joseph had died; cf. Tropper, “Jewish”, 335: a Jewish child in first century Palestine had only a 25% chance of having a father at thirty; cf. comparable figures for Roman families in Seller, “Family”, 686).

193 See Adams, Social, 61: “the vast majority of sons learned their father’s work and joined in the effort to keep the household functional”; Yarbrough, “Parents”, 39, 46 (for Rabbinic argument that a father should teach his son a trade); Balla, Child-Parent, 56.

194 On the obligation of men to marry and have children, see Yarbrough, “Parents”, 41; Jeffers, “Jewish”, 138: “a basic obligation” (138); Wilcox, “Jewish”, 523: “a Jew’s first duty is to marry”; Rubenstein, “Marriage”, 7: “both ordinary Jews and scholars are religiously obligated to marry”; Reinhartz, “Parents”, 69-70: in Philo, “to bring a child into the world is therefore not merely a privilege or a right, but a responsibility of every adult”. See Safrai, “Home”, 748 on how in first century Jewish society to be unmarried was “very rare”; the “accepted ideal” was marriage and family. See the importance of producing offspring in Philo, Special Laws, 2.129; 3.36; Josephus, Against Apion, 2.25. While dated later, early Rabbinic literature suggests a firm trajectory for this fundamental social norm into the Rabbinic period. Simeon ben Azzai, despite his love for the Torah, is accused of preaching well but not acting well, since he has no children (T.B.Yebamoth 63b; Safrai, “Home”, 748n5 places him “in the generation immediately after 70”). Rabbinic literature appeals to Gen 1.28, Is 45.18 (see m.Eduyyot 1.13, regarded by Safrai, “Home”, 750 as pre-70) and to Gen 9.7 (T.B.Yebamoth 63b: “he who does not engage in propagation of the race is as though he sheds blood”). The fact of debates in rabbinic literature (e.g. m.Yebamot 6.6; T.B.Yebamoth 61b-64) concerning what was required to fulfill the obligation of bearing children, underlines the fundamental nature of the obligation itself. Josephus’ account of an alternative order of Essenes (Jewish War, II.160-1), that differed from other Essenes only in that they embraced marriage (cf. Jewish War II.120-1 on ordinary Essenes’ disregard (ὑποχώρει) for marriage), emphasises just how unusual the ordinary Essenes’ position was. While Jesus was not atypical in being single at this point in his life (e.g. Jeffers, “Jewish” 135 suggests thirty “was not unusual”; Tropper, “Jewish”, 330-2 that thirty was the average age for marriage in Jewish Palestine), he is unusual in creating an alternative social kinship group (to his family), and in having no apparent interest in marriage.

195 These disciples feature repeatedly in Mark 1-3 (1.16-20; 29-30; 36-37; 2.13-16; 18; 23; 3.9; 13-19); the formation of this group is a prominent aspect of Mark 1-3.

196 The appointment of the twelve as apostles has (symbolic) eschatological significance (e.g. Collins, Mark, 216; see similar reference to eschatological appointment of twelve leaders in Matt 19.28; Luke 22.28-30; 11QT 57.2-15), though it is notable that Mark does not develop this emphasis. More important in the early Markan narrative is how the calling of the twelve “suggest[s] a new social formation” and “hints at a new social world in the making” (Collins, Mark, 237).

197 See Marcus, Mark I, 266: the use of ἀπῆλθον (3.13) is “probably significant since Mark could have simply said ‘came’”, and sees it as emphasising coming away from “previous pursuits…leaving other things behind”.

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of Jesus should not detract from the fact that Jesus is henceforth in Mark continually portrayed as “with” his disciples,\(^{198}\) eating with them, being in their homes, travelling with them, being assisted by them. The disciples constitute Jesus’ primary kinship group. The ambiguity of the phrase ἔρχεται εἰς οἶκον (3.19b) contributes to the Markan portrayal of Jesus as one having established residence and kinship independent of his biological family.\(^{199}\) This behaviour was unusual in a society where “the family stood at the centre of life”, where most individuals structured their lives around ensuring their family’s economic survival, and where “a person’s identity and success hinged on participation in a functioning household”.\(^{200}\)

Thus Jesus stands “outside” the socio-cultural-religious mainstream. The religious authorities’ conclusion that his power had demonic origins is an understandable characterisation of someone who combines supernatural power with apparent disregard for central tenets of Judaism. They act to discredit Jesus and bring his public ministry to an end. With a highly skilled riposte and counter challenge, Jesus dismisses the Scribes’ charge against him (3.23-30).\(^{201}\) Because their accusations have not been publicly validated, Jesus retains the confidence of the people, and will continue to minister among them. But he must still face his family.

**Jesus’ Family and Jesus’ Family**

Mark 3.31-35 assumes Jesus is in a house and the crowd is so great that his biological family, on arriving, are unable to enter, and so send someone to summon him (3.31). They have come to κρατῆσαι αὐτόν (3.21),\(^{202}\) which must mean practically to take him away from his disciples and ministry and return him to the family home and to family life/vocation. Jesus’ family also act to avoid further escalation in the conflict with the authorities (who have power over all of their lives)

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\(^{198}\) See Marcus, *Mark I*, 267, citing 1.29; 2.19; 3.7; 4.36; 5.37, 40; 6.50; 8.10; 9.8; 11.11; 14.7,14,17,18,20,33,67. Jesus is portrayed as “constantly surrounded by a circle of disciples”.

\(^{199}\) Note the similar ἐν οἴκῳ ἐστίν (2.1). Collins, *Mark*, 184, 226: ἐν οἴκῳ (2.1) and εἰς οἶκον (3.20) are “idiomatic for ‘at home’” (also France, *Mark*, 165n1), though noting the phrase has no precise meaning here beyond a reference to where Jesus was staying. Cf. also Kilpatrick, “Jesus”, 3-7, arguing the use of εἰς οἶκον without article or dependent genitive in 2.1; 3.19; 7.17; 9.28, means that Jesus established his own home and ministry base in Capernaum, independent of his family. The view it was Peter’s house (cf. 1.29-33) makes sense if it was written from Peter’s point of view (e.g. Cranfield, *Mark*, 96; similarly France, *Mark*, 164); even so this would still be a base for Jesus separate from his biological family.

\(^{200}\) Adams, *Social*, 8-10; citing research concluding that being part of an “established household with a living patriarch” gave the highest chance of economic stability, good reputation, offspring, and survival in first century Palestine (8).

\(^{201}\) See Marcus, *Mark I*, 281: Jesus “fights back ‘in parables’” (also Rohrbaugh and Malina, *Social*, 158); with 2.28-30 a “countercharge” by Jesus after he has “decisively refuted” the accusations against him (283); May, “Mark”, 86: the non-response of the authorities “is a badge of dishonour”.

\(^{202}\) While κρατέω is not necessarily hostile (e.g. the use in 1.31; 5.41; 9.27), it often is in Mark (e.g. 3.21; 6.17; 12.12; 14.1,44,46,49,51). In the present circumstances, while not likely to be malicious, it is at least adversarial, as the context implies a clear intent to curtail present patterns of behaviour. Thus France, *Mark*, 164: “a positive and offensive repudiation” of Jesus’ ministry; Cranfield, *Mark*, 134: the family intend to “to take him into their custody... under their control and restraint”. See also Edwards, *Mark*, 124 on the use of ζητέω (3.32); in Mark the term mostly refers to “an attempt to determine and control” Jesus.
and to prevent further dishonour to Jesus and to themselves. The family summons, publicly reported to Jesus (3.32), carried enormous weight in a time and culture where the obligation of children (of all ages), to honour and obey their parents, was of utmost importance. Such honour was to be given to mothers as well as to fathers. Honouring meant “concrete action for the reputation and health of one’s family”. Thus Jesus would have been expected to go out to meet his family, and to comply with their requests.

Provocatively, Jesus publicly refuses his family’s summons. In explaining his refusal Jesus uses the language of family, but with reference to those having no biological relationship to him. In a remarkable act of self-definition, and of social formation, Jesus designates those around him, and all others who similarly do the will of God, as his primary kinship group (3.33-5). In describing this group using the language of biological family, the expectation is created of relations “as close and indissoluble as that between people who come out of the same womb”. Obligations within this group would, as in a biological family, be expected to take precedence over obligations to other social groups, and must inevitably conflict with the claims of the biological family, as is dramatically portrayed in this scene. The combination of άποστέλλω and καλέω (3.31) echo (for the Markan reader) προσκαλέω and άποστέλλω in 3.13-14. At the heart of this conflict is whether Jesus has the authority to birth this (new) family/kinship group or whether he will be prevented from doing so by the authority of his biological family.

In so constituting this new kinship group, Jesus claims divine sanction and favour for himself and his followers. The one “standing outside” normal social groups and normal life is now situated

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203 So May, “Mark”, 85: the family’s action “reflects a primary anxiety for its honour lest Jesus by his behaviour dishonour them”. See (comparatively) Yarbrough, “Parents”, 40 on Philo’s “deep pain and embarrassment” regarding his nephew Tiberius Julius Alexander who “did not stand by the practices of his people” (Josephus, Antiquities, 20.5.2), but chose a Roman military/political career.

204 See e.g. Ex 20.12; Deut 5.16; 21.18-21; Lev 19.3a; Prov 1.8; 6.20; 23.25; 30.17; Sir 3.1-16; 7.27-8; 23.14; Tobit 4.3-4; 4Q416 2 iii. 15-16; Philo, Decalogue, 22.110-23.111; 23.117; 31.165-7; Philo, Special Laws, 2.38-9; 2.42-43; Josephus, Antiquities, 4.8.24; Josephus, Against Apion 2.28; Yarbrough, “Parents”, 49-53; Adams, Social, 72-3; Safrai, “Home”, 771; Balla, Child-Parent, 85-96.

205 Most texts in the previous footnote mention father and mother. The supporting rationale in some cases, appealing to parents’ role in a child’s origins applies to both (e.g. Tob 4.4; Philo, Special Laws, 2.38-9; 4Q416 2 iii.15-16). Cf. Kraemer, “Jewish”, 109 on the closeness of the mother-son relationship; this adds further intensity to the summons of a mother.

206 Adams, Social, 73. Honouring means obedience (Yarbrough, “Parents”, 51: a “major theme in the wisdom literature”); respect, requital and fear (Philo, Special Laws, 2.234-9; also Reinhartz, “Parents”, 78; and n14 for similar references); caring for parents in their old age (Sir 3.12; Philo, Decalogue, 117; Philo, Special Laws 2.235-8), and proper burial.

207 The direction of Tobit 4.3 in circumstances such as these (καὶ μὴ ὑπερέξῃς τὴν μητέρα σου, τίμα αὐτὴν πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας τῆς ζωῆς σου καὶ ποίει τὸ ἄφεστον αὐτή καὶ μὴ λυπήσῃς αὐτήν), stands in jarring contrast to Jesus’ actual response (similarly with Sir 3.11: καὶ ἄνεμος τέχνοις μὴν ἐν ἄδελφῳ). Hence Jacobson, “Jesus”, 204: Jesus’ “callous disregard... for his family would certainly have been sensed by... any Mediterranean person, given the pervasive emphasis on family solidarity”; Finlan, Family, 46: Jesus’ response was “crue... rude”.

208 Note 3.33-5: ἦ μήτηρ μου καὶ οἱ ἄδελφοί μου... ἦ μήτηρ μου καὶ οἱ ἄδελφοί μου... ἄδελφος μου...

209 Marcus, Mark I, 277.
within a kinship group who are defined as those who do the will of God (3.34-5). In contrast, his biological family are those standing outside (3.31-2: ἔξω στῆκοντες...ἔξω) and in opposition to those aligned with the divine will. The spatial language and imagery of 3.31-35 emphasises the distinct nature of the two groups²¹⁰ and their contrasting orientations toward Jesus.²¹¹ Thus Jesus’ actions constitute a “sharp move away from…the biological family” and can rightly be said to represent in that time and culture, “one of the most radical things in the Gospels”.²¹² Hence we should not be surprised if Jesus must resort to parabolic speech to explain his actions and to legitimize the kinship group that has formed around him.

Narrative Continuity in Mark 3.20-4.25

While 4.1 involves a change in scene, 4.1-25 presents as a narrative development closely connected to Mark 1-3, and especially to 3.20-35. The parallels between 4.1 and 2.13,²¹³ the anticipation of 4.1-2 in 3.9, the use of πάλιν (4.1), and the threefold use of διδάσκω/διδαχή in 4.1-2,²¹⁴ all situate 4.1-20 as a further and typical episode within this early phase of Jesus’ public ministry.

The privileged status of the kinship group forming around Jesus and the distinction between this group and other social groups, as portrayed in 3.13-35, is given further emphasis in 4.1-25. Jesus is again portrayed as distinct from the crowd (4.1,10), and identifying closely with his disciples (4.10). Inquiry concerning the parables is made by οἱ περὶ αὐτὸν σὺν τοῖς δώδεκα (4.10), emphasising the growing narrative importance of the “insiders” described in the previous chapter (3.16: “the twelve”; 3.34: “those with him”), and their intimate and privileged relationship with Jesus. This group are designated as the privileged recipients of the τὸ μυστήριον… τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ θεοῦ, further “accentuating the differences between the two audiences”.²¹⁵ Reference to “those outside” (4.11) and to those who will not be forgiven (4.12c) evokes the way Jesus’ biological family

²¹⁰ Ahearne-Kroll, “Who”, 14: “Mark transforms the spatial distance between Jesus and his immediate family into a deeper metaphorical, and much more permanent distance”. See also Smith, “Construction” on the metaphorical significance of domestic space, and the concepts of “third space” (45-6) and “spaces of representation” (46-7), applicable to this scene.

²¹¹ Jesus’ biological family is portrayed as standing outside, calling through others, waiting for a response, ignored by Jesus. His new kinship group are seated around Jesus, listening to his voice, and with Jesus’ face turned toward them. See Marcus, Mark I, 286: the scene inside the house is “reminiscent of OT portrayals of a patriarch surrounded by his children”; 3.34 evokes OT passage such as Is 49.18-21; 60.4 that speak of eschatological restoration of family.

²¹² Malina and Rohrbaugh, Social, 159. While other first century Jewish groups similarly used “family” language/concepts to describe relations between their members, they were also marginal groups (outside mainstream Jewish socio-religious life) whose demands on their members interrupted normal family and social life. See e.g. the use of family language/imagery to describe relationships within the Qumran community (Collins, Mark, 236; Marcus, Mark I, 277; Baumgarten, “4Q502”); among the Essenes (Philo, Hypothetica: Apology for the Jews 11.13); concerning the Therapeutae communities (Ahearne-Kroll, “Who”, 21).

²¹³ That Jesus ἐξήλθεν πάλιν παρὰ τὴν θάλασσαν (2.13) points to a pattern of ministry already established.

²¹⁴ See the use of the same terms in 1.21, 22 (x2), 27; 2.13.

²¹⁵ Edwards, Mark, 131; also in 4.11, ὤμην and ἐκείνοις are placed at the head of their respective clauses making them emphatic.

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(3.31-2) and the religious elite (3.28-30), respectively, are earlier described. Jesus’ parabolic speech also contributes to an intensification of the distinction between his new kinship group and all others (4.10-12). The disciples’ question concerning the parables (4.10) positions them as insiders, who through further inquiry and obedient listening, come to understanding and revelation (4.10, 34). Outsiders, failing to inquire and engage further, remaining ignorant. They are able to look and listen (to the parables), but without further inquiry they fail to truly see and hear (4.12).

Thus, as arranged within the Markan narrative, the events of 4.1-25 are a development of immediately preceding events (3.20-35) and are directly related to those events.

**The Need for a Parable**

Jesus’ refusal to take his place in his biological family, his standing outside contemporary expressions of Judaism, and his formation of a new kinship group, raises weighty questions. Jesus’ immediate answer is to claim adherence (for himself and his kinship group) to the will of God (3.33-5). But presumably the religious elite and Jesus’ family act with similar convictions. Who is Jesus and what is he doing, that would justify suspension of participation in normal family life, for himself and those who would follow him? Does Jesus stand above the guardians of Torah and Temple in defining the divine will? What is it that makes Jesus’ new “family” distinct from the pious of Israel, committed to Torah observance and zealous for the honour of Yahweh? Who has authorised its creation? What will govern its conduct? The Markan juxtaposition of 3.20-35 and the Sower, together with the correspondences between elements of 3.20-35 and motifs of the parable (see below), suggest that the parable is designed to speak to these vital questions.

In 4.1, Jesus moves from speaking directly, within a crowded house (3.33-5), to speaking “in parables” (4.2) in the open spaces of the lakeside. The seaside is territory at the “topographic margins”, away from the domain of family and the elite, in which “identities might be negotiated”.

In designating himself and his companions as a new kinship group, Jesus is treading on

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216 4.10 is vague and may concern the meaning of the Sower (cf. Luke 8.9), and/or the reason why Jesus addresses the crowds in such an obscure form of speech (cf. Matt 13.10). Either way the disciples clearly do not understand the Sower (see 4.13). Jesus’ response addresses both issues: 4.11-12 speaks to the purpose of the parables; 4.13-20 speaks to the meaning of the Sower.

217 See Marshall, *Luke*, 323: teaching in parables, Jesus “invited his audience to penetrate below the surface and find the real meaning; at the same time he allowed them the opportunity…of turning a blind eye and a deaf ear to the real point at issue”; similarly France, *Matthew*, 502.

218 See Balla, *Child-Parent*, 34-5, 60-1, 74-5, 78, 104-8, for examples in Greco-Roman and Jewish literature of how devotion to philosophy or the gods/God justifies suspension of normal parental obligations. The Jewish data Balla presents (104-8) is meagre and needs to be carefully interpreted. Ranking the obligation to honour parents (just) below honouring God (105) need not imply conflict between the two, especially for devout families (e.g. see below on the Maccabean martyrs). Jewish traditions concerning Abram and Aseneth leaving pagan families and gods (107-8) do not provide obvious role models for the devout of Israel.

219 The lack of definition given to τὸ ἰδαματικόν (3.35) inevitably creates many questions.

220 Stewart, *Gathered*, 188, thus providing opportunity for “new spatial practices…that do not replicate the spatial practices of temple/synagogue”.

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unconventional and socially dangerous ground, so that social “negotiation” and definition for the group is required.

The Sower: Jesus’ “Family” as the Eschatological People of God

My proposal, in short, is that the Sower’s narrative location, immediately following the events of 3.20-35, signals that (i) the kinship group forming around Jesus are the eschatological people of God; and (ii) that Jesus’ word, constituting and directing this group, is a divine word, making a claim on the group that transcends and ultimately displaces the claim of the biological family and of the religious leadership.

Jesus and his Followers are the Eschatological People of God

The Sower’s central imagery of seed/sowing evokes the Jewish eschatological hope of a day when God would again “sow” his people in the land. In that day, a people estranged from Yahweh would be chosen and sown again (Hos 2.22-3; similarly Jer 31.27-8), planted in their land by their God, to remain there forever (Amos 9.15). In the revelation of the Son of Man a “congregation of the chosen and holy will be sown” (1 Enoch 62.7-8). That the Sower is sowing ὁ λόγος (4.14) evokes “the vital OT concept of God’s word”, the essence of [God’s] creative power, the word that called into being the created order and that would one day go out again to re-form the eschatological people of God (Is 55.10-13).

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221 See especially N.T. Wright, Victory, 232-6. More generally on sower/seed imagery in ancient Jewish writings see e.g. Boucher, Mysterious, 47; Payne, “Jesus”, 3-6; Snodgrass, Stories, 168-9; Collins, Mark, 243-4; Dronsch, “Fruchtbringen”, 304-5: seed/sowing imagery symbolises “die Restitution des Gottesvolkes” (308).

222 See Stuart, Hosea, 61: the final word of Hos 2.22 רָקַעַת (“Jezreel”) and the first word of 2.23 וּזְרַעְתִּיהָ (“I will sow her”) share the root זָרַע (“to sow/plant”); thus in the passage, “Jezreel… is now a glorious name, full of its most basic sense: ‘God sows/plants’”. Reference to “that day” (2.21) points to an eschatological setting (see further Dearman, Hosea, 95-6 on sowing imagery in Hosea).

223 Cf. similarly 4 Ezra 4.26-32, anticipating a coming eschatological day when an abundance of sowing and reaping of righteousness would replace the age where seeds/fruit of wickedness has flourished (on this passage see Stone, 4 Ezra, 92-3 on the “two ages” portrayed in this parable; Marcus, Mark I, 296-7; Marcus, Mystery, 47-51). See Van Staalden-Sulman, “Agricultural”, 214 on how sowing in Is 28.25 is explicitly the restoration of Israel in Targum Jonathan Is 28.25.

224 As translated in Nickelsburg and VanderKam, 1 Enoch, 80. 1 Enoch 62.7-8 combines motifs of divine concealment of the Son of Man, a “chosen” people, chosen ones being sown, the chosen being “in the presence of” the Son of man, revelation of the Son of Man to the chosen, motifs also present in Mark 4.1-25. On 1 Enoch 62.7-8 see Collins, Mark, 243: “the context implies that the community of the holy and the chosen will be established at the beginning of the new age, when the Son of Man is revealed”; Nickelsburg and VanderKam, 1 Enoch 2, 265, recognising possible symbolic reference to “the eschatological community”. On the dating of this part of 1 Enoch, see Nickelsburg and VanderKam, 1 Enoch 2, 58-63, arguing for a date “between the latter part of Herod’s reign and the early decades of the first century C.E.” (62-3). See also Nickelsburg, 1 Enoch 1, 444-5 on how “plant” imagery in the Apocalypse of Weeks (1 Enoch 93.1-17), is used to portray both “historical Israel” and how “in the end time God will again choose the eschatological community of the elect” (445).

225 Marcus, Mark I, 308; similarly Dronsch, “Fruchtbringen”, 304.

226 Sabin, “Reading”, 14; similarly Evans, “Isaianic”, 466-7, emphasising “the efficacy of God’s word”; Dronsch, “Fruchtbringen”, 304: the “klangvolles, wirksames und mächtiges Wort Gottes”.

227 See the similar imagery in 4Q504, a prayer for God to “plant Thy Law in our heart” (II.13), anticipating a time when God would heal Israel of its sinfulness (II.15) and gather his people from the “lands, near and far” to which they have been banished (IV.13-14).
In 4.14 (ὁ σπείρων τὸν λόγον σπείρει), Mark begins his explanation of the parable in language that he has already used to describe Jesus’ ministry (2.2: ἐλάλει αὐτοῖς τὸν λόγον; also 4.33). In this crucial interpretive signal, Mark takes up the parable’s central imagery, with its rich Jewish symbolism, and in linking it to the ministry of Jesus (as narrated prior) makes the radical claim that Israel’s eschatological expectations are being fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus. One major outcome of Jesus’ word/proclamation (in Mark 1-3) is that he has called into being a new social group (as above). Jesus’ word summons people away from family and ordinary life to follow him (1.17-20; 2.14); it creates an inner circle of apostles symbolising the eschatological renewal of Israel (3.13-19); it designates those with him as a new form of “family” (3.34), distinct from other groups within Israel. The parable, situated directly after these events, designates this group as the eschatological people of God, the (beginning of the) fulfilment of Israel’s hope. Just as the sowing of the Torah was associated with the formation of the Jewish nation at the Exodus/Sinai (see 4 Ezra 9.29-31), so the word being sown in the ministry of Jesus is the divine word, calling into being the eschatological people of God. Sowing/planting imagery also helps explain the eschatological division within Israel depicted in Mark 1-3. Just as some seed/seedlings live and others die, so only some will participate in the life of the eschatological age (4 Ezra 8.41).

The above passages suggest that, in Jewish thought of the time, it was possible for seed/sowing imagery to describe the establishment of the eschatological people of God, and to portray them as a distinct and privileged group within Israel, gathered around the Son of Man. By arranging the parable immediately after the events of 3.13-35, Mark signals that these things are taking place as Jesus forms a group of initial followers around him.

**Excursus: Sowing and Family in Philo**

Language and motifs similar to that of the Sower are found in Philo, where they concern the creation of a family. Philo compares the womb to a field of marvellous fertility, with a proper season for fertilisation, with the purpose of exhorting intercourse during the fertile period of the menstrual cycle. To do so is to cast seed on fertile soil when it is dry, in the expectation of an abundant harvest of fruit. In this season a man might

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228 Also, while described using different language, Jesus’ “word” is central to the Markan description of Jesus’ ministry in Mark 1-3. Jesus comes κηρύσσων... καὶ λέγων... (1.14-15); he is frequently teaching; at the word of Jesus there is release from demonic power (1.25) and physical healing (1.41; 2.11: note σοι λέγω...; 3.5). See similarly A.Y. Collins, “Discourse”, 533-4.

229 That seed/sowing imagery has varied symbolic meaning in the ancient world is I suggest, why all three Synoptic Gospels preserve a (contextually decipherable) explanatory signal regarding this central motif (Mark 4.14; Matt 13.19; Luke 8.11).

230 Stone, 4 Ezra, 306 translates 9.31: “For behold I sow my law in you, and it shall bring forth fruit in you, and you shall be glorified through it forever”, noting that “glory” points to eschatological glorification of the righteous.

231 Further on this point see Snodgrass, “Ezra”, 70-1. Whilst 4 Ezra is late first century, on the possibility of 8.41 containing an older parable or use of imagery with a long tradition in Jewish thought, see Marcus, Mark I, 296; Sabin, “Reading”, 15; Brown, “Parable”, 43.

232 Philo, Special Laws, III.32-36.
“shower his seed into the ground ready to receive it, no longer fearing that there will be any loss of the seed thus sown”. In contrast, intercourse during periods of infertility (by those who waste their vigour in pursuit of pleasure) is likened to a farmer (drunk or suffering from sudden insanity) who sows seed in water (rather than in fertile plains) so that the seed is swept away, or like those “ploughing a hard and stony soil”. Philo’s work illustrates how imagery of soil in various states, seed/sowing, and harvest (or not) could be used metaphorically to describe the establishment of a family within first century Jewish thought. I am arguing the Markan Jesus uses similar imagery to describe his proclamation of the kingdom of God as the generative act creating the eschatological people of God, a group described using the language of family in the events Mark situates immediately prior to the Sower.

**Jesus’ Word Defines the Will of God for the Eschatological People of God**

Since the Sower portrays the proclamation and teaching of Jesus as the divine word, having authority to call into being the eschatological people of God, it also invests the word of Jesus with considerable ongoing importance for his followers. The word (of Jesus) that constitutes the eschatological people of God is also the word that will govern their conduct, having ultimate authority over their lives and giving definition to τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ (3.35) for them. This provocative claim is consistent with the portrait of Jesus evolving in Mark 1-4, as one who not only proclaims τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ θεοῦ (1.14) and speaks with divine authority, but is also an authoritative teacher of the divine will. The claim is given further emphasis by the Markan teaching that immediately follows the Sower, emphasising the importance of Jesus’ followers “hearing” the word of Jesus (see further below).

If Jesus’ word has the primary claim on the lives of his followers, this creates the socio-religious conditions for conflict between this group and other groups whose “word” would normally have have this primary place in their lives. This conflict is clearly evident in Mark 1-3 and throughout the subsequent Markan narrative. As teacher the Markan Jesus claims absolute authority to define the will of God for his followers (e.g. 7.17-23; 10.10-12). Consequently, he is often portrayed giving definition to God’s will, and doing so in opposition to the Jewish authorities who similarly claim to

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234 Philo, *Special Laws*, III.34.

235 Regarding Philo and the Gospels, I am not suggesting dependence, but only that Philo provides a ‘window into a common ‘reservoir’ of language and ideas’ (the phrase is from Keener, *John I*, 347) of that time and culture, which is of particular importance for understanding the symbolism of metaphorical imagery.

236 On Jesus’ word as that which defines the will of God (as in 3.35), see similarly Collins, *Mark*, 236; Ahearne-Kroll, “Who”, 14 (on contextual grounds); France, *Mark*, 180 (emphasising 1.14-15).

237 While Mark includes relatively little of Jesus’ teaching compared with Matthew and Luke, the Markan Jesus is continually called teacher or described as teaching: see 1.21-2.27; 2.13; 4.1-2.38; 5.35; 6.2.6,34; 8.31; 9.17,38; 10.17,20,35; 11.17-18; 12.19,32,35,38; 13.1; 14.14,49.
teach the divine will.238 Also, in calling those around him his “family” (3.33-5), Jesus is situating himself to play the same formative and directive role for his followers that the patriarch (or family in general) would normally play for family members. Hence in constituting a new socio-religious group, and designating it the eschatological people of God, governed by the will of God as Jesus defines that, Jesus makes a decisive break with the religious elite and with his family and his followers’ families. A socio-religious Rubicon has been crossed, and the implications of doing so need to be unpacked for Jesus’ followers.

Excursus: Christology in the Sower?
The OT anticipation of God’s word bringing eschatological restoration for Israel, and the use of sowing/planting imagery to describe that, means that the Sower’s imagery creates OT echoes with Christological significance. Since sower/sowing/seed imagery was used in Jewish literature to symbolise the divine being, divine action, and the divine word,239 Jesus’ use of the same imagery in the Sower not only aligns his ministry with the divine will and purpose, but may also hint at his identity. Some understand the Sower’s imagery to position Jesus as agent of God’s purposes.240 However, we should not overlook the primarily allusive nature of Mark’s Christology,241 and the associated possibility that in the Sower Jesus is subtly and allusively portraying himself as the embodiment of Israel’s God.242 The Markan ambiguity regarding the identity of the Sower leaves open this possibility.243 To the extent that such allusions are intended in the Sower, this gives us further reason to understand the “word” of Jesus as the divine word, having authority to call into being the eschatological people of God, and to define the will of God for them.

The Word Among the People of God: Bearing Fruit Despite Opposition and Temptation
I have argued thus far that reading the Markan Sower with reference to the narrative in which it is embedded leads us to see “the word” being sown (ὁ λόγος throughout 4.14-20) as the word of Jesus in proclamation, teaching, summons and command. Jesus the sower is among them, sowing the word of God, a word of divine power and creative force. Jesus’ word has both a formative and a displacing role, constituting and regulating the eschatological people of God even while

238 See the specific examples in 2.18-28; 3.4; 7.1-23; 10.1-10; 12.13-27; 12.35-7 (cf. 8.15).
239 See Sabin, “Reading”, 14; Payne, “Jesus’”; 3-6; Collins, Mark, 243-4, citing Greek, Latin and Jewish sources where the Sower is metaphor for God.
240 E.g. Snodgrass, Stories, 169; Collins, Mark, 243-4: “God sowing ‘the good news of God’… into the people through the agency of the proclamation and teaching of Jesus”.
241 See especially Hays, Reading, 17-33: “Mark’s proclamatory mystagogy is meant to lead readers, through a mysteriously allusive reading of Israel’s Scriptures, into recognising Jesus as the embodiment of the God of Israel” (33).
242 See Payne, “Jesus’”, 3-6,17-20, arguing Jesus applied to himself (in the Sower) “imagery whose usual referent was God in his work in the messianic age”, making both an “implicit claim” to be doing God’s work, “inaugurating the messianic age” (6) and providing “implicit affirmation of Jesus’ self-understanding as deity” (20).
243 The motif of the Sower is not given explicit meaning in 4.13-20. Cf. Marcus, “Blanks” on how this “narrative gap” does not mean the Sower is unimportant as many scholars have claimed (253-4), but rather the ambiguity allows for a “composite identity” (259-62, here 262). Similarly, the lack of a qualifier for ὁ λόγος (unusual in the OT) leaves open whether this is the word of God or of Jesus, or both (see Marcus, Mark I, 308). The ambiguity may well be deliberate, consistent with Mark’s suggestive, allusive Christology.
relativising the role and authority of other socio-religious groups (in regard to himself and his followers). It is Jesus’ word over against the diabolical word, the word of the biological family, and the word of the Jewish leadership.

In view of these things, what is the significance of the motifs within the Sower that prevent the growth and fruitfulness of the seed/word? In what follows I provide a brief outline of the implications of the above analysis for reading the remainder of the parable. The factors that prevent the word/seed bearing fruit in the Sower correspond readily and chronologically to major events in the experience of Jesus as he has gone about proclaiming and enacting the kingdom of God in Mark 1-3. The parallels are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jesus’ Experience (Mark 1-3)</th>
<th>Parable/Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diabolical opposition (1.13, 23-4; 3.27)</td>
<td>Birds eat seed (4.3) Satan takes away word (4.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposition from the religious authorities (2.16, 24; 3.6, 22)</td>
<td>Sun scorched plant (4.5-6) Trouble and persecution (4.16-17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus’ family seeks to take charge of him (3.21, 31-2), (to close down his ministry), so that Jesus faces the temptation to re-enter family life, as the normal means to alleviate economic/social anxieties, and obtain wealth and other things.</td>
<td>Thorns choke plant (4.7) Cares of world and deceitfulness of wealth and desire for other things (4.18-19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus’ creation of a new “family” (1.17-19; 2.14; 3.13-19, 33-35)</td>
<td>Produce grain (4.8) Bear fruit (4.20)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These correspondences, between major motifs of the parable and prominent aspects of the prior narrative, may inform a literary reading of the parable, so that those things which prevent the seed bearing fruit are understood to allude to the various forms of opposition to Jesus’ proclamation and ministry evident in Mark 1-3. The connection appears weakest (for a modern, western reader) between the actions of Jesus’ family (3.31-2) and the power of αἱ μέριμναι τοῦ αἰῶνος καὶ ἡ ἀπάτη τοῦ πλούτου καὶ αἱ περὶ τὰ λοιπὰ ἐπιθυμίαι to choke the word (4.19). But the two are intimately related in the socio-economic realities of the time. The power of anxiety, wealth’s deceitfulness, and human desires, is that they compel us to take action to relieve anxiety, obtain wealth, and satisfy our desires. For the modern western reader this is often reflected in a highly individualistic pursuit of education, relationships, career, etc. In first century Palestine an adult Jewish male would normally seek to alleviate worldly cares, create economic security, and fulfil ordinary human desires through participation in the economic and social life of his biological family. In relocating himself away from his family and outside the family home, Jesus was economically and socially vulnerable. Seeking to take charge of Jesus (3.21,31), his family offer a way out of that vulnerability, and a very normal and no doubt attractive means of moderating the anxieties of life and satisfying the need for economic security and the desires for other things. The social power of
Jesus’ family, and the temptation to pursue all that family life had to offer him, undoubtedly created considerable pressure for Jesus to heed his family’s summons. This was Jesus’ best (only?) chance of a secure and fulfilling (and “normal”) life. But Jesus does not go with his family. Directed by the will of God (3.35), Jesus refuses the irrefusable (his family’s summons), excluding himself from the normal context in which he might moderate life’s anxieties, obtain economic security and satisfy normal desires, in order to proclaim and enact the kingdom of God. Thus in reading the Sower in dialogue with the events of Mark 1-3 we are to understand that the word of Jesus, calling into being and regulating the eschatological people of God, will be actively opposed in these things by diabolic forces, the religious elite (bringing trouble and persecution), and pressure from family (offering an alternative life path).

What of the implications of all this for the disciples who hear the parable and inquire of Jesus concerning its meaning (4.10)? The Sower is preceded and followed in Mark by two imperatives: ἀκούετε (4.3) and ὃς ἔχει ὦτα ἀκούειν ἀκουέτω (4.9). Then follows further teaching from Jesus regarding parables generally (4.10-12) and concerning the meaning of the Sower (4.13-20), emphasising the importance of Jesus’ followers responding rightly, in receptive hearing and productive obedience, to the word of Jesus. Reading 4.9-20 in dialogue with the parable (and with reference to the events of 3.20-35) suggests that Jesus’ followers’ reception of the word of Jesus will occur in an environment every bit as hostile as that in which Jesus carried out his initial ministry (Mark 1-3). The disciples’ obedient reception of his word will be actively opposed by demonic forces (4.4,15), the religious authorities (4.5-6,16-17: bringing persecution and trouble), and family expectations and pressure (4.7,18-19: with the associated temptation to satisfy the cares of the age, the allure of riches and the desire for other things through participation in family life). The parable thus anticipates Jesus’ followers experiencing the same kind of opposition and temptation that he has already faced and exhorts them to follow his example, overcoming diabolic opposition and allowing his word to take precedence over the demands of family and of the religious authorities. Theirs will be a contested obedience to Jesus’ word, but by that same powerful and creative word they may (and must) prevail over every form of opposition to produce the fruit of the kingdom of God (4.20).

244 In Josephus, wealth and sexual pleasure are set in contrast to the duty to produce children (Josephus, Antiquités 4.8.2: “... they came together with each other not for the sake of pleasure, nor of increasing their wealth by placing in common what the two of them had, but in order that they might have children...”, as translated in Feldman, Judean, 433). Cf. similarly (regarding sexual pleasures only) Philo, Special Laws 3.36; 3.112-3. Jesus’ actions cohere with these ethics at one level, in that he is rejecting the temptations of wealth and sexual indulgence (normally satisfied through participation in family life), even while subverting them in that he is instead establishing an unconventional family of those who follow him, connected not by genetics or marriage, but by a common commitment to the will of God as defined by the word of Jesus.

245 Note the recurring use of ἀκούω in 4.1-20 (see 4.3,9,12,15,16,18,20) and again in 4.23,24, so that right listening and response to the words of Jesus is a major theme of Mark 4. See Chapter IX for further discussion of Mark 4, concerning the importance of listening rightly to the parables of Jesus.
Thus the parable both affirms the disciples as a privileged group and warns them that to live out their calling and purpose as the eschatological people of God requires their ongoing obedient reception of the word of Jesus, even amidst trouble, opposition and temptation. Only in this way will the full creative potential and redemptive significance of the word of Jesus be realised among and through this group of disciples, who are only the beginning of the eschatological people of God. The shift in the tense and status of ἀκούειν from a subordinate aorist subjunctive/participle (4.15-19) to a present indicative that is the main verb of the clause (4.20) provides a hopeful note: despite opposition and temptation, those to whom Jesus speaks (4.10: οἱ περὶ αὐτὸν σὺν τοῖς δώδεκα), are rightly hearing and obeying the word of Jesus, and in doing these things their full participation in (and contribution to) the eschatological harvest the parable portrays (4.20) is assured.

Summary
In Mark 1-3 Jesus’ ministry is opposed by diabolic forces, the Jewish leadership, and his family, all prominent elements in the Sower’s immediate narrative context (3.20-35). Despite this opposition, Jesus has persevered in proclaiming and enacting the kingdom of God, leading to the formation of an unconventional and unauthorised social group centred around Jesus. This represents a major development in the initial phase of the Markan Jesus’ ministry, a development demanding further explanation and legitimation.

Reading the Sower with reference to this narrative context, I have argued that Jesus, in parable, claims that his proclamation of the kingdom of God (the “word” being sown) is a divine word, calling into being the eschatological people of God, a group taking its initial shape in the “family” group forming around him (3.33-5). The Sower also portrays Jesus’ word as a word that displaces the primary claim the biological family would otherwise make on the lives of his followers, and - in giving definition to the will of God for Jesus’ followers - a word that stands over against and prior to the word of the Jewish elite.

The Sower also has a didactic function. It portrays the Markan Jesus’ own faithfulness, despite diabolical opposition, persecution and temptation (to lead a normal, family-embedded life), and in doing so prepares Jesus’ disciples for how in following him they also must prevail against similar opposition, persecution, and temptation, through rightly hearing, receiving and persevering in the word of Jesus. Those who so prevail will participate fully in the eschatological harvest of the fullness of the kingdom of God.

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See Marcus, *Mark I*, 313: “despite all such opposition the word is actually finding an entrance into human hearts… some hearers are prepared and able to listen to it, to receive it, to permit it to fructify their lives - and to let everything else go”. The change in the verb form “implies that the people being described here really hear the word, listen to it continually, allow themselves to be broken apart and put together again by the word…[the word] no longer occupies a secondary place in their lives but has moved to the very centre of their existence”.

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It is difficult this far removed from the disciples' socio-cultural-religious milieu to appreciate the radical, religiously subversive, and socially dangerous nature of this message. That the days of eschatological redemption and restoration anticipated in OT use of the imagery of sowing and agricultural/horticultural abundance were coming into being by the word of ὁ τέκτων, ὁ γεννάων τῆς Μαρίας (6.3), and taking the form of a small group of ordinary people gathered around him, and doing so over against the religious establishment and in displacement of the biological family, was a claim so scandalous that it could only be made in parable. Even in explanation, the crucial link between Jesus and the Sower can only be implied. It was a truth only for those with ears to hear!

**Excursus: The λογισμός in 4 Maccabees and the λόγος of the Sower**

That a first century prophetic figure (the Markan Jesus) would use a parable about ὁ λόγος in the way I have described above, is given tangential support by the presence of similar lines of thought in 4 Maccabees. 4 Maccabees celebrates the martyrdom of the priest Eleazar, a godly woman, and her seven sons, as a demonstration of the power of reason, as informed by Torah, to master the passions. The relationship between ὁ λογισμός and Torah is close and interdependent. The martyrs die to honour both Torah and ὁ λογισμός. The Torah informs the substance of ὁ λογισμός (e.g. 1.15-17). In turn, ὁ λογισμός appears to take the form of a rational embodiment of Torah, so that by it Torah’s requirements are fulfilled, despite the passions. The close relationship between ὁ λογισμός and Torah lends ὁ λογισμός divine sanction. It concurs with Torah in requiring conduct that leads to martyrdom, and has the power to master the passions, so that martyrdom for Torah is made possible.

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247 Marcus, *Mark l*, 295-6: “Mark is drawing on a standard apocalyptic metaphor: the new age will be like a miraculously fruitful field”; cf. also Ps 126.6; Is 37.31; Jer 31.11-14; Ez 36.8-12; Hos 2.21-23; Joel 2.21-7; Amos 9.11-15; Zech 8.12; 1 Enoch 10.16-11.2.

248 On the date of 4 Maccabees see Evans, *Ancient*, 55 (“first century C.E.”); deSilva, *Maccabees*, xiv-xvii: “sometime between the turn of the era and the early second century C.E.”. I am not arguing here for dependency between 4 Maccabees and the Synoptics (either way), but only that 4 Maccabees gives a window into the thought world of the time that helps identify the symbolic significance and practical implications of shared metaphorical language and concepts.

249 See Redditt, *Concept*, 259 on how law, reason and piety are “interrelated concepts” in 4 Maccabees; the law is kept through reason, but reason informed by the law; also Weber, “Eusebeia”, 227 (and the discussion 222-7); “Die Führungspotenz des Logos, die ihm als seine protologische Bestimmung inhäriert, wird geschichtlich konkretisirt in der Thora, welche seine weltliche Struktur- und Handlungsnorm darstellt”; Aune, “Mastery”, 135: ὁ εὐσεβῆς λογισμός is “reasoning in accordance with a strict interpretation and application of the Torah”; deSilva, *Maccabees*, 70; training in the law “inculcates invincible strategies of reasoning in the service of virtue” and in this sense, ὁ εὐσεβῆς λογισμός “is a cipher for living according to the Jewish Law”.

250 See 5.34-5: …ὡς ἐπιστρέφει σε, παιδευτά νόμε… οὔδε κατασχυνὰτε φιλόσοφοι λόγον.

251 The connection at the level of praxis is reinforced in 1.30-2.23 where specific requirements of the Torah are of issue, cf. also 6.30: καὶ μέχρι τῶν τοῦ θανάτου βασιλίων ἄντεστι τῆς λογισμοῦ διὰ τῶν νόμων. The connection is also evident in the speeches of the martyrs, e.g. 5.16-38; 9.1-4; 11.12; 11.27; see also 15.23-32. Similarly, Weber, “Eusebeia”, 227: “Die Speisegebote dienen der Reinheit der Seele, ihrer Beförderung in Hinsicht auf ihr wahres Wesen, das eben nicht einfach aus der Faktizität des Natürlichen entnommen werden kann, sondern in einem spezifischen Bezug zum Logos steht, dem durch den εὐσεβῆς λογισμός im Menschen zur Durchsetzung verholfen wird”.

252 E.g. 1.30-2.23; also 2.9b: τῶν παθῶν ἐστιν ὁ λογισμός κρατῶν; see also 1.1-7, 13-29; 2.24-3.18; 6.31-35; 13.1-7; 16.1-5; 18.1-2. Reason is the chief gardener, able to tame the jungle of inclinations and passions (1.29).
The two most comprehensive species of passion are pleasure and pain (1.20: ἡδονή τε καὶ πόνος).

Pious reason teaches moderation, so that pleasures and desires are restrained, and courage, so that one can endure pain willingly (5.23). As the book moves from philosophical reflection to narrative, this mastery of the passions takes tangible form in the martyrs’ refusal to love life and family above obedience to Torah, and in their capacity to endure the most terrible torture and death for Torah’s sake. The narrator recognises the kind of temptation that might naturally have troubled the seven brothers as they face death (8.16-26), including the desire to hold on to a pleasant and sweet life (8.23) and their compassion for their elderly mother (8.20). What prevents such thoughts prevailing and enables the brothers to despise their passions and master pain (8.28) is their loyalty to the Torah (9.1-3; 11.5,12). It is not their tormentors, but the divine law that has authority over them; διὰ τοῦτο ἀνίκητον ἔχομεν τὸν λογισμόν (11.27). Thus the brothers are able to master the passions of normal brotherly affection (14.1) to exhort each other to faithfulness in the face of death (13.19-14.1). Similarly their mother’s love for her sons (14.11-15.32) and normal desires/ambitions for them (16.6-11) are set aside out of devotion to the law, so that she exhorts them to die rather than disobey the law (16.24). The mother receives courage from ὁ εὐσεβής λογισμός, allowing her to disregard τὴν πρόσκαιρον φιλοτεκνίαν παριδεῖν (15.23), despite her sons’ horrendous suffering.

Thus we have in 4 Maccabees a line of thought that is comparable, at a conceptual level, to my reading of the Sower. In mastering ἡδονῶν καὶ ἐπιθυμιῶν (5.23), setting aside normal family obligations and affections and the pleasant life they facilitate, and in enduring persecution, the martyrs remain true to the Torah. It is ὁ λογισμός that allows them to master their passions to this end having both a legitimating and an enabling role for the martyrs. Similarly, in my contextual reading of the Markan Sower, ὁ λόγος of Jesus legitimises the actions of Jesus’ disciples as they diverge from family and social norms and enables them to remain faithful to Jesus despite persecution, trouble and the temptation to participate in family life. Thus 4 Maccabees suggests that my contextual reading of the Sower is quite at home within Jewish thought of the time.

The Lamp that Comes

Further confirmation that Mark 4.1-20 concerns the dramatic events of 3.20-35 may be found in the parabolic saying concerning the lamp (4.21). The literal sense of the question, “Μήτι ἔρχεται ὁ λύχνος…?”, having the lamp as active agent, suggests that “Jesus himself is to

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253 The distinction is made between passions that prevent moderation (arrogance, greed, gluttony and lust) and those that prevent justice (anger, fear and pain) (1.3-4, 20-27). See Aune, “Mastery”, 134-5, 151n41 on the rhetorical purpose of this definition: “Pleasure and pain are highlighted as passions in order to emphasise that the Maccabean martyrs are not led astray by the pleasures of this world, and are able to endure horrible amounts of pain without succumbing to their torturer’s demands...even the seemingly positive emotions of joy and parental love can be regarded as destructive passions if they get in the way of following the Law” (135; italics mine).

254 Also 16.4: ἀλλὰ τῷ λογισμῷ τῆς εὐσεβείας κατέσβησεν τὰ τοσιάτα καὶ τηλικά τά πάθη ἤ μήτηρ.


256 A crucial point of distinction between the Markan Jesus and the martyrs of 4 Maccabees is that ὁ λόγος is primarily given its content by Jesus’ proclamation and teaching, whereas ὁ λογισμός is given definition by Torah. The divergence of the two can be seen by a comparison of 4 Macc 1.31-35 regarding refraining from eating forbidden foods and Jesus’ (parabolic) teaching in Mark 7.17-23 on the same subject.

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be seen as the lamp that comes”. It is a “christological parable about Jesus’ coming into the world”. But if this saying refers to Jesus, what does it tell us about him? The saying employs the imagery of domestic life, of ordinary household items (μόδιος… κλίνη) able to hide/extinguish the light of a lamp, which may be an allusion to the events of 3.20-35, where Jesus’ family seek to take him away from public ministry and “hide” him within the confines of ordinary family social and economic life. In 4.21a Jesus insists that he has not come to be “hidden” in this way.

The Jewish symbolism of “lamp” may also point to Jesus’ true identity and vocation. In the OT, “lamp” imagery symbolised the Davidic king, suggesting Jesus’ application of the imagery to himself had messianic connotations. The messianic sense of the 4.21 is reinforced by reference to the lamp being put on a lampstand. Use of λυχνία in 4.21b (οὐχ ἵνα ἐπί τὴν λυχνίαν τεθηκεν) may signal a movement (within the saying) from a household setting to a cultic setting. That the lamp is to be “put” (τίθημι) on a lampstand echoes OT passages where the “putting” of the lamp on the lampstand is a central procedure in the establishment of a place and practice of worship within Israel. Does the saying allude to how Moses put the lamps on the lampstand in setting up the tent of meeting (Ex 40.4: ισοίσεις τὴν λυχνίαν καὶ ἑπιθήσεις τοὺς λύχνους αὐτῆς; cf. 40.24-5), indicating that Jesus has similarly come to restore true worship within Israel? Since the Roman destruction of the Temple could be described saying “the light of our lampstand has been

257 Hooker, Mark, 133; also Hays, Reading, 29-30; Cranfield, Mark, 164; N.T. Wright, Victory, 240; Edwards, Mark, 139: OT usage of “lamp” as a metaphor for God, the Messiah and the Torah, the use of the definite article, and the verb ἐρχομαι being more suitable to a person than an object, all argue that the image “points to Jesus as the implied agent”.

258 Hays, Reading, 30. I note also how Jesus in Mark 1-3 is one who “comes”, cf. ἐρχομαι in 1.4,24,29,39; 2.17; ἐξέρχομαι in 1.38 and also of the Sower in 4.3.

259 On the nature and use of lamps in first century Palestine see Smith, “Household”; Lapp,“Clay”, 174-5; Dronsch,”Lieber”, 134; Baasland, Parables, 117-8; Mynarzycz, “Terracotta”, 99-133 (lamps at Qumran). For archeological evidence of oil lamps in Galilee dating to the early Roman period see e.g. Leiber, Khirbet, 416-40 (Khirbet Wadi Hamam) and Hadad, Excavations (Bet Shean).

260 On lamp imagery in Jewish thought see Baasland, Parables, 116-7; Dronsch,“Lieber”, 135; TDNT IV, 325.

261 See 2 Sam 21.17; 1 Kings 11.36, 15.4; 2 Kings 8.19; 2 Chron 21.7: cf. Ps 132.17. In a (later) parallel to Jesus being described as a lamp, Sifré to Numbers 93 describes Moses as a “lamp which is set on a candelabrum” (translation: Neusner, Numbers II, 102). “Lamp” is also used widely in Jewish writings to symbolise Torah: in the OT (e.g. Ps 119.115; Prov 6.23), in writings dated shortly after 70CE (e.g. 2 Peter 1.19; 2 Baruch, where the lamp is the eternal law (59.2), and the giving of the law by Moses can be described as the lighting of a lamp for Israel (17.2-18.1)), and in later Rabbinic texts (see e.g. Baasland, Parables, 117n273). On this symbolism in post 70CE writings (Vermes, “Torah”, on “the symbolism ‘light-Law’ in Targumic literature” (436)), suggesting a stable and well established symbolic association. In describing himself as a lamp, is Jesus also making an allusive Messianic claim to be the embodiment of Torah itself? (Cf. the discussion in Keener, John I, 360-3 on how in John 1.1-18 Jesus is portrayed as one who “embodies the Torah and is its fullest revelation” (360)).

262 In the LXX, λυχνία is used almost exclusively for the lampstand of the Tabernacle/Temple (2 Kings 4.10 is the sole exception). The word is also mainly or only used in this way in Philo, Josephus (the only exceptions I could locate: Life, 68; Jewish War, 6.388) and the Qumran literature. Thus in terms of literary associations, the link between λυχνία and the Temple is very strong. On the background to λυχνία in Rev 1.12, 22 see Beale, Revelation, 206-7: the lampstand is “a figurative synecdoche: part of the temple furniture stands for the whole temple”; Aune, Revelation 1-5, 88-9: λυχνία is “a technical term for the sacral lampstand”.

263 The link is strengthened by the combination of λύχνος and ἑρμή (or ἑπιθήμι) in the LXX; see Ex 40.4; Ex 40.24-5: καὶ ἐβηκεν τὴν λυχνίαν εἰς τὴν σκηνήν… καὶ ἑπιθήκην τούς λύχνους αὐτῆς ἑναν τύπον κυρίου; Num 8.2: “Ὅταν ἐπιθήκην τοὺς λύχνους… For the importance of the lampstand and its lamps in (re)establishment of worship in Israel see also 2 Chron 4.7,19-22 (Solomon’s temple); 1 Macc 4.49-50 (cf. 2 Macc 10.3), concerning the renewal of worship in the Temple after it was desecrated by Antiochus.
put out" (4 Ezra 10.22), does Jesus use similar language to signal his intention to establish an alternative temple/cult within Israel (see 14.58; 15.29)?

These considerations suggest that the Lamp saying was intended to signal that Jesus’ vocation lies outside the world of his biological family, his mission being the restoration of true worship within Israel. This once again positions Jesus in opposition to his family and the existing guardians of Temple and Torah. Understood this way, the Lamp combines with 3.20-35 to bracket 4.1-20 with passages having similar thematic concerns:

A: Jesus prevails over opposition from the Jewish elite (3.22-30)
    B: Jesus refuses his family’s summons (3.31-35)
    C: Sower and explanation (4.1-20)
    B’: Jesus did not come to live a family-embedded life (4.21a)
A’: Jesus will establish authentic worship within Israel (4.21b)

That thematically similar concerns bracket the Markan Sower adds further support to my argument that the parable speaks to these same issues.

The sayings and imperatives that follow the Lamp (4.22-5) return to themes of careful and obedient listening, reinforcing the didactic aims I have proposed for the Sower. Despite being privileged recipients of the mysteries of the kingdom (4.11), the disciples must still hear/receive rightly (4.23-5), in order to gain the full revelation the word/lamp came to bring. Rightly hearing and receiving Jesus’ word, which includes overcoming the opposition to that word the Sower portrays (4.4-7,15-19) leads to fullness of understanding and fullness of participation in the eschatological purposes of God (cf. 4.20); in contrast, those content to listen only superficially lose even the place among God’s people they thought they had (4.24-5).

In this way we may see the whole of Mark 4.1-25 in continuity with, and as a development of, the prior Markan narrative, and particularly the events immediately prior (3.20-35). In the Sower and accompanying teaching (4.9-25) Jesus speaks to these events, investing them with great

264 On this passage see Stone, Ezra, 324; Aune, Revelation 1-5, 89.

265 See Hays, Reading, 29, recognising Mark 4.21-5 as a “direct continuation of Jesus’ answer about teaching in parables” and arguing “this is surely to be understood as a figurative discourse about the hermeneutics of hearing and understanding the word”.

266 Note δίδωμι (4.11); παραδέχομαι (4.20); διδώμενοι (4.25).

267 N.T. Wright, Victory, 240 rightly connects 4.25 to what precedes it: “those who ‘have’ are equated with those who hear aright, who in turn are identified as Jesus’ true family, those to whom is revealed the mystery of the kingdom; those who ‘have not’ are identified as ‘those outside’;” also Zager, “Gottersherrschaft”, 180: the one who has is the one who “Jesu Wort nicht nur hört, sondern auch in seinem Herzen bewahrt und sein Verhalten danach ausrichtet (Mk 4.20)”. 245
eschatological significance, and in light of these things seeks to prepare his disciples to participate fully in the kingdom of God and to contribute to its expansion.

**The Sower in Mark, Matthew and Luke: Spot the Similarities**

The Synoptic Gospels’ respective accounts of the Sower have much in common. The parable’s structure and plot is the same in all three Synoptic versions, which share all major motifs and have only minor differences in language.\(^{268}\) In arranging the Sower, all three Synoptics position the parable within a similarly structured literary unit and place the same or thematically similar events/teaching in close proximity to the parable. Despite some expansion (Matthew), abbreviation (Luke), and nuancing of the Markan version, the Synoptic arrangements of the Sower all share (in the same order) the following elements:

(i) A particularly large crowd as audience;

(ii) Jesus speaks to the crowd in parable(s), telling the Sower;

(iii) The imperative ὃς ἔχει ὥτα ἀκούειν ἄκουέτω follows immediately after the Sower;

(iv) The disciples, in a private setting, question Jesus concerning parabolic speech;\(^{269}\)

(v) The disciples are portrayed as privileged recipients of the mysteries of the kingdom, and distinct from the crowds who hear only parables;

(vi) Paraphrase of Is 6.9-10;

(vii) Explanation of the Sower.

Further, the Synoptics all signal that the sowing of the seed corresponds to the proclamation and teaching of Jesus, and their repeated use of ἀκούειν signals a central concern with people’s response to that proclamation/teaching.\(^{270}\) Also, the material that Matthew and Luke use to “frame” their account of the Sower describes events/teaching that are the same as those Mark uses to frame the Sower, or thematically similar. The data is as follows:

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\(^{268}\) For comparison of the Synoptic versions see Hultgren, *Parables*, 184; Snodgrass, *Stories*, 152-4, 172-4. See also the analysis in Blomberg, “Parallel”, 80-2; Blomberg, “Orality”, 91-93, 99-100, examining the shared vocabulary of the three Synoptic versions, finding that verbatim words, words in different forms and synonyms account for over 80% of the (Greek) words in each version of the parable.

\(^{269}\) While the private setting is not explicit in Luke, it is implied in 8.10, where Jesus says he speaks to the crowds only in parables (cf. Marshall, *Luke*, 321).

\(^{270}\) Snodgrass, *Stories*, 152: “In all three [Synoptic accounts of the Sower] the dominant idea is hearing” (italics original), with use of ἀκούειν 13x in Mark, 15x in Matthew, and 9x in Luke.
All three Synoptics describe the formation of a new kinship group (around Jesus) immediately prior to the Sower, and precede that with an account of conflict between Jesus and the Jewish elite. All three Synoptics place in immediate proximity to the Sower/explanation an account of Jesus refusing his family's attempt to take charge of him and then describing his followers using the language of the biological family. The parable of the lamp features in Mark and Luke, and Matthew's “synagogue” and “scribal” pericopes cohere thematically with the material Mark uses to frame the parable. These shared elements in the Synoptic arrangement of the Sower suggest a shared understanding of the parable's intended literary function. In view of the importance of this contextual material in a literary reading of the Sower, I examine the Matthean and Lukan arrangement in more detail below.

### The Sower in Matthew

Matthew follows Mark in locating the Sower in narrative proximity to the Beelzebul controversy (expanded to include further controversy and polemic (12.22-45)) and the summons of Jesus’ family (12.46-50).\(^{271}\) Despite omitting Mark 3.20-1, the Matthean family scene is still a deeply unsettling one for the audience/reader.\(^{272}\) Jesus’ family is portrayed as outsiders,\(^{273}\) spatially separate from Jesus and his disciples. Jesus publicly refuses to acknowledge his family or to honour them in obedience. Provocatively he designates his disciples as his family. Reference to

\[\text{\footnotesize 271 Matthew’s use of } \text{Ἐν τη ἡμέρᾳ ἔκεινη } (13.1) \text{ to introduce the scene in which the Sower is set situates the parable in chronological proximity to what immediately precedes it (Nolland, Matthew, 522), as does the fact of his leaving the house where the events of 12.46-50 are presumed to have taken place (France, Matthew, 501).}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize 272 Matthew does not say why the family came to Jesus, though prior conflict with the Jewish leadership (12.1-45) suggest a desire to prevent dishonour to the family (cf. Keener, Matthew, 370).}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize 273 Matthew has } \text{ἐξετάσθησαν ἐξω ἐστήκασιν } (12.46-7). \text{ Since Matthew does not retain the Markan reference to Jesus being in a house, this characterisation of the family is unusual, suggesting its inclusion was important to Matthew.}\]
τοῦ πατρός μου τοῦ ἐν οὐρανοῖς (12.50) invokes divine sanction for Jesus and the disciples; they stand in filial relationship with God. Thus, as in Mark, the Sower features at a point in Matthew where clear distinctions are emerging between Jesus and the group forming around him (claiming alignment with the divine will and a privileged relationship with God) and contemporary expressions of Judaism and the biological family.

Matthew accentuates the privileged status of Jesus’ disciples. As in Mark, they are recipients of the mysteries of the kingdom (13.11; adding emphatically, ἐκείνοις δὲ οὐ δέδοται). Only οἱ μαθηταί receive explanation of the parables (13.10-11,36). In placing the Markan saying concerning those who have and those who do not (Mark 4.25) immediately after Matt 13.11, Matthew “accentuates the distinction between those who perceive and those who do not”. Matthew adds that the disciples are μακάριοι, privileged recipients of that which the prophets and righteous longed to see and hear (13.16-17).

That which is sown is the τὸν λόγον τῆς βασιλείας (13.19), linking the parable directly to the ministry of the Matthean Jesus, who proclaims the kingdom of heaven (4.17, 23; 9.35). While retaining Mark’s emphasis on listening rightly to Jesus’ word, Matthew draws a distinction between hearing and understanding. Understanding is a divine gift. However, the command to hear/listen/obey throughout, the distinction between different kinds of hearing (13.13: καὶ ἀκούοντες οὐκ ἀκούουσιν), and the warning against temptation and opposition (13.20-2) characterise understanding as also the task to which the disciples are called. Those who hear only the parable, being content to listen superficially, never come to understanding. Those who listen carefully and obediently, including through further inquiry of Jesus concerning the parables (10.13, 36), are given to understand, and may prevail against those things that would snatch the word away, or render it powerless, so as to bear the fruit of the kingdom.

274 While Matthew has dropped Mark’s Καὶ οτί ἐγένετο κατὰ μόνας (4.10), the implication of 13.10-17 is that the disciples are the sole recipients of this teaching (so Nolland, Matthew, 533; Davies and Allison, Matthew 8-18, 387).

275 Davies and Allison, Matthew 8-18, 391.

276 On μακάριοι (13.16) designating the presence of the eschatological age (and the disciples’ participation in that age) see Davies and Allison, Matthew 8-18, 394; France, Matthew, 515; cf. 16.17.

277 See especially 13.10-16, 19, 23 where Matthew uses συνήμη five times, and again in 13.51.

278 For δίδωμι (Mark 4.10; Matt 13.11; Luke 8.10) as divine passive see e.g. Cranfield, “St Mark”, 54; Marcus, Mark I, 298; Hagner, “Matthew’s”, 105; Schöttroff, Parables, 68.

279 See similarly the distinction in Philo, Special Laws, 1.39.214 between reading the scriptures with the mind, rather than merely with the eyes.

280 The distinction between hearing and understanding may be Matthew’s attempt to clarify how parabolic speech contributes to the division between insiders and outsiders in the Markan account.
Thus the juxtaposition of the events of 12.22-50 and the Sower (13.1-23) may be understood to give the parable a narrative function in Matthew that is similar to the parable’s Markan function (as above). In the Matthean Jesus’ ministry the seed/word is being sown, leading to the formation of a group of disciples whom the Sower designates the eschatological people of God. This group are being prepared to expand the ministry of Jesus with a view to an abundant eschatological harvest (10.7; 24.14; 28.19-20). This is being achieved in Matthew despite opposition from the religious authorities (e.g. 12.22-42; 15.1-2; 16.1-4), and as a movement that is incompatible with contemporary expressions of Judaism (e.g. 9.2-3; 9.14-17; 12.1-14; 15.1-9; 23.1-24). It is being achieved because allegiance to Jesus takes precedence over family demands (4.21-2; 8.21-22; 10.37-9) and despite opposition from family members (10.21-2,35-6). The word of Jesus gives definition to τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρός μου (12.50), obedience to which is the defining mark of the community forming around him.

Matthew concludes this parable section with two extraordinary scenes. Following their private discussions with Jesus, it is established that the disciples have understood the parables (13.51-2), giving grounds for hope that they will yield the fruit of the kingdom (13.23). Jesus then speaks of his disciples becoming a new discipled scribal group (13.52), who will guide and instruct others in the ways of the kingdom,281 thus situating his followers over against (and in competition to) the present guardians of the traditions and scriptures of Israel. This is followed by Jesus teaching at the synagogue in his hometown (13.54) and his rejection by those who heard him. If Jesus received religious education at this synagogue in his youth,282 the shock of the local population to his ministry is understandable. Their objection is that Jesus possesses wisdom and power which he did not receive from his local teachers. Jesus’ teaching is breaking out beyond religious traditions passed faithfully from generation to generation in that synagogue. The audience’s question, πόθεν οὖν τούτῳ ταῦτα πάντα; (13.56b), evidences the inadequacy of normal explanations (of family upbringing and childhood education) to explain Jesus’ apparent vocation (as teacher) and the substance of his teaching. The implication of this highly negative response is that Jesus should not be teaching, but should return to his normal place in family/society.283 Jesus’ unwillingness to be confined within “his own house” (13.57), to a normal family identity and role, or

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281 See France, Matthew, 545-6 on reference here to “a new ‘alternative’ scribal school…the saying envisages disciples in their ‘scribal’ function, that is, as authorised teachers for the kingdom of heaven, in contrast with the Pharisaic scribes”. Nolland, Matthew, 571: 13.52 anticipates the disciples’ role as outlined in 28.19; the use of μαθητεύων in both passages identifies the disciples’ experience as one that will be duplicated with others who will likewise be discipled. This is the fruitfulness the Sower describes. Given the connection here between scribes and parables, cf. Sir 39.2-3: the scribe ἐν στροφαῖς παραβολῶν συνεισέλευσε, ἀπόκρυφα παραμύθων ἐκζητήσει, καὶ ἐν αὐνίγματι παραβολῶν ἀναστραφήσεται.

282 As argued in Meier, Marginal I, 271-78; though see also Keith, Jesus’, 116-120 on the likelihood and limitations of a synagogue education, including his reading of the relevant passages in Philo and Josephus. Further on the first century synagogue, see Ryan, Synagogue, 23-93; Stewart, Gathered, 189-92; MacKay, “Ancient”.

283 See the discussion in Keith, Jesus’, 130-139: the audience’s questions indicate that since Jesus had not received a scribal education, and as ὁ τέκτων; ὁ τοῦ τέκτονος υἱός, he has “no business teaching” (137).
to the religious traditions of his childhood education, were indeed a scandal (13.57: καὶ ἐσκανδαλίζοντο ἐν αὐτῷ), the very scandal to which the Sower speaks, in order to explain and legitimate Jesus’ actions. The word Jesus proclaims and teaches originates not within family or Synagogue, but is a divine word, by which the eschatological people of God are called into being, governed, and sustained in bearing the fruit of the kingdom. That fruitfulness comes at the expense of Jesus (and his disciples) retaining their normal place in their biological families, and within contemporary expressions of Judaism.

Thus Matthew’s narrative “framing” of the Sower has strong thematic similarities to the Markan arrangement, signalling a similar interpretive direction, even while intensifying the distinction between the Jesus movement and other expressions of contemporary Judaism.

The Sower in Luke

Immediately prior to the Sower (8.1-3), Luke profiles a new “family” group that has formed around Jesus. This pericope presents as a typical scene in the life/ministry of Jesus at this point in the Lukan narrative. Jesus is travelling widely, κηρύσσων καὶ εὐαγγελιζόμενος τὴν βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ (8.1) in the company of the twelve and a socially mixed group of women, with both sharing an intimate relationship with him. The women providing economic support are part of the group, rather than patrons. The group’s economic interdependence, shared vocation, and practice of travelling and (presumably) lodging together, means Jesus and his followers have

284 See Stewart, Gathered, 189-92 on the link between Temple and Synagogue, and how the synagogue facilitated extension throughout Israel of the ritual purity and teaching of the Jerusalem Temple (it is “the Jerusalem authorities and their associates who control the interpretation of the law within the Synagogues” (192)). Thus this local incident had larger significance, setting Jesus against the Temple also.

285 Snodgrass, Stories, 174 (also 154) is one of the few to comment on the significance of the narrative frames for reading the parables of Matt 13, suggesting 12.46-50 and 13.53-8 “help the parables fulfil their function”, warning readers not to repeat Israel’s rejection of Jesus (though this gives insufficient emphasis to those who clearly respond positively to Jesus, also a feature of these pericopes). Davies and Allison, Matthew 8-18, 461 is better noting how the framing texts “relativise the significance of natural or earthly connections”, but does not explore the significance of this for reading the parables. Oppong-Kumi, Matthean, 73 argues 12.46-50/13.54-8 form an “inclusion around our set of parables” making the parables a “rhetorical device to demonstrate how the true relatives of Jesus are and why”, though he gives these sections too little emphasis in his subsequent reading of the parable, focusing instead on broad Matthean themes and allowing 13.11-12 to dominate his exegesis. Ewerido, Matthew’s, 62-72 discusses the significance of 12.46-50/13.54-8 for the Sower, seeing a typical example of rejection/opposition of/to Jesus within Israel, but failing to explore the specific dynamics of family relations that features so prominently.

286 See Bauckham, Women, 111-3 on how the grammar of the sentence places the twelve and the women alongside each other (both groups are described as “with” Jesus (8.1: σὺν αὐτῷ), “the essence of discipleship” (112)), having the same kind of relationship to Jesus. The women are portrayed as disciples of Jesus on the same terms as the twelve, as “constant companions of Jesus from an early stage of the Galilean ministry” (113).

287 Bauckham, Women, 162-3. He reads διηκόνουν αὐτοίς ἐκ τῶν ὑπαρχόντων αὐτᾶς (8.3) as referring to the women supplying “the economic needs of Jesus and the twelve” (113). See 121-35 on these women having independent financial means, and 114-6 on why the women may have had greater wealth at their disposal than the male disciples (correcting Sim, “Women”, 51-5 and Withurst, “Road”, at important points).
adopted patterns of life typical of (and largely restricted to) a biological family. Further, to
participate in this kinship group must - practically - have required members to be away from their home towns (presumably for long periods of time), disrupting life within their biological families. Economic resources that would normally go toward sustaining the biological family are being used for group purposes. As in Mark, the Lukan Sower is preceded by a pericope in which Jesus and his companions are portrayed as an unusual and unauthorised kinship group, having similarities to a biological family, though standing over against the biological family in the claim that it makes on the lives of its members. This group is called into being by the authoritative word of Jesus, the word that summoned and named the twelve (6.14) and that brought healing and deliverance to his women followers. The word that is sown is ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ (8.11), terminology already associated with the Lukan Jesus’ proclamation and teaching (4.18; 5.1), a word aligned with the divine will and purpose, and carrying divine authority. This authoritative word is traversing social and religious norms, to bring together male and female, marginalised and aristocratic, rich and poor, into a community of people whom the Sower designates the eschatological people of God.

Prior to the Sower, Luke give less prominence (than Mark) to Jesus’ conflict with the Jewish leadership, though the seeds of that conflict are there (5.17-6.11; Markan material). Given the Jewish elite’s sensitivity to the company Jesus kept, it was no doubt highly provocative for him to form an (unauthorised) socio-religious group that included tax collectors (5.27), former demoniacs, and members of the house of Herod (8.2-3). The Lukan Sower follows shortly after the dramatic scene in the house of Simon the Pharisee (7.36-50), where Jesus fails to honour Pharisaic patterns of purity, refusing to enforce socio-religious boundaries excluding “sinners” from his company. Instead Jesus proclaims (and enacts in social solidarity) the forgiveness of sins,

289 On the unusual nature of this behaviour for persons not related biologically, see Bailey, Jesus, 193: “I know of no place in traditional society where the social scene presented in this text is possible”; Witherington, “Road”, 245; Green, Luke, 318-9; Bauckham, Women, 117-8; Bock, Luke I, 713; Bovon, Luke I, 300 (leading Perroni, “Disciples”, 178 to dismiss the verse as a “Lukan gloss”).

290 See Bauckham, Women, 114-5 on how the women’s use of their resources to support Jesus is a comparable act to the male disciples leaving home and family.


292 The women of 8.1 are αἱ ἥσαν παραρτημμέναι ἀπὸ πνευμάτων πονηρῶν καὶ ἀπθηρευθεῖσαι; in 4.18 these things are said to occur as the direct result of the proclamation of Jesus.

293 See Bauckham, Women, 135-161 on Joanna as a member of the “Herodian aristocracy of Tiberias” (161) and on her following Jesus as a “radical step right outside the Herodian establishment to which she had belonged and into the life of the ordinary people of Galilee and of the marginalised and rejected of society” (150).

294 Luke retains from Mark the early controversies with the Pharisees (5.17-6.11, though he softens 6.11 slightly), but shifts the Beelzebul controversy to the journey to Jerusalem (11.14-22) and places it amidst equally serious conflict and polemic.

295 See the objections to the company Jesus was keeping in 5.30; 7.34; 7.39; 15.1-2; 19.7, suggesting this was a major point of contention between Jesus and the Jewish elite throughout Jesus’ ministry.
provocatively granting a “sinner” a place among the people of God. Jesus is again operating outside the boundaries of contemporary Judaism.

Luke follows Mark in placing in immediate proximity to the Sower/explanation the parabolic saying of the lamp (and associated sayings; 8.16-18) and an account of Jesus’ family seeking him out (8.19-21). Juxtaposed alongside each other, these two pericopes may mutually inform. Just as the lighting of a lamp is not then frustrated by it being put under a jar or a bed (8.16), so Jesus’ ministry will not be frustrated (remaining hidden; 8.17) by the demands of his family who are portrayed as unable to reach him and unable to summon him (8.19-21). Rather, as in Mark, the lamp with be put on a lampstand. That the lamp is to give light to those who enter [the house] may point to how a new kinship group is being formed around Jesus, a family/household (8.21) made up of those who rightly hear (8.18) and obediently receive (8.21) the word of God (which is again equated to Jesus’ proclamation/teaching).

In sum, Luke frames the Sower with pericopes that (a) depict Jesus publicly extending solidarity and forgiveness in violation of the norms of Pharisaic Judaism (7.36-50); (b) situate Jesus within an unusual and unauthorised kinship group, made up of people having no biological relationship to him and including people otherwise excluded from normal participation in religious life (8.1-3); and (c) have Jesus describe this group as his “family” and situate it as distinct from (and having priority over) his biological family (8.19-21). This gives Luke’s arrangement of the parable thematic similarity to Mark’s. These are provocative developments, demanding explanation. The Sower, by evoking how the divine word goes forth to sow/gather the people of God, provides that explanation. The group forming around Jesus is the (beginnings of the) eschatological people of God, called into being by the authoritative word of Jesus, a word standing in opposition to the word of family...

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296 The only other Lukan use of δύναμαι in the imperfect middle indicative is in 19.3 to describe Zacchaeus’ inability to reach Jesus. Ironically it is marginal characters such as Zacchaeus who come to share table fellowship with Jesus, whilst his family are left standing outside.

297 Scholars generally play down the sense of any conflict between Jesus and his family in this Lukan section (especially compared with Mark). However, Jesus’ reply to those who pass on his family’s summons (8.21) can be seen as a shockingly disrespectful dismissal of his family’s summons, and a rejection of the right for his mother and brothers to summon him on the grounds that he now recognises others as his mother and brothers(!). This is deeply provocative.

298 Cf. Howes, “Placed”, 315-6, re the similar lamp saying in Luke 11.33, who sees in 11.33b a “vivid picture of family solidarity” that is “meant as a metaphor for God’s symbolic family” (316).

299 Nolland, Luke I, 395, rightly sees in relation to 8.21 that “the word of God has the power to create family”.

300 The return to Markan material at Luke 8.4 generally discourages inquiry as to the link between 8.1-3 and what follows. Two exceptions are Witherington, “Road”, 248: 8.1-3 is “an introduction and illustration of the parable… the ‘good soil’ was not limited to a particular class, race, or sex”; Green, Luke, 321: in the Sower “Luke will begin to define the nature or make-up” of Jesus’ followers profiled in 8.1-3. Neither develops the thought in sufficient detail in reading the parable.
and of Pharisaic Judaism. The parable does not primarily concern people’s initial responses to Jesus, but portrays responses to Jesus over time, and the need to overcome opposition by demonic forces, persecution by the religious leaders, family demands, and the temptation to a normal family life. To truly listen to Jesus is to hold fast (κατέχω) to the word and to persevere (ὑπομονή) in obedient receptivity, bearing fruit in time (8.15).

My Interpretation and Other Scholarship
I have demonstrated that Mark 4.1-25 is connected strongly to the events of 3.20-35, and have argued that the Sower speaks directly to these events. My approach is distinct from other scholarship where Mark 3.35 is widely regarded as the end of a narrative section, and where 3.20-35 is given little interpretive significance for reading the parable.

The Sower is frequently understood as Jesus’ explanation of the mixed results of his ministry in Mark 1-3 (or Mark as a whole), illustrating people’s varied responses, and providing assurance of ultimate success. Tolbert’s influential study of the Markan Sower sees its “basic typology of hearing-response (sowing-earth) as fundamental to the plot of the entire Gospel”.

However Tolbert’s efforts to connect each sowing to the actions of particular characters in Mark makes poor sense of an important and recurring feature of the parable’s narrative dynamics. The parable’s descriptions of the various sowings (excepting the seed sown on the path) involve...

301 Luke 4.1-25 is connected strongly to the events of 3.20-35, and have argued that the Sower speaks directly to these events. My approach is distinct from other scholarship where Mark 3.35 is widely regarded as the end of a narrative section, and where 3.20-35 is given little interpretive significance for reading the parable.

302 Note καὶ φυέν…συμφωνεῖσαι …καὶ φυέν (8.6-8) and how Luke has removed the Markan έθνος from the description of satanic opposition (8.12) and also from the description of persecution (8.13, twice). Despite Luke’s tendency to abbreviate Mark (e.g. the first three sowings are described in 97 words in Mark, and 73 words in Luke), Luke’s description of the final sowing adds πορευόμενοι (8.14: see Nolland, Luke I, 386: the verb points to “a gradual development of a plant toward maturity”), κατέχω and ὑπομονή (8.15), all of which imply a sense of process/time.


304 For helpful summaries of major lines of interpretation of the Sower, see Snodgrass, Stories, 155-6; van Eck, “Harvest”, 1-3; Dietzfelbinger, “Samen”, 83-8 (especially German scholarship up to 1970).

305 E.g. Marcus, Mark I, 287: the parable addresses the question: “If some...do not hear God’s word...whose fault is that?”; France, Mark, 189: the pressing question for the disciples was “Why is the message of the kingdom of God meeting with such a mixed reception?” Similarly re Matt 13: Davies and Allison, Matthew 8-18, 374: the pressing question is “Why has Israel not embraced her Messiah?”.


307 Tolbert, Sowing, 150.

308 See Tolbert, Sowing, 148-72.
explicitly or implicitly, a period of time between sowing and unfruitfulness/fruitfulness and a process of (partial or full) growth and formation during that time. Thus, to the extent that the parable concerns people’s responses to Jesus, the focus is not primarily on initial responses, but on what happens after that, territory largely unexplored in the Markan narrative world, where we usually only see characters in an initial encounter with Jesus. This makes it more difficult than has generally been acknowledged in scholarship to identify correspondences between Markan characters’ responses to Jesus and the Sower’s different sowings/soils. The only groups that Mark allow us to observe responding to Jesus over time are parts of the Jewish leadership and the disciples. The Jewish leadership are consistently portrayed as opposing Jesus, so that they best correspond to the agents of persecution portrayed in the parable, not to one of the seeds/soils. The Markan (and similarly the Synoptic) portrait of the disciples has them experiencing or being warned they will experience, the full range of circumstances that the Sower/explanation warns can prohibit fruitfulness of the word: diabolic opposition, persecution, family pressures, and the temptations of wealth and the cares of this age. As I have shown, the Markan Jesus experiences all these forms of opposition and prevails over them. The disciples are warned that similar experiences await them; they must imitate Jesus’ example if they are to participate in the eschatological harvest. Thus the parable can be readily seen to allude to the narrated

Note (i) In Mark 4: καὶ ὅτε ἀνέτειλεν ὁ ἥλιος (4.6) refers to events that occur after the seed is sown and after it has sprouted (4.5); an implied period of time during which plants and thorns grow (4.7); an implied passage of time in which the seed grows and bears fruit ready for harvest (4.8); (ii) Matthew 13.5-8 is similar; (iii) in Luke: note καὶ φυεῖ...συμφιμεῶσαι ...καὶ φυεύ (8.6-8), all implying developments over a period of time. See similarly e.g. Scott, *Hear*, 354-5; Hooker, “Mark’s”, 93.

E.g., it is difficult to draw a distinction between the disciples (Tolbert, *Sowing*, 154-6: seed on rocky ground) and Jairus (169-70: seed falling on good soil). Jairus’ initial “response” to Jesus appears comparable with that of the first disciples in 1.29-31. We do not what became of Jairus’ faith in Jesus. The mission of the former demoniac among his own people (166-7: seed falling on good soil) may well be the kind of fruit-producing response of the seed that fell in good soil, but again it is hard to draw a contrast with the disciples who also go out proclaiming and enacting the kingdom of God (6.6-13). The application of Tolbert’s approach to characters in Luke-Acts in Spencer, *Rhetorical*, 155-163, while helpfully assessing the experience of the twelve over a longer period of time (159), suffers from similar difficulties when classifying characters who feature only briefly in the narrative.

See Keegan, “Parable”, 516: the Jewish leaders “do not change in [Mark]…they are irrevocably opposed to Jesus. Their own agenda allies them with Satan. They try to take away the word”. This counts seriously against their being depicted as seed/soils, which would require at least some initial enthusiasm and positive response to Jesus.

Keegan, “Parable”, argues (for the Markan Sower) the Pharisees are aligned with the birds/Satan in trying to take away the word (508-9), and the Jerusalem temple elite are like the thorns choking the word (511), though, somewhat inexpressibly, he takes this as a warning for the disciples not to be like the Jewish leaders (513, 518) (rather than as anticipating how the disciples will face trouble and persecution from the religious elite).

Mark 3.15; 5.7; 9.28. Cf. similarly Matt 10.1,8; 16.18; Luke 10.17-20; 22.31.


See the explicit connection between the persecution and suffering experienced by Jesus and the similar persecution and suffering the disciples can expect (as his followers) in the future: Matt 10.24-5; 16.24-5; 20.22-3; Mark 8.31-34; 10.38-9; Luke 9.21-4.

Also, the disciples are presented in the Synoptics as having a crucial role in securing the ongoing fruitfulness of the proclamation/word of Jesus: see Matt 24.14; 28.16-20; Mark 13.10; Luke 24.44-49.
experiences of Jesus and to correspond naturally to the initial and (more particularly) the anticipated future experiences of Jesus’ followers.319

One result of Tolbert’s analysis is an emphasis on the descriptive nature of the Sower.320 My reading emphasises the parable’s exhortative function. While the disciples are privileged recipients of the mystery of the kingdom, they are being warned that coming opposition, persecution and temptation create a very real risk that the full potential of the divine gift will not be realised. The eschatological fullness of the word being sown among them, portrayed in the Story’s abundant harvest, may well be assured by divine intent. But the participation of individual disciples in that harvest depends on them rightly hearing, obeying and persevering in that word.

Reading the Sower along the lines proposed by Tolbert is often also associated with a misunderstanding concerning the significance of Mark 4.11b-12. To varying degrees the single group of persons negatively described in Mark 4.11b-12 have essentially been equated with the three groups of seed/sowings that do not bear fruit.321 This is to confuse the role of a passage whose main purpose is to explain Jesus’ use of parables, not to provide an explanation of the Sower, which features subsequently.322 This is also to collapse the three groups of seed/persons into one,323 failing to give due recognition to the differences between them (the reasons why they fail to bear fruit), which are described in considerable detail and constitute the bulk of the parable, and thus (in my view) must carry significant in a contextual reading of the parable.324

Redaction-critical approaches to reading the Sower have tended to focus on differences between Synoptic versions and their literary arrangement, contributing to an under-emphasis in scholarship

319 Recognising how the Sower can be seen to anticipate the disciples’ future experiences are Tannehill, Narrative, 210-1; Fay, “Structure”; Snodgrass, Stories, 163: the interpretation of “the Sower seems to be a warning to the disciples as much as it is a description of Jesus’ ministry generally” (italics original); Green, Luke, 329 (briefly); Knowles, “Abram”, 149-50: “the relevance of [the impediments to growth] to Jesus’ own disciples becomes more obvious as the gospel narrative proceeds”; Bayer, Evangelium, 202: as a “sekundäre Anwendung”, the parable functions as a “Warnung für den gelten, der bereits fruchtbringend nachfolgt”. However, these scholars fail to go on to adequately explore the implications of this observation for reading the Sower, having already committed to reading the parable as a description of varied responses to Jesus’ ministry.

320 Tolbert, Sowing, 175: the material functions as “a plot synopsis, or prooemium, a conventional feature of Greek literature, for the Gospel of Mark”; similarly Guelich, Mark, 224: Mark 4.13-19 “is more descriptive than prescriptive”.

321 While there may be a limited overlap between “those outside” (4.11b-12) and the persons described in the Sower (perhaps those described in 4.13,15?), I am arguing that the Sower speaks mainly of/to Jesus’ disciples (4.10-11a).

322 Mark 4.10 is somewhat ambiguous in regard to the precise focus of the question; what follows suggests a concern with both the reason for Jesus speaking in parables (4.11-12) and with the meaning of the Sower (4.13-20). In Matt 13.10, the question specifically concerns the reason for speaking in parables. In Luke 8.9 the question concerns the meaning of the Sower, though Jesus’ answer concerns parables plural (8.10), so that it relates to his use of parables generally (the disciples’ question is answered in 9.11-15).

323 E.g. Hooker, “Mark’s”, 93, who acknowledges the resulting reading of the Sower inevitably collapses the four groups in the parable into “two camps”. This is Mark 4.10-12, not the Sower!

324 While the first three sowings share in common a failure to bear fruit, this aspect is not even explicit for the first two sowings. The emphasis for each of the first three sowings is on the reasons for the lack of fruitfulness.
on similarities. In adopting a literary-critical approach I have shown how the form and arrangement of the Sower in all three Synoptic Gospels is characterised by a high degree of consistency around all essentials. In particular I have shown that the material placed before and after the Sower in all three Gospels refers to the same or thematically similar events/teaching, suggesting a shared understanding amongst the Synoptic authors concerning the function of the parable, and arguing for more weight to be given to these events and teaching in how we read the Sower.
Chapter VII
NT PARABLE CASE STUDIES: FINDINGS AND REFLECTIONS

The drama I am working on for our mission is going well. I wanted to work on one of Christ’s parables, to address the present situation… I want it to be as hard-hitting as Christ’s original parables, though deceptively simple. It must find a way through defences and, while winning empathy, proceed to turn expectations upside down. - From the dairy of Rev Richard Carter, during the Solomon Islands’ civil conflict, 2002.1

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1 Carter, Search, 107; emphasis mine.
INTRODUCTION

In Chapter IV I proposed a methodology for reading parables contextually, that included my model of the Parabolic Process. In Chapters V and VI, I applied this methodology to reading six NT parables (my “Case Studies”). In doing so I was testing aspects of my theory and methodology. I wanted to see if the NT Gospels' arrangement of these parables anticipates, and is able to inform, a contextual reading. This is a genuine inquiry, since my methodology requires certain textual data (Story, Plain Speech, Underlying Circumstance), and a literary arrangement of this data that signals an interpretive relationship between them.\(^2\) I was particularly interested in the potential for collaboration between Story and Plain Speech in the Parabolic Process. Are the two genuinely dependent on each other and able to mutually inform, so that new meaning and new perspective is created from a dialogue between the two? I also wanted to see if these parables were linked (by their literary arrangement) to specific narrative circumstances and whether it was possible to identify their rhetorical function in relation to those circumstances.

In this Chapter, I summarise the findings of my Case Studies. I refer to the six NT parables using the following abbreviations: S (Markan Sower); RF (Rich Fool); TS (Two Sons); BFT (Barren Fig Tree); HT (Hidden Talent); JW (Judge and the Widow). I also discuss the Workers in the Vineyard (WV).\(^3\) At crucial points throughout this Chapter I also discuss the significance of my findings for other NT parables, and examine potential exceptions.\(^4\) In this Chapter I also provide a brief discussion around major conclusions indicating how my approach coheres with, complements, or departs from, that of other major parable scholars (deepening the dialogue with other scholarship begun in Chapter II).

THE PARABLES’ INTEGRATION INTO THEIR GOSPEL NARRATIVES

The parables examined in my Case Studies are thoroughly integrated into their immediate literary contexts, whether that context is primarily narrative (S, TS, WV), primarily discourse (JW, HT), or a mix of the two (RF, BFT). Particularly important in signalling this integration are: (i) the introduction

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\(^2\) By way of contrast, a contextual reading (of the kind I have argued for in this thesis) is not possible for parables presented in a sayings collection (due to lack of data), or where parables are positioned in a literary work lacking narrative framework/structure or lacking a strong connection to the narrative. Further, my model of the Parabolic Process would add far less value where parables are used primarily as illustrations, since it anticipates the parables creating new meaning, not only illustrating what is already known. The Broken Jar (Chapter III) is an example of how a parable’s literary arrangement may frustrate a contextual reading, and where there is insufficient data to allow an application of my model to the parable.

\(^3\) I have examined the Workers in the Vineyard in depth, though due to space constraints a full treatment of the parable is not included in this thesis. I refer to it in this chapter to complement the data provided by my six case studies.

\(^4\) When examining the extent to which my findings have application across all the Synoptic parabolic material (and in identifying possible “exceptions”), I have endeavoured to consider all the longer narrative parables, but (in the interests of keeping the project manageable) have not always considered all the Synoptic parabolic sayings.
to most of the Stories contains a syntactical link to their immediate literary context;\(^5\) (ii) linguistic parallels between Story and adjacent sayings (JW, TS, WV); and (iii) some of the Stories’ motifs corresponded strongly with (or point symbolically to) persons and/or events in the prior narrative (S, BFT, RF, WV) or discourse (HT, JW).\(^6\) Also, in all cases the parables (in dialogue with adjacent Plain Speech) were shown to speak meaningfully to the circumstances described in their literary contexts, giving an interpretive significance to the literary proximity of the two. Coherence of the entire pericope in which each parable was set was demonstrated.\(^7\)

This literary integration, consistently signalled, is suggestive of literary design, of the Gospel authors having deliberately situated the parables in proximity to carefully chosen narrative/discourse textual segments, knowing the interpretive significance this would carry for their readers. While parable scholarship often relies on a relationship between the parables and the Gospel narratives as a whole, my approach seeks to give due weight to the precise literary location of a parable, with textual signals arising from their immediate literary contexts having primary importance in the interpretive process.

**Exceptions?: Naked Narratives**

Contextual integration is evident for most Synoptic parables. Two possible exceptions are the Rich Man and Lazarus, and the Workers in the Vineyard, regarded by some as having little obvious connection to their immediate literary context. Are they exceptions?

**The Rich Man and Lazarus**

The Rich Man and Lazarus, Gerhardsson’s “totally naked narrative”,\(^8\) appears isolated in its Lukan arrangement, since it follows a group of sayings concerning Torah and divorce (to which it does not obviously relate\(^9\)), is without an introduction, and has no concluding saying. However, an argument

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\(^5\) This may be (i) use of a conjunction (HT, WV: γάρ); (ii) a phrase (sometimes redactional) linking the Story to preceding action/persons (S: Καὶ πάλιν…; RF: Ἐπεμεῖν δὲ παραβολὴν πρὸς αὐτούς…; JW: Ἐλευθέρων ἐξῆγεν τὴν παραβολὴν αὐτοῖς πρὸς…; TS: Τί δὲ ὑμῖν δοκεῖ;). There is no clear literary “break” between any of the Stories and what immediately precedes them.

\(^6\) While there is an element of subjectivity here, the possibilities for finding correspondences are not endless where a parable is set within a particular narrative, and are even more limited where inquiry is directed solely to the immediate literary context. The situation is more complex with the TS, which I have argued is developed as a contrast with the religious elite. Perhaps for this reason there is reference to the ministry of John the Baptist immediately after the parable, linking it directly back to the Matthean events that precipitated its telling (which likewise profile John’s ministry), making for a strong literary argument that the parable concerns these same things in some way.

\(^7\) This includes JW, TS and WV, where literary incoherence (between Story and contextual data) has been argued in some scholarship. Ultimately, this is a second-order indicator of integration, given the parables' Plasticity.

\(^8\) Gerhardsson, “Frames”, 325.

\(^9\) Hence Fitzmyer, *Luke II*, 1119: Luke 16.18 “seems to move to an entirely different topic - even less related to the general theme of chap. 16 than [16.16-17]”, so that it is “puzzling why it has been introduced into this part of his travel narrative” (1121).
can be made that the parable was intended to combine with the sayings that immediately precede it (Luke 16.15-18), as Jesus’ response to the Pharisees’ ridicule (16.14):


2. The description of the Pharisees as those who love what is ἐν ἀνθρώποις ύψηλόν (16.14-15) but detested by God, anticipates (and may explain) how the rich man had everything of value (in life) but ended up excluded from the company of Abraham (in death).

3. 16.16-31 begins and ends with double reference to the Law and reference to the prophets (16.16-17; 29-31). This prominent literary feature suggests that the Law and the Prophets, and people’s response to them, is of central concern throughout the entire pericope.

4. Supporting the previous point is Green’s argument that idolatry (cf. 16.15), wealth and divorce (16.18) are here “collocated as manifestations of pseudo-righteousness”, the “means by which the Pharisees have distanced themselves from the very law they thought to uphold”. Thus 16.14-18 can be seen to “stand in close interpretive relationship” to 16.19-31, “the one subsection interpreting and being interpreted by the other”, and in collaboration constituting a critique of the Pharisees for their inadequate response to the law. There is also reason to read 16.14-31 in interpretive dialogue with the Unrighteous Manager Who Acted Wisely. The pericope begins with a reference to what immediately precedes it (16.14a: Ἡκουον δὲ ταῦτα πάντα). Both 16.16a: Ο νόμος καὶ οἱ προφήται; 16.17: ὁ νόμος; 16.29 and again in 16.31: Μωϋσεα καὶ τῶν προφήτων.

10 Green, Luke, 599: “one narrative unit”, in which no “fissures” are discernible until 17.1. Green has provided a reading of 16.14-31 which demonstrates coherence, as well as the relation of this pericope to 15.1-2 (598-610); see also Hays, Luke’s, 150-3 on the “unified agenda of the chapter” (152n260) and its relationship to ch 15. In my view Green and Hays provide the best explanation of the flow of thought in Luke 16; for other viewpoints see: Piper, “Social”, (esp 1647-1662); Stigall, “Moses”, 552-4; Feuillet, “Parable”, 212-23; Gowler, Host, 257-61; Szukalski, Tormented, 160-71; Story, “Twin”, (esp 105-110, 118-20); Ball, “Parable”, 329-30; Kessler, “Mose”, 49-50; Quayesi-Amakye, “Prosperity”, 302-4; Bailey, Jesus, 379-80. 11 Identifying the dynamics of challenge-riposte in this section (in a public competition for honour) are Malina and Rohrbaugh, Synoptic, 294; Green, Luke, 599; Szukalski, Tormented, 166-7.


13 Green, Luke, 604, citing OT use of βδέλυγμα (16.15) to refer to idolatry, unethical financial dealings, and marriage to a divorced woman, and Qumran’s Damascus Rule’s “three nets” (CD 4.14-6.1): fornication (including lax interpretation of Mosaic divorce laws), riches and profaning the Temple. I note similarly how love of money, immorality and idolatry are combined in Testament of Judah 17.1-19.1, with a warning of their capacity to “draw you away from the law of God” (18.3). That these things “do not let a man have compassion on his neighbour” and mean people will not “obey a prophet when he speaks” (18.3-5) provides further textual resonance between the two passages (quotations as translated in Hollander and de Jonge, Testament, 215).

14 See Hays, Luke’s, 151-3 on the flow of thought in 16.14-31, where the Lukian Jesus “lays siege to grounds on which the Pharisees claim to be righteous, viz., to their adherence to the Law and the Prophets” (151). In this argument 16.16-18 assert the validity of the Law/Prophets, and offers an example of their persistence “by citing the teaching on divorce”, before using the Rich Man and Lazarus to show how the Pharisees’ righteousness fails to meet the Law’s requirements. Similarly Green, Luke, 602, arguing 16.15 is “programmatic” for reading 16.16-31, in that it “sets up the need for Jesus to elucidate in what way the Pharisees are idolatrous”. In what follows the “enduring validity of the law” is explicitly asserted (16.16-17) or assumed (16.18; 16.29-31) and the Pharisees are seen to have failed to uphold the law (as interpreted “in relation to the inbreaking kingdom of God”) in regard to marriage/divorce (16.18) and in regard to use of wealth (16.19-31) (602-4).
parables have wealth as a central motif and portray a direct connection between its (mis)use in a penultimate age/season and the central character’s welfare in the age/season that follows. The lead character in the Rich Man and Lazarus, as archetype of those who fail to ἑαυτοῖς ποιῆσατε φίλους ἐκ τοῦ μαμωνᾶ τῆς ἁδικίας (16.9), highlights by way of stark contrast the wisdom of the unrighteous manager.

These structural, linguistic and thematic connections argue for the Rich Man and Lazarus to be seen as an integral component of 15.1-16.31, part of Jesus’ extended response to the religious elite who had criticised his ministry (15.1-2) and refused the values of the kingdom (16.14-15). The parable is to be interpreted in dialogue with the sayings that precede it (16.8b-18) and with reference to the preceding parable (16.1-8a). The naked parable may be considered clothed.

**The Workers in the Vineyard**

The WV’s Matthean narrative context (Matt 19.16-30) is generally given little interpretive significance in reading this parable. Further, the sayings that frame the parable (19.30/20.16), are often regarded as ill-suited to it. The resulting literary isolation of the parable is in my view unnecessary. Rather, I suggest the Matthean arrangement of the parable can be seen to be carefully designed, with parable and frame directly related to their preceding narrative circumstances and able to inform each other to cast these circumstances in a new light.

This parable is situated after an encounter between Jesus and a rich young man (19.16-22) and the discussion between Jesus and his disciples that followed (19.23-30), which concludes with a saying (19.30). Linked to what precedes it by a disjunctive δέ, 19.30 is a warning of reversal, that speaks directly to the audience and events of the prior narrative. The parable, introduced with γάρ (20.1), is then presented as an “explication of 19.30”, and thus directly related to the audience

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16 A typical example is Dietzfelbinger, “Arbeitern”, 133: “der matthäische Kontext von ganz anderen Interessen gelenkt wird”. For many scholars, the redactional nature of the Matthean arrangement of this parable (Matthew has been following Mark up until 19.30, and reverts to subsequent Markan material immediately following the parable (20.17)), means also that the Matthean narrative circumstances of the parable are not original/historical, casting further doubt on their importance for reading the parable.

17 See Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28, 61: The δέ of 19.30 could be “conjunctive” so that the logion “nicely finishes off vv. 16ff, where the rich man has failed but Peter and the others succeeded”. Or it could be “disjunctive” (the dominant use in Matthew), so that together with the “explanatory” γάρ in 20.1, it is a “caution against thinking oneself among the first”. Thus the “congratulations” of 19.28-9 are “followed by warning” (19.30-20.16). Davies and Allison prefer the latter (also France, Matthew, 746). Either way, the saying is connected directly to preceding events/dialogue. On the function of δέ generally in Matthew see Black, Sentence, 142-78.

18 Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28, 71; see also Black, Sentence, 276-80 on how γάρ in Matthean discourse “appears most often to ‘backward confirm’ an immediately preceding clause” (280).
and circumstances with which 19.30 is concerned. The integration of the parable into its narrative context is further attested by strong parallels between the climactic events of the Story and events within its preceding narrative:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jesus and the Disciples (19.16-30)</th>
<th>Master and Labourers (20.1-15)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less obedience/sacrifice by rich man, compared with the disciples; creates expectations concerning relative reward (19.22-29).</td>
<td>Less work by last employed compared with first employed; creates expectations concerning relative reward (20.1-7).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter questions Jesus: the disciples have done better than the rich man (and others); what will they get for it? (19.27)</td>
<td>Initial labourers confront landowner: they have worked harder than the rest and should be paid more. (20.10-12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus replies: The disciples will be richly rewarded (19.28-29)</td>
<td>The landowner replies: the labourers have been fairly recompensed (20.13-14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First will be last/last will be first (19.30)</td>
<td>Last will be first/first will be last (20.16)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These parallels, overlooked in scholarship, strongly suggest the parable speaks in some way to the disciples’ concern for their relative reward and standing in the kingdom of God, and must carry interpretive significance at a literary level.

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19 The connection of the parable to 19.30 is reinforced by the use of the highly similar saying in 20.16 (beginning with οὐ̂ν, the statement is in some way congruous with the parable). There are also linguistic links between the sayings and the parable, particularly 20.8: τὸν ἐργάτην... τὸν πρῶτον; 20.10: οἱ πρῶτοι; 20.12: οἱ ἐργάται; 20.14: τὸν ἐργάτην. Accordingly, I suggest Matthew intended the parable to be read with reference to its frame (Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28, 68n15: “for the redactional level [the framing sayings] are determinative”). The framing sayings are also related to preceding events. Despite this, little interpretive significance has been given to these connections in reading the parable. While a thematic connection is often observed (e.g. Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28, 61, 68, 76; France, Matthew, 746-8; S. Wright, Storyteller, 148 (briefly); Nolland, Matthew, 802-5, 812; Allen, Matthew, 213; Snodgrass, Stories 374-9 (see below); Hultgren, Parables, 41; Roloff, “Kirchenverständnis”, 343-5; Calvin, Harmony, 412), only Davies and Allison, Calvin and Snodgrass allow the parable’s narrative context to have a material influence on their subsequent reading of the parable.

20 Snodgrass, Stories, 375; Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28, 74; Nelson, “Exposition”, 291 mention only the parallel between the first-hired’s question and Peter’s question (19.27).

21 Dietzfelbinger, “Arbeitern”, 134 observes how “In der Gleichniserzählung ist es das Ereignis der Güte, das den Protest der zuerst gedungenen Arbeiter herausgefordert hat” and on this basis, he dismisses the Matthean context, arguing “daß es auch in der Geschichte Jesu das Ereignis der Güte war, das den Protest seiner Kritiker hervorrief”. Hence an alternative context for the parable must be sought. Is this necessary? I would argue it is not. Scholars have not found it easy to explain the flow of thought in 19.23-27 (and particularly the significance of 19.26), so as to identify the cause of Peter’s question. There are two possibilities: (i) If 19.25b-26 is generalised, characterising salvation as impossible for man to obtain, but possible for God to grant, Jesus is perceived as relativising the importance of the disciples’ sacrificial obedience (which Peter then recalls) which obviously is not able to secure salvation for him. Thus others may be granted salvation whom Peter considers are less worthy than he. So then, what about Peter and all his sacrifice? (ii) If 19.25b-26 is understood to refer specifically to the situation of the rich man, Peter may see 19.26 as indicating the rich man may still - by an (undeserved) act of God - be saved, despite his unwillingness to leave all and follow Jesus (so France, Mark, 406 re Mark 10.27: does this saying “effectively put rich and poor back on the same footing”). Hence Peter’s need to clarify that his own sacrifice is not in vain. Either way, 19.26 appears to hold out the possibility of persons being saved through divine (and gracious) action, without the kind of sacrificial obedience the disciples have made to follow Jesus. This alludes to precisely the sort of “Ereignis der Güte” that leads directly to envy, negating Dietzfelbinger’s perceived need to go looking elsewhere in the Synoptics for the historical context of the parable. In my view the disciples are not so openly at the point of the first-employed’s indignation (though they will be by 20.24), but Jesus appears to perceive, hidden behind Peter’s question (19.27), the jealousy and envy that the parable depicts, and issues a pre-emptive warning, naming and confronting the disciples’ jealousy and envy as incompatible with the ways of the kingdom of God.
The potential for this literary integration to inform a reading of the parable is demonstrated by the few scholars who recognise the disciples as audience, and the parable as speaking to the "speculation about reward in comparison to others" evident in the prior pericope. Reference to the "evil eye" (20.15), given prominence at the climax of the Story, then can be seen as a "description of envy, jealously, and lack of generosity", and also the issue behind Peter's question in 19.57. The parable thus understood functions well as a direct response to the Matthean circumstances that precipitated its telling.

A further argument against the WV's integration into its Matthean context is that the sayings that frame the parable (19.30/20.16) do not "fit" the parable. These sayings speak of reversal, of changes in relative standing, and therefore (it is argued) have little relationship to a parable where all are paid equally. This is a weak argument. The sayings of 19.30/20.16, so prominent in the Matthean arrangement of the parable, capture precisely the central dynamic of the Story (that lead directly to the final dramatic scene). The Story does depict differentiated outcomes for the workers when their situation is measured in relative terms:

1. Those employed last, at the eleventh hour, are the least fortunate (the last) in terms of economic opportunity (time employed). When paid a full day's wage they become "first" on a relative/comparative basis, having been paid at the highest hourly rate of all workers. Those employed first have the greatest economic opportunity (the first), but are the least well remunerated on an hourly basis (and thus "last").

2. The Story is told in a society where "the pivotal social value was honour", and where "concern for honour permeates every aspect of public life". Where honour is seen as a limited good, this assertion is surprisingly widespread and persistent in scholarship, e.g. Dodd, Parables, 122; Jeremias, Parables, 35-6; Scott, Hear, 282; Dietzelbinger, "Arbeitern", 127; Glasswell, Labourers, 61; Via, Parables, 148; de Ru, Reward, 204; Linnemann, Parables, 85; Levine, Stories, 215. Attempting some exploration of the relationship between parables and frame (though ultimately without going far enough, in my view) are Jones, Parables, 413; Nolland, Matthew, 813; Neyrey, Honor, 186; Plummer, Matthew, 274.

22 Snodgrass, Stories, 374-9 (citation from 377).

23 Snodgrass, Stories, 375-6. Similarly Elliot, "Matthew", 60-1: the parable is "a carefully crafted story about Evil Eye envy and its denunciation" and noting that "the concerns of the disciples regarding wealth (19:16-30) and status (19:13-15, 23-30; 20:20-28) may suggest that the issue of envy lurks in the background throughout this section of the narrative". Cf. Knowles, "Everyone", 303 on how the parable speaks to the disciples, though he gives insufficient attention to the Evil Eye and envy. On the Evil Eye and its widely attested association with envy in the ancient world see Elliot, "Matthew", 52-56; Busse, "Souveränität", 68. Veamcombe, "Redistibution", 227-31, in his meticulous analysis of the socio-economic background to the parable, argues it's final scene does not depict envy, but is a fairly typical conflict arising because the normal economic order is disrupted. But the disruption of ordinary economic patterns is a well-established cause of envy (which in turn causes conflict), so that this distinction is not absolute.

24 This assertion is surprisingly widespread and persistent in scholarship, e.g. Dodd, Parables, 122; Jeremias, Parables, 35-6; Scott, Hear, 282; Dietzelbinger, "Arbeitern", 127; Glasswell, Labourers, 61; Via, Parables, 148; de Ru, Reward, 204; Linnemann, Parables, 85; Levine, Stories, 215. Attempting some exploration of the relationship between parables and frame (though ultimately without going far enough, in my view) are Jones, Parables, 413; Nolland, Matthew, 813; Neyrey, Honor, 186; Plummer, Matthew, 274.

25 Similarly Avemarie, "Jedem", 464, noting the importance (then and now) in renumeration of labour of "Aristoteles beschriebenen Gerechtigkeitsbegriff bestimmt, der auf der proportionalen Entsprechung von Tun und Vergeltung, von Leistung und Gegenleistung beruht" (emphasis added). Hence 19.30 and 20.16 describe "die subjektiv empfundene materielle Zurücksetzung der Ganztagsarbeiter; leistungsbezogen erhalten sie ja tatsächlich den geringsten Lohn" (468; emphasis original); also Knowles, "Everyone", 300 on how "natural justice requires a proportional system of recompense". Haubeck, "Verständnis", 98 rightly observes that the last employed "nur einen zwölfteh Denar verdient haben".

26 Malina and Rohrbaugh, Social, 369, so that every effort is made to protect one's honour in public situations. See further Neyrey, Honour, 14-34.
any *relative* change in status/honour is taken very seriously ("it is this relative advantage that is most prized")\(^\text{27}\). Thus, the first-employed labourers object because, having been paid only as much as those employed at the eleventh hour, they suffer a public loss of honour.\(^\text{28}\)

This is a Story of (comparative) winners and losers. The events preceding the parable (19.16-29), the sayings that frame the parable (19.30/20.16) and the Story (20.1-15) all concern two groups, their *relative* standing/situation, and (actual or potential) reversal in that standing/situation. Rather than being ill-fitted to the parable, the framing sayings highlight the central drama taking place in the parable and intensify its warning.

**Conclusion**

These findings argue that the Synoptic parables are typically located within carefully structured literary units and are well integrated within those units, with this integration intended to carry interpretive significance in a literary reading of the parables.

**THE PARABLES AND THE PARABOLIC PROCESS**

In view of the integration of the NT parables into their immediate literary contexts, an inquiry concerning the relationship between the two is a legitimate component of literary analysis. The methodology I applied to reading six NT parables, giving due weight to their literary arrangement and immediate narrative circumstances, and using my model to explore the parables' rhetorical function within those circumstances, was designed to facilitate such an inquiry. Discussing my Case Studies, and making reference to other NT parabolic material, I now evaluate the extent to which the NT Gospels' arrangement of the parables is able to inform the kind of contextual reading envisaged in my methodology, including an assessment of a parable’s rhetorical function.

**The Underlying Circumstance**

My Case Studies show that a strong literary connection can be argued between each parable and particular circumstances given definition within their immediate literary context, suggesting that the

\(^\text{27}\) Elliot, "Evil", 59. Our parable is an example of a "competitive conflict situation [vulnerable day labourers competing for work/wages], governed by the rules of honour and shame, [where] life assumed the characteristic of a 'zero-sum game' in which one person's gain presupposed another's loss".

\(^\text{28}\) See the arguments in Herzog, *Parables*, 91-95. While Herzog overly dramatises the parable's final scene, reading in detail which simply is not there, he rightly alerts us to the fact that the labourers will measure their situation at the end of the day by counting their honour as well as their wages. See similarly (i) Derrett, "Workers", 82: "reward implies honour as much as money...One wrongs a wage-earner not merely by depriving him of his due wage; you may wrong him if you treat him contemptuously, e.g. by making no distinction between him and someone less meritorious"; (ii) Elliot, "Evil", 60: "Even when persons' absolute position remains constant, they will perceive their relative position to have been diminished to the extent that the position of others has improved"; thus while paid the same in absolute terms, in "relative terms...[the first employed] have been shortchanged and disfavoured", since their "relative position" has been diminished; (iii) Vearncombe, "Redistribution", 232-3. The way the first employed boldly challenge the Lord of the vineyard (20.12) is evidence of their felt need to urgently remedy the situation and regain their honour (e.g. Herzog, *Prophet and Teacher*, 149 "They must respond, or they will be shamed forever...")

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parables were designed to speak to those circumstances. These Underlying Circumstances consisted of narrated events immediately preceding a parable (BFT, S, TS, RF, WV) and (anticipated) circumstances described in preceding discourse (JW, HT). These Underlying Circumstances include details of: (i) audience identity (all parables); (ii) precipitating encounters, conversations and events (S, TS, RF, BFT, WV, HT); (iii) physical location (S, TS, HT); (iv) the audiences’ Inner World (all seven parables), including descriptions of an audience’s thoughts, attitudes, emotions and character, and/or descriptions of actions, questions, public statements and reports, discussion and demands that are often suggestive of audience viewpoints, worldview and paradigms. The Underlying Circumstance was in each case defined in sufficient detail to inform an assessment of the parables’ rhetorical function.

While, with Dodd and Jeremias, I “expect the parables to bear upon the actual and critical situation in which Jesus and His hearers stood”, I have allowed the Synoptic arrangement to determine the specifics of that situation for all parables. Rather than adapting these parables to a generally defined historical hypothesis (N.T. Wright, Herzog), I am reading each parable in relation to its own specific narrative circumstances. This means the Underlying Circumstances are defined with a higher level of specificity and detail, and results in interpretive outcomes that are comparatively more diverse, without common subjects. This approach also lays the foundation for a more precise and detailed exploration of the parables’ rhetorical significance than is possible where interpreting with reference to general hypotheses (see further below).

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29 Similarly, the Underlying Circumstance (“UC”) is given definition in immediately prior discourse for a range of other parables/parabolic sayings: e.g. Mark 9.49-50 (UC: 9.42?); 13.28 (UC: 13.14-27); 13.34-36 (UC: 13.24-27,32); Matt 10.16 (UC: 10.5-15); 23.4 (UC: 23.2-3); Luke 12.35-48 (UC: 12.1-12; 22-34, anticipating a time when the disciples will be vulnerable to fear (note φοβέω in 12.4,5(3x),7,32) and anxiety (note μεριμνάω in 12.11,22,25,26 and μετεωρίζομαι in 12.29), and tempted to set their hearts on the things of this age).

30 On the Inner World of the audience see Chapter IV, Part II. Those passages that give definition to the Underlying Circumstance for my Case Studies are: S: Mark 3.20-22,30-2; WV: Matt 19.25, 27 (also 20.12 may expose the nature of the disciples’ feelings more sharply); TS: Matt 21.23,25b-27a; HT: Matt 24.1-3, 9-14 (the monologue of the third slave (25.24-5) may also describe the worldview of the disciples); RF: Luke 12.13,15 (the Fool’s monologue (12.18-19) may also depict the life dream of the man who sought Jesus’ assistance); BFT: Luke 13.1-2,4; JW: Luke 17.22; 18.1.

31 Dodd, Parables, 26 (similarly Jeremias, Parables, 21), though I would need to add, “or would stand in the days to come” since as I have argued, Jesus’ parables, as arranged within the Synoptics, often anticipate the future circumstances of the disciples and events around the coming of the Son of Man.

32 Given a small sample, my conclusions about diversity of outcomes are tentative. But several comments may be made: (i) My readings should be more diverse in subject than those of e.g. Irenaeus, N.T. Wright, and Herzog, where interpretive outcomes tend to coalesce around a dominant (hypothesis-derived) theme; (ii) I expect greater diversity than evident in Jeremias, whose methodology favoured contexts of conflict, and led to interpretive outcomes being “immensely simplified”, and dominated by a “few simple essential ideas” (Jeremias, Parables, 115); (iii) Whether my readings would be more diverse than those of e.g. Scott, Hear; Zimmermann, et. al., Kompendium; Snodgrass, Stories, who reference Jesus’ (and the NT’s) wider teaching in all its variety, requires a greater sample size to assess, though my situational approach recognises the parables’ ability to contribute to the depth and diversity of this teaching (see below) rather than only to illustrate what is already known from direct speech teaching, which should result in greater diversity of interpretive outcomes.
Exceptions?: Parable Collations

The second and subsequent parables located in Synoptic collations appear more textually isolated, having no adjacent narrative elements (to define an Underlying Circumstance) and sometimes little accompanying Plain Speech. Can my model still be applied? The HT is an example of such a parable, and the reasons why my methodology could be applied to it are worth rehearsing, since they carry significance for reading all Synoptic parables located in collations. The HT is integrated into a tightly structured Matthean collation (24.43-25.30):[^34]

(i) References to the coming of the Son of Man bookend the collation (24.42; 25.31) and feature repeatedly throughout.[^35] These references link all the parables to the preceding narrative/discourse (24.1-41), which concerns the coming of the Son of Man and the circumstances and conduct of the disciples while they wait for that day/hour, the Underlying Circumstance expressed in general terms.

(ii) The connection between the parables and this Underlying Circumstance is strengthened in that major motifs within each parable are obviously analogous to events described in 24.4-41;[^36]

(iii) Imperatives and sayings throughout the collation[^37] link the parables tightly together, and help signal the unique contribution of each to how the Underlying Circumstance is portrayed.[^38]

(iv) Shared motifs and parallel plot elements further signal an interpretive relationship between the parables.

Thus, these parables have a shared Underlying Circumstance (defined in the narrative/discourse located immediately prior to the first parable), to which they all speak, in dialogue with carefully structured Plain Speech sayings, and with each other. This careful structuring of Matt 24.42-25.30

[^33]: The parable is toward the end of a long collation. Within that collation there are no narrative inserts between the parables. Also, the ὥσπερ with which it in introduced (25.14) has no explicit associated term of comparison.

[^34]: On the structure and cohesiveness of 24.36-25.30, see especially Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28, 374-7, noting repeat use of similar phraseology (in 24.42,44,50; 25.13), and the frequent use of “know”, “day”, “hour”, “comes”, “Son of man” and “watch” throughout; Oppong-Kumi, Matthean, 304-329, observing: (i) how 24.30-1 and 25.31-2, speaking of the coming of the Son of Man, bracket “the entire parabolic account” (310), and noting the strong structural parallels evident in 24.30-1 and 25.31-2 (318-9); (ii) the various “markers of cohesion” throughout the section, including the use of “various connectors” (ὅτε; “Ὡσπερ γάρ; ὡσεί) and “parallel concluding formulas”, together with the parables’ “shared themes” and common vocabulary and phraseology. The passage is characterised by “internal cohesiveness” (317-8).

[^35]: In direct or parabolic speech: see 24.43, 44, 46, 50; 25.1, 6, 10, 13, 19. Re the HT, it is introduced with “Ὡσπερ γάρ (25.14), meaning it substantiates the imperative of 25.13, which concerns τὴν ἡμέραν…τὴν ὥραν (contextually a clear reference to the coming of the Son of Man).

[^36]: Especially the absence of a master/groom/thief (corresponding to the absence of the Son of Man); the responsibilities and alternative possibilities of the homeowner/slaves/virgins during the master’s absence (corresponding to the responsibilities and (potentially varied) responses of the disciples while they await the coming of the Son of Man); the unknown hour of the coming of the thief/master/bridegroom (corresponding to the unknown hour of the Son of Man’s coming); the coming of the master/bridegroom (corresponding to the coming of the Son of Man).

[^37]: See 24.36-42, 44; 25.1a, 13, 14a, emphasising particularly the need to be ready and to watch.

[^38]: Thus, the HT is a parable concerning (in a comparative sense 25.14: “Ὡσπερ) the kingdom of heaven, at the time of the coming of the Son of Man (25.1: Τότε; 25.13: τὴν ἡμέραν…τὴν ὥραν). More specifically it substantiates (25.14: “Ὡσπερ γάρ) what it means to watch (25.13).
may point to a deliberate literary strategy, intended to inform how we read all Matthean parable collations.39

Similar structuring and textual features are evident in the two other Matthean collations (13.1-53; 21.28-22.14), which follow clearly defined narrative circumstances, their literary proximity signalling they are designed to speak to these circumstances. Both begin with two parables (Matt 13: the S and the Wheat and the Weeds; Matt 21-22: the TS and the Murderous Tenants) accompanied by relatively extensive Plain Speech, that establishes a basic interpretive paradigm and confirms each collation’s relationship to the prior narrative circumstances.40 This interpretive framework may then inform how the subsequent parables in the collation - textually more distant from precipitating narrative circumstances and more economically arranged41 - are interpreted, supplying essential interpretive guidance, even while leaving room for their unique contribution to emerge. That the subsequent parables stand in interpretive relationship to the first two parables in these collations is signalled as follows:

(i) The five parables that follow the Matthean S and the Wheat and the Weeds all likewise speak of ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν.42 The Mustard Seed shares “seed” imagery with the first two parables, and has a similar plot sequence.43 The plot sequence of the Leaven is analogous to the first three parables.44 The Net has analogous plot elements to the first four parables and strong parallels to the Wheat and the Weeds. The Treasure and the Pearl have strong conceptual and linguistic links to central aspects of the entire discourse.46 Further, in my view, 

39 Oppong-Kumi, Matthean, 28-30 recognises the potential for a similar approach, suggesting all three parable collations in Matthew speak to “one main rhetorical situation… acceptance/rejection of the Matthean Jesus”, even while each of the three collations has its own particular “rhetorical problem” (though except in relation to 21.28-22.14, he tends to favour general Matthean narrative themes and give less interpretive weight to the specific issues at the point in the Matthean narrative where the collation is located).

40 See my readings of the S and TS (the first parables in these collations) in Chapter VI for my arguments to this end.

41 The Mustard Seed, the Leaven, the Treasure, and the Pearls, have only an introductory formula (ὅμοια ἔστιν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν).

42 The S concerns τὸν λόγον τῆς βασιλείας (13.19); the Wheat and the Weeds is introduced with ὡμοιώθη ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν (13.24); all subsequent parables begin with ὅμοια ἔστιν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν.

43 Oppong-Kumi, Matthean, 135-64 takes an approach like this in reading the Mustard Seed which he understands to speak to the dawning of the kingdom in the ministry of Jesus, as described in the earlier chapters of Matthew and portrayed in the two prior parables (the Sower, the Wheat and Weeds). He identifies linguistic, thematic and theological parallels between the Mustard Seed and the two prior parables (140-2), which inform his reading (esp 147-49, 152-5, 160-4). Cf. Kingsbury, Parables, 79 on how Matt 13.31a signals the same audience and apologetic purpose for the Mustard Seed as for the two prior parables.

44 While the motifs are no longer horticultural, there is a (partially) analogous plot sequence: small object; object placed by agent in context supplying what is needed for growth/expansion; period of growth/expansion; maturity/fullness.

45 While the imagery in the Net is maritime not horticultural, and the main emphasis is on the final scene, the sequence of items - action by human agent - (expansionary) process - large result (13.47-8: ἐκ πολλῶν γένους συναγαγούσῃ · ἡν ὄτε ἐπηλευθή), can still be discerned.

46 In celebrating human initiative and sacrifice to obtain something of great value, the parables variously evoke (i) the privileged status of the disciples who seek out (and receive) Jesus’ explanation of the parables (13.11,16-17); (ii) the proclamation and revealing (in the parables) of that which has long been hidden (13.35); and (iii) the picture of a trained disciple as those who have treasure in their house (13.52); (iv) the using of what one has (selling all possessions) so as to have in great abundance (13.12).
all the parables of Matt 13 may be seen to contain motifs that correspond to elements within the events described in Matt 12.22-50 (as understood in my reading of the Sower) and/or the (non-parabolic) narrative events in Matt 13.47

(ii) The narrative introduction to the Wedding Banquet (22.1a48) connects it to the narrative events and the two parables that precede it. All three parables concern the kingdom of God.49 All three parables depict an ἄνθρωπος,50 in a position of authority (father, landowner, king), having a son/sons, sending his son(s)/slaves, and whose initiative is resisted. These plot elements may be seen to relate to the central concern of 21.23-27 (cf. also 21.1-17), the nature of Jesus’ authority and responses to that.51 The parallel motifs and plot elements between the Wedding Banquet and the Murderous Tenants52 deepens their interpretive significance for each other.

Thus in my view, the Matthean collations combine parables that are intended to speak to a single Underlying Circumstance (even if in different ways), as defined by the narrative/discourse immediately preceding the collation. The collations are tightly structured and coherent literary pieces, so that their parables mutually inform. Those located in immediate proximity to the preceding narrative, and typically having more extensive accompanying Plain Speech, provide interpretive guidance for subsequent parables, which in turn contribute their own emphases.

The parable collation in Luke 15 is structured similarly. The collation’s narrative context (15.1-2) supplies an Underlying Circumstance to which all three parables (each in their own way) speak, a connection confirmed by the Plain Speech that follows the first two parables (15.7,10). Shared motifs and partially aligned plot structures connect all the parables to the Underlying Circumstance (by analogy) and to each other, allowing them to mutually inform. Thus, for example, by the time

47 Further detailed analysis of individual parables is required to confirm/demonstrate this.
48 The Wedding Banquet is introduced as Jesus’ answer/reply (22.1: ἀποκρίνομαι) to the same audience (αὐτοῖς) speaking to the same subject (πάλιν) as the Murderous Tenants. See Davies and Allison, Matthew 8-18, 273 and BDAG, 114 on how ἀποκρίνομαι can (with εἶπεν) be used formulaically (and left untranslated), though in my view the use of πάλιν in 22.1 argues strongly against this in this instance. Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28, 197n23 acknowledge the possibility that ἀποκρίνομαι “here refers to the actions of Jesus’ opponents (21.45-6)” and thus can be translated “and Jesus responded”.
50 Matt 21.28; 21.33; 22.2.
51 See the analysis of Oppong-Kumi, Matthean, 209-214 who argues on structural grounds (emphasising particularly the role of 21.28a; 21.33a; 22.1; 22.14 in providing a “skeleton structure that holds the entire trilogy together” (210)) that all three parables can be “read as one argument made by Jesus against his hostile opponents on the question of his authority” (209; emphasis added). Thus he is arguing - to use my terminology - that all three parables speak to the same Underlying Circumstance; they are “Jesus’ definite answer to the question of his authority” (243). He finds a single “semantic, narrative and rhetorical strategy” in the trilogy (230); the parables are “interdependent and interconnected” (264; see the full analysis at 227-64).
52 See similarly Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28, 188-9 who document the “similar themes, related constructions, and much common vocabulary” in 21.28-46 and 22.1-14, all of which contribute to an “artistic unity” as well as “themtic coherence … encouraging readers to expect similar meaning” (189). Also, when reading the Wedding Banquet, “the reader naturally identifies the son with Jesus… [because] the son of the previous parable is obviously Jesus” (198).
we read of a celebratory banquet for a restored prodigal (15.22-24), we need no accompanying saying to signal its significance, having encountered such joyous celebrations five times already.\footnote{See reference to joyous, communal celebration of finding/repentance in 15.2b, 6, 7, 9, 10.}

The strong parallels between the Unrighteous Manager Who Acted Wisely and the Prodigal Son\footnote{E.g. Austin, “Hypocritical”, 311-12; Landry and May, “Honor”, 305-8; Donahue, Gospel, 167-8.} argue for Luke 16.1-13 to be also seen as part of Jesus’ extended response to those who criticised his table fellowship with sinners (15.1-2).\footnote{Concerning other actual or possible parable collations: (i) Similar imagery and shared plot elements in the two Lukan master-servant parables (12.35-48) suggest an interpretive relationship between the two, and that both parables speak to the circumstances described in 12.40. The two parables’ interdependence is reinforced by Peter’s question following the first parable (12.41) which creates an expectation for the reader that what follows relates to 12.35-40. (ii) Similar interpretive dynamics to the Matthean collations are anticipated in how the parables are arranged in Mark 4, where the Seed and the Mustard Seed take their interpretive cue from the Sower (with its extensive accompanying Plain Speech), with whom they share central motifs (especially the seed/sowing, given definition in Mark 4.14)) and a similar narrative structure (seed-sowing-growth-maturity/yield). (iii) See Bryan, “Transformation”, 122-34 on how the Lukan Mustard Seed and Leaven both speak to the immediately prior circumstances of the Lukan narrative (13.10-17: to which the parables are linked by the “Ἔλεγεν οὖν with which 13.18 begins); (iv) I have not treated the parables of Luke 14.1-35 as a “collation”. While Luke 14.1-24 is a distinct literary unit (centred around a meal at a Pharisees’ house), and the chapter as a whole can be shown to have thematic coherence, the narrative/discourse elements interspersed throughout the chapter create literary breaks between the parables, that point to changing (or at least evolving) Underlying Circumstances and provide parable-specific interpretive guidance. (v) Similar interpretive dependence for Q parables arranged in collations is argued by some: e.g. Kloppenborg, Formation, 150 observes how A Faithful or Unfaithful Slave? (Q12.42-6) “gains its explicit connection with the coming of the Son of Man through its attachment to 12.39-40 [the Thief]” (further on the juxtaposition of the two parables see Roth, Parables, 104n87; cf. Dewey, “Prophetic”, 99). For other examples in Q see Kloppenborg, “Jesus”, 305-8 (the Leaven and the Mustard Seed (Q13.18-21))); Roth, Parables, 245 (the Splinter and the Beam and a Tree and its Fruit (Q6.41-5)).}

In summary, I am arguing that the literary arrangement of all the Synoptic parables connects them strongly to particular circumstances given definition in the prior narrative or discourse.

**Distance and Proximity**

In each Case Study, the literary arrangement of the parables means that their telling represents a movement away from speaking directly of the situation at hand (the Underlying Circumstance) to speaking to it indirectly, by way of fictitious Story.\footnote{While the RF both depicts wealth and speaks to wealth, it depicts someone else’s wealth, and in all likelihood, far more abundant wealth than that of the man whose question precipitated the parable’s telling (or that of Jesus’ wider Lukan audience).}

The parables feature scenarios, motifs and imagery drawn from agrarian life (BFT, S, TS, RF, WV), the ancient household (TS, HT, WV), the justice system (JW), and the world of commerce (WV, RF, HT), and thus stand at a Distance from the Underlying Circumstance. My argument is that this Distance created didactic “space” for Jesus’ Initial Audience, providing them opportunity - within the world of the Story - to develop new ways of seeing (themselves, the ministry of Jesus, etc.) so as to be able to receive (“hear”) aspects of Jesus’ teaching and proclamation that they otherwise had no capacity to understand and/or accept.

The importance of Distance may be indicated by how these parables: (i) were spoken into socially intense situations, sometimes featuring conflict and opposition, where Jesus provocatively alludes to his own identity (TS, S, BFT) and anticipates the awful fate of those who fail to recognise him (BFT, RF); and/or (ii) provocatively confront or subvert important expectations among Jesus’
disciples concerning the nature of the kingdom of God and their participation in it (WV, HT, JW, RF, S), so as to open the way for alternative expectations to be established (of a period of Jesus’ absence and of the disciples’ vulnerability, suffering and slave-like responsibility and labour during that time). In situations where much is at stake and where paradigms are deeply and tightly held, parables create a necessary “neutral space” where Jesus seeks to draw his audience alongside him to learn to see the world as he does, so that they might hear and receive matters that otherwise would have been lost due to a lack of capacity to receive them directly and immediately.

What prevents these Stories from being “about” the subjects they narrate are literary factors (in addition to textual juxtaposition) that mitigate Distance, creating Proximity between Story and Underlying Circumstance:

(i) Selected motifs of the Stories (e.g. vineyard, fig tree, seed, sowing, master-slave, two-sons) with symbolic meaning or allusive significance, corresponding to aspects of the Underlying Circumstance.

(ii) Major motifs or plot elements of the Stories analogous to elements of the Underlying Circumstance (WV, HT, S, BFT, JW).

(iii) Accompanying Plain Speech signalling the parable speaks to an Underlying Circumstance. This may be (one or more of) an introduction (e.g. WV: Ὁμοία ἐστίν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν…); a prior or subsequent pronouncement (WV, BFT, TS, JW, RF) or imperative (HT, RF, JW); a subsequent “explanation” of the parable (S).

(iv) Linguistic parallels between a Story and proximate sayings/pronouncement that strengthen its connection to the Underlying Circumstance (TS, JW, WV).

In my view Distance and Proximity are a feature of the NT Gospels’ presentation of all the parables of Jesus and my interpretive model gives this due weight. This is a point of distinction from scholarship where the parables are denied proximity to events narrated or anticipated in their immediate literary context in being adapted to more general hypotheses, or where Distance is minimised or eliminated by reading the parables as speaking of the realities they depict.

Connectedness and Difference

Distance and Proximity exist in a dynamic tension within the Parabolic Process, creating an interpretive space in which new meaning and perspective may emerge. Proximity creates a

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57 In the case of the RF, the central subject of parable and preceding narrative is wealth and its distribution, making an even stronger connection.

58 Regarding the significance of this (or similar) introductory formula, see Gerhardsson, “Frames”, 326: nearly half of the 55 texts he identifies as parables are introduced with Ὁμοία ἐστίν, Ὁμοίοις, ὣς, or ὡςπερ; of this group, 18 explicitly reference the kingdom.

59 As in Herzog’s readings, an approach followed in Schottroff, Parables and van Eck, Parables.
Connectedness between Story and Underlying Circumstance that commends the parable to the audience as a valid way to speak of/to the Underlying Circumstance. However, Story is never completely analogous to Underlying Circumstance, and important points of Difference between the two contribute to reframing how an audience perceive the Underlying Circumstance. Within a parable familiar and analogous ways of depicting the Underlying Circumstance combine with motifs that characterise the Underlying Circumstance in ambiguous or unexpected ways, creating a generative tension through which (with the help of Plain Speech) the Underlying Circumstance may be perceived in new ways. Some examples. The JW combines a judge who grants justice to a widow (analogous to God granting his elect justice) with the judge’s unexpected and ungodly rationale for doing so, to provide new grounds for assurance of divine justice. The HT’s imagery of slaves attending to their master’s business during his absence anchors the parable to analogous events described in the prior eschatological discourse, while the master’s greedy capitalism (not readily associated with the disciples’ expectations of the kingdom of God) points to new ways of understanding Jesus’ ambitions for the kingdom. The opening scene of the BFT uses familiar imagery to anticipate God’s coming judgment on Israel, while the ambiguous gardener figure (having no parallel in how most in Israel at that time understood their situation) points to an unrecognised source of hope and salvation. While the WV’s second scene is analogous to events prior to the parable (19.23-29: as above), the question with which the parable closes (Matt 20.15b) is without parallel in the preceding narrative, and identifies an attitude behind Peter’s question (19.27) having no place in the kingdom of God.

A similar interplay of Connectedness and Difference can be seen in N.T. Wright’s proposal that Jesus used parables to tell Israel’s story in partially familiar terms (Connectedness), while also signalling how that story is reaching an unexpected conclusion in the ministry of Jesus (Difference). My concept of Difference also helps identify a significant point of departure from Herzog. In Herzog’s schema, Difference usually takes the form of an action or scenario within a parable that represents a departure from normal socio-economic realities, having the potential to stimulate conversation and precipitate action leading to “genuine social change”.

60 It may be helpful to say explicitly that my concern does not lie in unexpected, paradoxical or extravagant elements of the parables, in themselves, but rather with the unexpected ways in which elements of Story relate to the Underlying Circumstance. Thus even though the presence of a fig tree in a vineyard (BFT) is not unusual or extravagant, it carries interpretive significance in my reading because it is an unusual way to depict Israel. A greedy wealthy master (HT) is not an unfamiliar figure, but it is an unexpected way to portray Jesus.

61 Further, the condemnation of the third slave becomes a point of interpretive inquiry for the disciples concerning their own preparedness for the responsibilities that will be entrusted to them concerning the mission of Jesus.

62 Though in comparison to N.T. Wright, my assessment of Difference is defined contextually and is thus far more parable-specific and varied in nature.

63 My comments here relate to Herzog, Parables.

64 Herzog, Parables, 171. Difference is a particularly important feature in Herzog’s treatment of four parables in his second section (173-258).
Difference points to new forms of human action as the grounds for new beginnings by an audience. In contrast, Difference in my methodology points to possibilities of “newness” from audience participation in the kingdom of God, even while presupposing the dawning of the kingdom as the defining reality of the present age, that makes all newness possible.\(^{65}\)

**Story and Plain Speech: Dependency and Collaboration**

In each of my Case Studies, the parables are one component of a longer dialogue, discourse or prophetic proclamation that also includes Plain Speech discourse, sayings, questions, dialogue, and proclamation.\(^{66}\) An intended interpretive relationship between Story and Plain Speech is signalled by one or more of: (i) literary proximity; (ii) grammatical connection; (iii) linguistic parallels; (iv) Plain Speech elements referring direct to Story. My Case Studies demonstrate: (i) how the full significance of both Story and Plain Speech within a particular discourse or prophetic piece is dependent on each being considered in an interpretive relationship with the other; and (ii) that the full communicative intent of a discourse or prophetic piece containing both Story and Plain Speech is only realised in their collaboration. This may be demonstrated as follows.

Firstly, the importance of Story and Plain Speech being brought into an interpretive relationship is seen in how the full significance of each is *not* able to be established without reference to the other:

1. **Dependence of Story:** In some cases the Story, even considered in regard to its narrative context, failed to signal an Underlying Circumstance, so that Plain Speech guidance was required. The motif of abundant harvest in the RF may or may not be metaphorical in nature - the Story itself does not say.\(^{67}\) Elsewhere a Story’s symbolic imagery, together with correspondences between Story and narrative context, were suggestive of the Underlying Circumstance, but Plain Speech was necessary to give more precise definition. The BFT, having motifs with established symbolic meaning, can be seen to anticipate judgment on Israel, but the ambiguous fig tree motif means the Story (of itself) leaves the precise identity of those (within Israel) deserving judgment undefined. Plain Speech was also required to signal the

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\(^{65}\) In my view this is an inevitable result of reading the parables contextually, since within the Synoptics the parables are firmly located within the ministry of Jesus, who is one proclaiming and enacting the kingdom of God as a new and present reality opening a new era in salvation history.

\(^{66}\) This conclusion may be generalised; the main possible exceptions (Naked Narratives; Parables in Collations) are discussed above. Other possible exceptions: (i) The Hidden Mina has no introductory formula or concluding saying. However, the parable is linked to the saying in Luke 19.10 (ἡλθεν γὰρ οὗ τῶν ἀνθρώπων καὶ τῶν ἁπαξλεκτομένων ταύτην τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ τῶν προφητευόμενων ταύτην) with which the parable is introduced. (ii) The Lukan Great Banquet has no adjacent sayings or introductory formula. However, an interpretive link to Jesus’ prior ethical teaching (Luke 14.12-14) is signalled in that the question that precipitates the telling of the parable (14.15b) is a response to this teaching (14.15a: Άκουσάς δὲ τις τῶν συνανακειμένων ταύτα...).

\(^{67}\) Also, the TS does not correspond obviously to the known behaviour of its primary audience, raising question as to how the Story relates to the prior narrative (answered in the Plain Speech that follows the parable).
precise nature of the relationship between Story and Underlying Circumstance. Most of the parables in my Case Studies function comparatively, but not all. Plain Speech provides the crucial interpretive guidance. The judge who grants the widow justice may stand in an interpretive relationship to a God who grants justice to his elect (JW), but further guidance is needed to establish the precise nature of that relationship. Story’s dependence is also seen in the essential contribution made by Plain Speech to focusing the Stories around particular didactic and rhetorical aims, including by: (i) giving emphasis to some motifs rather than others; (ii) signalling the specific emphasis intended for imagery having various symbolic referents; (iii) developing motifs and plot elements in ways that extend beyond the Story (JW, TS, RF, WV); (iv) evaluating central aspects of the Story; and (v) bringing the Story to bear on the audience’s situation in particular ways.

2. Dependence of Plain Speech: In some of my Case Studies, Plain Speech elements (in themselves) were partially enigmatic and/or contained metaphorical elements. Even the extended explanation of the S does not disclose the identity of the sower or the metaphorical referent of the bountiful yield. The main verb of the imperative that precedes the HT (Matt 25.13: γρηγορέω) is metaphorical in nature, and reference to the day and hour begs further definition. These enigmas were resolved in dialogue with the associated Story and with reference to the Underlying Circumstance. In some cases Plain Speech was explicitly dependent on the associated Story. The saying that follows the RF (Luke 12.21: οὕτως…)

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68 E.g. the TS sets up a contrast between the characters in the parable and the audience; the saying that follows the RF suggest a stark contrast between the events of the Story and the way of life of the kingdom of God. Elsewhere: the Red Sky draws a contrast between the religious elite’s knowledge of meteorological matters and their ignorance of spiritual realities (similarly the Cloud and the Wind); Friends at Midnight is generally understood to rely on an argument from the lesser (Story) to the greater (Underlying Circumstance), a relationship given definition in the Plain Speech saying that follows (Luke 11.13).

69 E.g. the Plain Speech that follows the JW highlights the judge’s monologue; the Plain Speech that follows the TS picks up (by way of linguistic parallel) on how the first son, afterwards, changed his mind; the saying following the WV gives emphasis to reversal from amongst the various motifs of the parable that might have been highlighted.

70 E.g. the explanation of the Sower signals that sowing/seed speaks of proclamation of the “word”, setting aside other common symbolic associations; the imperative that precedes the HT helps confirm that the master-slave imagery of the parable, often used in the OT to symbolise God and his people, is here being used to speak of Jesus and his followers; the warnings that precede the BFT clarify that the Story’s motif of a tree threatened with being cut down anticipates judgment coming to Israel rather than to foreign rulers/nations (of whom it sometimes speaks in the OT).

71 In most of my Case Studies the main characters and/or their actions are evaluated in some way within the Story itself (WV, HT, RF, JW). But this is not always the case. With the TS, evaluation occurs through a subsequent exchange between Jesus and his audience (as it does similarly in Two Forgiven Debtors). Other examples: (i) the Pharisees are unlikely to perceive the actions of their fictitious colleague in the Pharisee and the Toll Collector in negative terms with reference to the Story alone, hence the need for an evaluation in the Plain Speech that follows (Luke 18.14); (ii) the main character in the Unrighteous Manager Who Acted Wisely is of dubious moral standing and it is not clear from the Story alone that he (or precisely how he is) to be emulated (even if he is commended by the master, important ethical questions remain). Thus the importance of the Plain Speech sayings that follow (Luke 16.8b-13).

72 E.g. the saying that follows the WV (Matt 20.16) confirms for Jesus’ disciples that the reversal portrayed in the parable is analogously a genuine possibility for their future which they must take every measure to avoid; the saying that follows the RF points to an alternative life plan for the man disputing with his brother; the proclamation following the TS (Matt 21.31b-32) characterises the audience as worse than either of the two sons in the parable.

73 Similarly the metaphorical elements in: (i) the sayings that frame the WV (Matt 19.30, 20.16); (ii) the saying that follows the RF (Luke 12.21: …είς θεόν πλουτών) .

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refers directly to the parable’s final scene, upon which it is dependent for its meaning. Sometimes Plain Speech posed questions (directly or implicitly), or left important matters unstated, calling for clarification that the Story was designed to provide. The warnings of judgment that precede the BFT leave open the precise nature of Israel’s sinfulness (and hence the rationale for judgment); the Story that follows fills this crucial gap. In some cases Plain Speech was clear in its meaning, but rhetorically dependent on Story. Plain Speech often gained rhetorical force by incorporating the Stories’ imagery, even while developing it beyond the world of the Story (RF, TS, JW, S, WV). Thus while Plain Speech elements in all cases provided crucial interpretive signals for reading the Stories contextually, their dependence on the associated Stories was also evident, being by nature more enigmatic and incomplete than is generally recognised in scholarship.

Thus the mutual dependence of Story and Plain Speech (within a contextual reading of a parable) is generally a function of the “indeterminate” nature of both. Further literary indeterminacy is created because the Synoptics combine Story, Plain Speech and narrative elements in literary proximity (within a literary unit), thus implying an interpretive relationship between these textual components, but without wholly resolving that relationship at a literary level. For example, while the prophetic proclamation that follows the TS is unambiguous, its relationship to the TS, and their combined relationship to preceding narrative events, is enigmatic, left partially unresolved at a textual level. The textual invitation to resolve this indeterminacy is the grounds and impetus for interpretation in a literary reading of the parables. Both forms of indeterminacy (of the textual components themselves and as created by their literary juxtaposition) contribute to a literary dependence between Story and Plain Speech, in that both must contribute to resolving the

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74 Further: (i) the introduction to the JW (Luke 18.1) explicitly signals a literary reliance on the parable that follows for its substantiation; (ii) the imperative following the JW (18.6) directs the reader to the judge's monologue; (iii) the WV begins with Ὁμοίω γόνον ἐστιν ἦ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν... (Matt 20.1), a statement signalling dependence on the Story for its full meaning (similarly the HT: Matt 25.14: Ὅσπερ...).

75 Similarly: (i) the sayings that bracket the WV do not - of themselves - supply the cause of the stated reversal (despite this being of utmost importance to avoiding that reversal); the Story fills this crucial gap; (ii) Jesus' statement that life does not consist of the abundance of possessions (RF: Luke 12.15) begs for clarification, as to why and as to what the alternative might be; the Story that follows provides this (in dialogue with Luke 12.21 and what follows).

76 E.g. the distinction between wealth and life (Luke 12.15b) is unlikely to be “heard” where greed has already exercised its deceptive power on an audience, so that a parable is required to expose the lie; the warnings of judgment that precede the BFT are not able to be heard where the audience is working with a paradigm in which Israel is the victim of evil and Rome is the perpetrator of evil, deserving divine judgment.

77 As anticipated in Chapter II; see further on indeterminacy (with reference to Iser’s scholarship) in chapter IX.

78 Similarly, the proclamation and questions preceding the BFT are unambiguous and not dependent on the parable for their basic meaning (though the parable adds to how they are understood). However, indeterminacy is created by the literary combination of narrative (Luke 13.1) and subsequent proclamation (13.2-5), as the latter seems an unjust and implausible response to the former (why are the victims of oppression rather than the oppressor subject to imminent judgment?). This indeterminacy is only resolved with reference to the parable that follows.
indeterminacy, so as to establish their own (full) contextual significance and to realise the communicative intent of the dialogue or discourse as a whole.

Secondly, the importance of Story and Plain Speech being brought into an interpretive relationship is seen in the potential for the two to mutually inform and collaborate in interpretative process. My proposal (see Chapter II) was that because indeterminacy is shared by both Story and Plain Speech (as above), its resolution may occur in a genuinely dialogical manner (rather than by Plain Speech dominating Story), with both making an essential contribution to the shape and substance of interpretive outcomes. There is good evidence of this in each of my Case Studies, where the process of interpretation features an extended dialogue between Story and Plain Speech, from which interpretive outcomes emerge. I have described this mutually informing dialogue between Story and Plain Speech as their “collaboration”, and proposed that this collaboration had the potential to produce new meaning and new perspectives that transcends what is explicit in Story and Plain Speech when considered in isolation from each other. There is evidence of this in my Case Studies. That Israel is as deserving of judgment as it considers Rome to be, and that Rome is the agent of God’s coming just judgment upon Israel (BFT) is not said in either Story or Plain Speech but arises as the two are brought into interpretive dialogue (and having reference to their narrative circumstances). That the elect (being regularly given to prayer) may hold confidently to assurances of eschatological justice because God will act to preserve the honour of his own name (JW) is only established as Plain Speech assurances and the judge’s monologue are brought into interpretive dialogue. The scandalous claim that Jesus and his followers are the eschatological people of God (S) is only established as the Story’s allusive imagery and its Plain Speech “explanation” mutually inform (and with reference to preceding narrative circumstances). That those who are envious risk being relegated within, or even excluded from, the kingdom (WV) is only established as parable, introduction and framing sayings mutually inform. That the unbelief of the Temple elite constitutes disobedience to God the father of Israel (TS) is a perspective that only emerges as Story, question and answer, and Plain Speech enter into an interpretive dialogue. While the imperative preceding the HT provides essential interpretive guidance, the nature of watchfulness is given definition by the Story; the two in collaboration (and with reference to the prior discourse) call for faithful labour in the spread of the gospel throughout the whole earth.

The contextual dependence of both Story and Plain Speech and their potential to mutually inform and collaborate in the interpretive process create a genuine alternative for the parables’ interpretation to adapting them to a hypothesis. In this contextual approach, the parables are not dominated or adapted; rather their interpretation occurs by way of an interpretive dialogue, to

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79 I note that the argument in other scholarship that assurances of justice for the elect rest on a how much more argument (since a godless judge will give a widow justice, how much more a just God his elect), is also not explicit in the pericope. See chapter V for the arguments for my alternative reading.
which the parables and their contextual elements both contribute substantively. My case studies 
suggest that the Synoptic Gospels, in their arrangement of the parables, anticipate an approach of 
this kind to reading the parables. Within the wider corpus of NT parabolic material there are other 
examples of literary units that combine Story and Plain Speech in ways that suggest similar 
dependence and dialogical collaboration toward particular didactic or prophetic aims:

1. Mark 7.1-23: The Pharisees’ inquiry concerning the failure of Jesus’ disciples to observe the 
traditions of the elders (7.1-5) leads to Plain Speech critique (7.6-13) and then parabolic 
teaching concerning what truly defiles (7.14-15). Jesus’ disciples question him about the 
parable (7.17: παραβολή) leading to further Plain Speech teaching (7.18-23) that draws on the 
parable’s imagery and develops it in particular ways.

2. The telling of the Matthean Sower (13.1-9) prompts inquiry from the disciples (Matt 13.10), to 
which Jesus responds with enigmatic sayings and Scripture citation (13.11-17), imperative 
(13.18) and (somewhat cryptic) explanation (13.18-23), followed by further parables and 
exploration (13.24-49), all of which combine to bring new understanding for the disciples 
(13.51). Story and Plain Speech are thoroughly integrated into this complex and extended 
interaction between Jesus and his disciples, each informing how the other is understood and 
making a necessary contribution to the whole.80

the Story clear (13.36: διασαφέω), a request honoured by an extended explanation of the 
parable, incorporating reference to (most) central motifs, but leaving much unsaid.81

4. Matt 16.1-12: Asked for a sign by the Pharisees and Sadducees (16.1), Jesus answers with 
Story (16.2-3a) and enigmatic Plain Speech denunciation (16.3b-4). After a boat ride (16.5), 
Jesus issues a parabolic warning against the Pharisees and Sadducees (16.6), which the 
disciples misunderstand (16.7), so that Jesus responds with a series of rhetorical questions 
(16.8-11a), before repeating the same parabolic warning (16.11b), all of which combine to bring 
new understanding for the disciples (16.12).82

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80 With regard to the Markan presentation of the Sower (structurally similar to how the Matthean Sower is presented), France, Mark, 194 suggests it may record a typical pattern in the reception of Jesus’ parabolic speech. The imperfect tense of the verbs in 4.10, which “may be intended to indicate that vv. 10-12 relate to a more general pattern… not simply a single inquiry, but a regular pattern of response to Jesus’ parables on the part of οἱ παρὰ τοῦ διδάσκαλον οἱ διδάσκαλοι” (emphasis added). Use of the plural παραβολάς (4.11), after the telling of a single parable, and 4.33-4 (main verbs are also imperfect) also point in this direction. Thus Mark 4.1-34 may describe a typical pattern of teaching in the ministry of Jesus.

81 The identity of the slaves and the significance of their questions and proposal are without explicit explanation (see further in Chapter II on the indeterminacy of this parable/explanation). In my view this “omission” (or literary gap) plays an important literary role in that it forces the reader to give particular attention to this scene, which may well portray inclinations they recognise in 
themselves, and which (I suggest) the parable is designed to cast in a new light. It is also notable how the explanation makes repeat 
reference to the parable’s motifs, suggestive of the rhetorical importance of their imagery.

82 The effect of which is to discredit the religious elite, as a prelude to presenting Jesus as Messiah and Son of God (16.13-20).
5. Luke 12.35-48: Two Stories concerning household management (12.35-39) are followed by a Plain Speech saying, dependent on the parable for its meaning (12.40). This draws a request for clarification from Peter (12.41), to which Jesus replies with a further Story (12.42-46), followed by parabolic (12.47-8a) and Plain Speech (12.48b) sayings.

6. Luke 20.9-19: In response to the Jerusalem elite’s challenge to his authority (20.1-8), Jesus tells the Murderous Tenants, the conclusion of which appears unacceptable the crowd (20.16). Jesus continues with an enigmatic citation of Scripture and parabolic saying (20.17-18). The combined effect is that the Jerusalem elite take great offence (20.19).  

7. Parabolic material in John is frequently followed by questions seeking clarification, or responses that reflect varying degrees of incomprehension. The Good Shepherd (10.1-5), designated a παροιμία (10.6), is not understood by the disciples (10.6) and is followed by a discourse interweaving parabolic speech, metaphor and direct speech sayings (7-18), which leads some to conclude Jesus is mad, while others seeking to defend him can only point to his miracles (10.19-21). The audience’s demand for clarification (10.24: εἰπὲ ἡμῖν παρρησίᾳ) follows shortly after.

These pericopes describe audience responses to Jesus’ parables that signal incomprehension or misunderstanding and illustrate a pattern of communication in which parables function in collaboration with Plain Speech, and are dependent on that collaboration for their full didactic or prophetic potential to be realised.

In other Synoptic pericopes Jesus follows a parable with a question of his own, generating further dialogue and sayings/proclamation. The Two Sons is followed by a question for Jesus’ audience (Matt 21.31a), which is followed by their reply and then Plain Speech proclamation that

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83 The most likely sense of καὶ ὑμεῖς (12.40) is “so you too” (Nolland, Luke II, 698; cf. “you also” (NRSV, NIV)), thus making the force of the statement dependent on the parable that precedes it (cf. Matt 24.44: διὰ τοῦτο καὶ ὑμεῖς which makes the dependence more explicit).  

84 I have often been asked whether the Murderous Tenants is an obvious exception, that brings my argument for the enigmatic nature of parables into question. Didn’t the leadership get the point of the parable? But Jesus speaks here only partly in parable, and also partly in Scripture citation (itself metaphorical), in proclamation (Matthew, partly metaphorical in nature) and in a saying (Matthew and Luke; the saying is enigmatic in nature, having metaphorical elements). In this carefully designed rhetorical piece, a critique of the leadership emerges as Story, citation, proclamation and saying are brought into dialogue with each other and with prior narrative events.  

85 Zimmermann, “Parables”, 269 identifies 18 parabolic pieces in John, of which 10 are followed by question, complaint, or replies/action that evidence failure to understand or misunderstanding.  

86 See Zimmermann, “Parables”, 262-4 for παροιμία as John’s “own term for figurative language, including parables” (262), observing that “the parable and paroimiai both call for understanding, but also bring forth incomprehension” (264). For John 10.1-5 as parable see Zimmermann, “Parables”, 269, 256n60.  

87 As a further example of this collaboration see Luke 16.1-31: The Pharisees listen to the Unrighteous Manager Who Acted Wisely and the enigmatic Plain Speech sayings that follow (16.8b-13), which pick up on the parable’s imagery, plot elements and language. It is in hearing both (note the plural τοῦτο παρμένει in 16.14) that the Pharisees take offence and responded with ridicule (16.14). Jesus replies with further denunciation and sayings (16.15-18) and another parable (16.19-31).
incorporates language from the Story (21.31b-32). This and other similar examples suggest that Jesus regarded the parables as a rhetorical tool to be used alongside and in collaboration with other speech forms such as questions, sayings and proclamation:

1. Matt 12.22-32: Jesus responds to the Pharisees’ attempt to publicly discredit him (12.24) with a parabolic saying (12.25), which is then explored using rhetorical questions (one of which draws on the parabolic saying’s imagery) and pronouncements (12.26-28), further parabolic sayings (12.29-30) and a Plain Speech prophetic warning (12.31-32).

2. Matt 21.33-44: The Murderous Tenants (21.33-41) is followed by a rhetorical question from Jesus that brings a (metaphorical) OT passage into dialogue with the parable (21.42). The proclamation that follows, mixing metaphorical and direct speech forms (21.43-4), draws on motifs from the prior parable and the Scripture citation.

3. Luke 7.36-50: Following the Two Forgiven Debtors, Jesus presses Simon with a question (7.42b), which Simon answers (7.43), preparing the way for a Plain Speech critique and proclamation which evokes and develops the parable’s central imagery (7.44-48).

4. Luke 10.25-37: A lawyer’s question to Jesus concerning eternal life (10.25) is answered by way of a return question (10.26), followed by a Plain Speech exchange (10.27-8) and a further question from the Lawyer (10.29). Jesus answers with the Good Samaritan (10.29-35), only to then press the lawyer with a question concerning the parable (10.36, answered in 10.37a), and a final imperative (10.37b) that is directly reliant on the parable for its meaning.

The above examples (both groups) illustrate the inherent ambiguity of the parables, even when used situationally, in that they are typically not understood (or are misunderstood) so that questions and further discourse follow in which their significance is clarified. The parables of the NT Gospels do not function autonomously, whether in discourse or proclamation, but feature alongside other speech elements and function in collaboration with them. Further, neither Story nor Plain Speech feature as autonomous or self-contained communicative pieces, but rather the prophetic or didactic aims of Jesus are realised in the collaboration of the two. The number of these examples,

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88 It is also possible that Synoptic parables that are followed directly by Plain Speech (i.e. without intervening question or inquiry), may reflect a literary abbreviation of events, omitting (but implying) expressions of incomprehension and/or further inquiry. For example, there are two Lukan parables that are followed by audience response, that results in further teaching from Jesus (Luke 19.25; 20.16). The audience response component is missing in other Synoptic accounts of the same/similar parables. Matthew’s Hidden Talent (Matt 25.14-30) has no equivalent to Luke 19.25. Similarly, there is no equivalent to Luke 20.16 in the Matthean (Matt 21.33-46) or Markan (Mark 12.1-12) versions of the Murderous Tenants. Does this point to similar omissions behind other Synoptic accounts where (in the interests of abbreviation) Story is followed directly by Plain Speech?
and their featuring in all the NT Gospels, may point to a pattern of prophetic and didactic speech/dialogue originating in the ministry of the historical Jesus.

My analysis in this section demonstrates that arguments for the independence and autonomy of the parables are incompatible with their literary arrangement within the Synoptic Gospels. Further, because the Synoptics' literary arrangement of the parables incorporates textual signals with clear interpretive significance, it suggests the Synoptic Jesus told parables with particular didactic or prophetic intent rather than to facilitate interpretive endeavours where an audience supplies the crucial interpretive signals for themselves. Further, my analysis has identified the dependent and sometimes enigmatic nature of the parables' Gospel frames, suggesting they were intended to be read in dialogue with the parables rather than being understood to adequately express (in isolation) the parables' theological essence or ethical significance.

Excursus: Parabolic Material in The Sermon on the Mount

The Sermon on the Mount (SM) includes "parables or metaphorical language" that make up “about one third” of the entire discourse. Baasland argues the SM is a single, coherent, rhetorical piece, planned and deliberately structured and therefore able to be subject to “a comprehensive rhetorical analysis”. Baasland demonstrates how parabolic material is thoroughly integrated into the SM, and this is reflected in his highly contextual approach to reading this material.

An example is Baasland’s reading of 5.13-14 (the Salt, the Light). His reading is firstly informed by socio-historical research, observing the uniqueness in the ancient world of the “application of salt to people” (Matt 5.13: ὑμεῖς ἐστε τὸ ἅλας), and identifying an “honour-and-shame dimension” in the saying: to be

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89 See Allison, Constructing, 10-30, on his principle of “recurrent attestation”; we are “more likely to find the historical Jesus in the repeating patterns that run throughout the tradition” (23). The examples cited include parables of varying length and complexity (including parabolic sayings), parables with well established stock imagery, and parables from all four NT Gospels.

90 Lemcio argued that the structure of Mark 4 follows the form of a common OT prophetic dialogue, of which Ezekiel 17 (examined in Chapter III) is the earliest example, involving: ambiguous parabolic speech/action; incomprehension; critical rejoinder; explanation (Lemcio, “Structure”, 324-30; he might also have noted how the pattern occurs earlier in Ez 12: ambiguous parabolic action (12.1-7); incomprehension (12.9); critical rejoinder (12.9); explanation (12.10-16)). While Lemcio’s “critical rejoinder” is less common in the Synoptics (it features in Matt 16.8; Mark 4.13; 7.18; Luke 20.17), the pattern fits the above examples fairly well, though in my analysis Plain Speech is less of an unequivocal explanation, and more a partner in dialogue with the enigmatic parable.

91 On this point see the discussion in the following chapter.

92 Baasland, Parables, 4, working with a very broad definition of parable, including what might be regarded simply as hypothetical scenarios serving a didactic purpose (e.g. 5.23-26).

93 Baasland, Parables, 598.

94 This is in contrast to scholarship that reads individual sayings or literary units within the SM in literary isolation, or in dialogue with textually distant Matthean passages (or wider biblical texts). See e.g. the treatment of the Two Builders in Snodgrass, Stories, 334-7, which involves dialogue with other Synoptic passages (outside the SM), biblical texts, rabbinic writings and Pauline theology. There is no dialogue with the rest of the SM (apart from a passing reference to 5.17-20), despite the parable’s climactic position in the SM.

95 Baasland, Parables, 88.
compared to salt (and light) is a great honour. These findings then inform Baasland's literary analysis, which recognises how the sayings' imagery is developed (5.13b: salt; 5.14b-16: light), and then brings the sayings into dialogue with: (i) the Beatitudes that immediately precede them (5.3-12), noting how ὑπερβαλλόμενος in 5.13-14 refers to the “strange group of people the Beatitudes describe”,77 and (ii) the dual reference to “the prophets” (5.12,17) that “frames” the pericope, so that the “would-be-disciples’ are admonished to be in continuity [with the prophets]… they [also] can be salt and light of the world”.98 Thus, in these opening sections of the SM, Jesus’ followers, the poor and persecuted, are “surprisingly” designated in terms of great honour: they are the salt and light of the world.99

Baasland’s methodology and findings cohere with the interpretive approach I have argued for in this thesis. His analysis demonstrated how the SM’s parabolic material, being thoroughly integrated into the SM as part of a carefully designed rhetorical discourse, may be interpreted in dialogue with the material adjacent to it, and in light of its place in the rhetorical structure of the SM as a whole. In this process, the parables’ own singular contribution to the SM’s theology and rhetorical strategy is established, in that Baasland finds the parabolic material to be “crucial for the understanding of the instructions and commandments in the SM”,100 and “extremely appropriate” for the SM’s “rhetorical strategy”.101

96 Baasland, Parables, 95: To be “compared with the divine symbol of salt and to be called ‘the salt of the earth’ is of course a great honour”, and conversely to be thrown out and trampled on (5.13b) “is in most cultures the deepest humiliation”. Similarly concerning 5.14: “light and the role of ‘light of the world’ is very prestigious” (103).

97 Baasland, Parables, 103 (re 5.14); similarly 100 (re 5.13), noting that “the context not the saying identifies them clearly” (103).

98 Baasland, Parables, 121.

99 Baasland, Parables, 103; also “Jesus gives an open invitation particularly to a lower class group” to fulfil a task typically associated in the ancient world with the ruling elite and aristocracy (122). A further example is Baasland’s exegesis of Matt 7.7.1-12 (Baasland, Parables, 418-491), often seen to combine a group of unrelated sayings. Baasland demonstrates how the pericope is structured around a coherent theme so that individual parabolaic sayings may inform each other, even while being interpreted in dialogue with adjacent Plain Speech. Thus the Plain Speech introduction (7.1-2) seeks to “abolish the principle of retribution in personal relations”, and sets “the theme for the following parables” (423-33, 437-8; here 432-3, italics original). The whole of 7.1-12 coheres around this theme of reciprocity: reciprocity “from the perspective of lex talionis and measuring (judging)” in 7.1-5 and reciprocity from the perspective of “gifts/giving and receiving” in 7.6-11 (418-23, here 421), thus “allowing lex talionis to be transcended” (486). He also demonstrates how the parabolic sayings may be brought into meaningful dialogue with each other, so that, for example, the enigmatic saying concerning holy things/pearls and dogs/swine (7.6) is understood as a critique of wasteful or foolish benefaction (442-58), that prepares the way for exhortations concerning genuine benefaction, the meeting of real needs within relationships characterised by openness to one other in both asking and giving (7.9-11) (458-64, 486-8). Note also how the Plain Speech and parabolic saying of 7.11 makes a necessary contribution to the interpretation of the parabolaic questions of 7.9-10 (481-86, and how the parabolic saying on dogs/swine (7.6) serves as a “necessary limitation” to the golden rule (7.12) (488). See similarly 315-373 for his treatment of 6.19-24, also generally seen as a group of unrelated sayings.

100 Baasland, Parables, 8.

101 Baasland, Parables, 611. He finds that parabolic discourse, combined with rhetoric are “perfect tools for describing a new lifestyle” (630, see the discussion in 612-30), a lifestyle that is “based on a theocentric world view” which “the parables are aptly designed to illustrate” (611). Baasland characterises the SM as a discourse that “gives a design for life - a meaningful life, a life in accordance with a profound understanding of God” (611). The parabolic material makes a particular contribution by depicting “experiences and consequences” (611; italics original; see 617-8 on the logic of “experience leading to consequence” in the parabolic material). Baasland also regards the parables as particularly suited to the “wisdom character” of the SM (see the discussion in 612-30). This is as close as Baasland comes to a general hypothesis concerning the parables, and in general he does not allow it to dominate his readings (which are generally contextually directed). One notable exception is his treatment of a Tree and its Fruit (Matt 7.16-20; see 522-38), where his decision to focus “more on the wisdom character of the parable” (523; italics original) leads him - atypically - to devalue the contextual reading of the parable. That there is no conjunction in 7.16 (524) is not a strong enough argument for dismissing the link with 7.15, particularly as 7.16 opens with ἀπό τῶν καρπῶν αὐτῶν ἐπιγνώσθη τὸ δώρον. 281
To Put Another Face on the Matter: Rhetorical Dynamics of the Parables

My Case Studies illustrate the potential for parables, in collaboration with accompanying Plain Speech, to provide their audience with a new perspective on the situation at hand. Entering the world of the Story and following the interpretive signals provided by Plain Speech, the audience journeys to a vantage point from which they are able see familiar things from a new angle and/or see for the first time things previously hidden from their view. This new perspective has the potential to play a liberating and empowering role, enabling and authorising audience participation in the kingdom of God in new ways. This may be seen in my Case Studies as follows:

1. Some parables speak to beliefs, paradigms, norms, attitudes and values by which an audience have understood the world and which shape how they live in that world, seeking to expose these things as incompatible with the kingdom of God. The very act of naming and exposing these things begins a process of liberation of an audience from their power, bringing the audience to a point of empowerment and decision where alternatives (in relation to the kingdom of God) become necessary and possible. When Israel’s sinfulness (rather than Roman oppression) is seen to be the most pressing problem of the present hour (BFT), then the way has been opened for Jesus’ call for repentance to be heard, even by the victims of violence. When the disciples’ natural timidity and conservatism is named and exposed as incompatible with the ambitions of Jesus (HT), then the door is open for the disciples to renounce a previously unacknowledged impediment to their participation in the mission of Jesus. When the capacity for abundant wealth to create a fool is demonstrated (RF), then the lie by which greed exercises its power is exposed as a fiction and the audience is free from its power to seek out alternative life pathways (in the kingdom of God) in order to obtain true life and true wealth. If the WV exposes envy behind Peter’s apparent desire for fairness and justice in the kingdom of God, then an unacknowledged sin has been named and the possibility of repentance and avoidance created. In naming in advance the disciples’ vulnerability to losing heart and giving up, the JW creates the possibility that through regular and ongoing prayer they may avoiding these very things.

2. Other parables reveal possibilities for participation in the kingdom not previously known or able to be entertained by their audience. In revealing these possibilities in parable, Jesus opens doors previously shut or unrecognised, authorising and empowering an audience’s participation in the kingdom in previously unimaginable ways. When the word being sown in the ministry of Jesus is seen to be the divine word constituting the eschatological people of God (S) then obedience to that word is legitimised, even when that means refusing the word of the biological family and of the religious elite. When the disciples understand the universal nature of Jesus’ ambitions (HT), then they are authorised to pursue Jesus’ mission throughout the whole world in his name. When God is seen to be good and generous to all (WV), then grounds for serving him without concern for one’s relative standing or reward in the kingdom have been
established. When the regular and ongoing prayer of the disciples is seen to have the potential to create a crisis of honour for God, so that he must act to preserve the honour of his name (JW), then the disciples have been given to play a direct role in helping secure the eschatological justice and fullness of the kingdom. In presenting Jesus’ ministry as the sole basis for Israel’s hope and salvation, the BFT creates the possibility of a responsive and obedient reception of that ministry (a possibility not open so long as Jesus remains unrecognised among them) through which his audience may secure a future.

As discussed above (“Connectedness and Difference”), the initial stimulus for developing this new perspective is often provided by a movement within a parable from familiar imagery and plot elements (familiar in themselves and as they relate to the situation at hand), to unusual and unexpected imagery and plot elements (unfamiliar in themselves and/or as ways to represent the situation at hand). However, this new perspective typically only gains clear and precise definition as these unusual elements within the Story are further explored in dialogue with associated Plain Speech.

The formation of this new perspective occurs in a process characterised by relatively high levels of audience participation, since the audience (and the reader) must be actively and personally involved in resolving the indeterminacy associated with the parables. I suggest that this very process of participation, of responsive inquiry and endeavour (to resolve the parables’ indeterminacy), helps create a capacity for understanding and accepting the strange new ways of the kingdom of God that the parables reveal. Participation also increases the likelihood of an audience owning the associated interpretive outcomes, since they are partially of the audience’s own making. Further, this very act of participation means that an audience is now further involved with Jesus, having already begun the journey toward new acts of responsive participation in the kingdom that the parables are designed to facilitate. The parable is a knot that the audience must untie. Having taken hold of the rope and untied the knot, the audience finds the rope in their hands opens a door they had previously not recognised, to a path they did not previously know, which they can now follow if they will. Having the rope already in their hands, and having untied the knot, they have already begun the journey.

In examining how this new perspective is formed, my Case Studies provide new insights into the Rhetorical Dynamics of individual parables. My analysis of what a parable does (how it “works” rhetorically) may complement the widespread emphasis in parable scholarship on what a parable

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102 See Kierkegaard, Training, 133.
103 I return in Chapter IX to consider in more detail how the depth of audience engagement required for interpretation of the parables helps facilitate increased audience participation in the kingdom of God.
means (its teaching or theological content). Some examples. Blomberg rightly sees that the JW “teaches both that (1) God will hear and answer the cries of his people against injustice by again sending the Son of Man…, and that, therefore (2) we must persist in faithful petition for the consummation of the kingdom”. My reading coheres thematically with Blomberg’s and complements it by demonstrating how the parable commends this viewpoint to the disciples, providing the disciples with new self-understanding and a new understanding of the significance of prayer in salvation-history so that they may own for themselves the necessity of prayer. Snodgrass rightly sees how the RF “warns against thinking that possessions are life”. My reading coheres with Snodgrass’ and complements it by exploring the Rhetorical Dynamics that give this warning its persuasive force, showing how the Story maps out an idealised future that its primary audience will readily embrace as the ultimate dream for their lives, only to then shatter this life dream by exposing it as the dream of a fool. My reading of the BFT recognises, with most scholarship, how the parable warns of coming judgment, but complements this by showing how the parable subverts a paradigm within which the warning has no obvious rationale (Israel is a righteous victim; Rome is an evil occupier). The parable provides an alternative perspective on Israel’s situation (Israel also is guilty of bloodshed; Roman is the agent of God’s coming judgment) that invests the warning with enhanced rhetorical urgency and persuasiveness. My reading of the HT coheres thematically with Snodgrass’ assessment that it teaches “faithfulness” as “an agent on behalf of the kingdom”, but complements it by showing how the parable gains rhetorical force by leading the disciples to identify with the third servant, only to have his timidity and conservatism exposed as their own and as a barrier to the faithfulness required for them to discharge their responsibilities in the kingdom of God.

Thus, my analysis of the Rhetorical Dynamics of the parables demonstrates their capacity to confront and subvert ideology, worldview and self-understanding so as to liberate an audience from their power, while at the same time introducing alternative categories and altered perceptions by which an audience may comprehend the “newness” of the kingdom of God breaking into the world around them, and be authorised and empowered to participate in that kingdom in new ways.

104 Blomberg, Parables, 273; italics mine.

105 Snodgrass, Stories, 399-400; in a section entitled “What is the teaching of the parable?” (398; italics mine).

106 Snodgrass, Stories.

107 Cf. Brueggemann, Finally, 115-124, on the significance (in preaching) of Daniel 1 for the contemporary church. The narrative speaks today to those who have joined “the dominant ideology with innocence and without noticing”, and who are “incapable of imagining an alternative” (“we are not skilful in noticing how we ourselves have joined the version of ideology most compatible with our social location and interest”) (121). The narrative subverts the dominant ideology by insisting we notice “an extra character in the story, a character no one else has noticed… but who matters decisively” (God) (121, what I call “Difference”). The narrative “neither scolds nor urges”, but “proposes new categories for reading life that tell of new possibility”; the narrative “proposes and imagines another way in the world… another way to be human in the world” (123). To articulate these possibilities requires an “allusive and subversive”, or “poetic” speech form (124). The same might be said concerning the parables of Jesus.
The Argument and Evidence So Far

The above findings suggest that the NT Gospels’ literary arrangement of the parables of Jesus anticipates a contextual and situational approach to their interpretation. The parables are not presented in literary isolation; nor do they stand (primarily) in interpretive relationship to a general hypothesis. Rather they are located within literary units, and thoroughly integrated into those units alongside associated narrative elements (actual or anticipated) and parable-specific direct speech elements. The juxtaposition of the parables and this contextual data creates an indeterminacy within literary units that provides the impetus for interpretation in a literary reading of the parables.

The significance of the parables for the audience and events associated with their telling (in their literary arrangement) is not evident with reference to the parables alone. Rather, the parables’ situational meaning and function is determined by giving due weight to accompanying Plain Speech and with reference to the situation to which the parable speaks (recognising any interpretive links between the two). The full contextual meaning and significance of both Story and accompanying Plain Speech is determined as the two are brought into an interpretive dialogue (where each may inform the other), and in this way the didactic or prophetic intent of the discourse or dialogue as a whole is realised. The presence of indeterminacy and/or openness in both Story and Plain Speech means this interpretive relationship may be truly dialogical and collaborative, and ultimately generative of new meaning and perspective that transcends what is explicit in either. This approach represents a genuine alternative to adapting the parables to a hypothesis and avoids the parables being dominated in the interpretive process.

I have also shown that the NT Gospels’ literary arrangement of the parables contains sufficient data to inform a reasonably specific assessment of a parable’s rhetorical function and strategies. The parables lead an audience away from the situation at hand and into the relative freedom of their unthreatening narrative worlds. These narrative worlds combine familiar and unexpected imagery and plot elements (that is, familiar/unfamiliar in themselves and/or in their relationship to the situation at hand) in ways that are designed (in dialogue with Plain Speech) to subvert an audience’s existing paradigms and viewpoints and provide new categories and perceptions. While rhetorical function and strategy tends to be parable-specific, I have shown in general that the parables are skilful rhetorical pieces, opening new perspectives that have the power to liberate an audience from things that prevent their participation in the kingdom of God and to authorise and empower their participation in the kingdom in new ways.

The Distinct Voice of the Parables

In Chapter II, I suggested that my methodology would elevate the parables’ literary function, so that rather than only illustrating or reinforcing what is already known and established elsewhere (as
occurs when parables are adapted to a hypothesis), the parables might make their own, first order, and distinctive contribution to the narrative and theology of the Gospels in which they are placed. I also suggested that a contextual reading of the parables may subsequently be given additional depth and perspective with reference to the Gospel narrative as a whole. My Case Studies contain some evidence of these things.

Firstly, the interpretive outcomes from my Case Studies generally evidence a relatively high level of specificity. The data the NT Gospels locate in literary proximity to the parables is often detailed, situational and parable-specific, and thus able to inform interpretive outcomes that are more specific in nature than when parables are adapted to general hypotheses. This specificity in interpretive outcomes is highlighted where my readings cohere thematically with those of other scholars. The HT is about faithfulness and productivity in the things of the kingdom; a contextual reading gives this faithfulness/productivity a specific focus and concern, the proclamation of the good news of the kingdom throughout the whole world. The TS does speak of obedience, but a contextual reading identifies its specific concern with the foundational act of obedience, believing authoritative testimony concerning the identity and authority of Jesus. While the S does concern Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom, a contextual reading invests that proclamation with priority and authority over the word of the family and the word of the Jewish elite. While the BFT anticipates judgment coming to Israel, a contextual reading identifies that this judgment will take the form of a Roman military offensive against the whole nation. The JW is about regular and ongoing prayer, but when read contextually speaks specifically of prayer for the justice of the kingdom at the coming of the Son of Man. This specificity (and associated variety) of interpretive outcomes points to individual parables finding their own distinct voice rather than echoing the more generally defined voice of a hypothesis.

Secondly, my Case Studies show how a contextual reading of a parable may make an important and sometimes unique contribution to the development of a Gospel’s narrative and theology, even while that reading is given depth and perspective as the narrative progresses. The BFT is not only an illustration of the judgment coming to Israel that subsequent Lukan passages speak of in increasingly concrete and certain terms. Rather it provides an important qualification to those passages by insisting that despite the coming judgment, Jesus’ presence and ministry among them

108 Cf. McDonald, “Rhetorical”, 67, arguing the Good Samaritan “is not an illustration of passing significance but is itself the substance of the new reality” (and his contextual treatment of the parable 59-73).

109 It is necessary to clarify a point of distinction between my approach and that of N.T. Wright in this regard. Wright argues, correctly in my view, that the parables made a first order contribution (they are a primary not secondary form of activity) to the ministry of the historical Jesus (see Chapter II). But in Wright’s scholarship this was a functional contribution only: the parables contribute as a form of Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God, while their content is derivative, being given definition by Wright’s overarching hypothesis concerning the ministry of Jesus (Israel’s return from exile). I am proposing that the parables can also make a first order contribution to the content of the teaching and proclamation of Jesus.
at the present time means salvation remains possible for some, and thus anticipating the subsequent repentance and faith of various Lukan characters, and of many from Israel in response to the preaching of the early church. I have argued that the Markan Sower is not an illustration of varying responses to Jesus as narrated elsewhere in Mark, but rather invests the particular circumstances of its telling with new significance, identifying the small and otherwise insignificant group gathered around Jesus as the eschatological people of God. In insisting that life cannot be equated with abundant possessions the RF contributes directly and substantively to the theological foundations that underpin subsequent Lukan wealth ethics (rather than merely illustrating aspects of those ethics), ethics that shape community life among Jesus’ followers throughout Luke-Acts. In characterising envy as an insult to the honour of a God who is abundantly good and generous to all (WV), and in exposing the capacity of timidity and conservatism to frustrate the ambitions of Jesus (HT), these parables make a unique contribution to Matthean theology and ethics. The TS opens (for the Matthean reader) the theological insight that faith is first and fundamentally an act of obedience, the foundational concern of which is the identity and authority of Jesus. The JW does provide assurance of answered prayer (as elsewhere in Luke, but in its own way) but also the insight that the practice of prayer has the power to sustain the disciples in faith and faithfulness.

Several of my Case Studies anticipate the lot of the disciples in the post-easter period, and in this sense contribute to extending the Gospel narratives beyond the events they otherwise narrate. The HT signals, for the first time in Matthew, that the disciples (previously sent only to minister to Israel) will be given responsibility for expanding the kingdom of God throughout the whole world in the post-easter period (a point that becomes more explicit at 28.18-20). The Sower anticipates that the faithful and obedient reception of the word of Jesus will require the disciples to prevail over opposition, trouble and temptation, realities that become more explicit as the Markan narrative unfolds. The Sower’s location in each Synoptic Gospel suggests it functions as a foundational contribution to Jesus’ efforts to reframe his followers’ expectations concerning what it will mean to be his disciples. The JW, like no prior Lukan passage, emphasises the role of prayer in sustaining the disciples’ faith through the trials of the post-easter period and in contributing directly to the outworking and fulfilment of salvation history, thus anticipating the central role of prayer in the Lukan account of the growth and expansion of the early church.

The parables are able to contribute in this way because they have first been read contextually, with reference to the circumstances of their telling and in interpretive dialogue with associated Plain

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110 The Sower’s contribution is - in my view - also more substantial and comprehensive on this matter than any other part of the Synoptics, in that it brings together a reasonably comprehensive catalogue of the trouble, opposition and temptation which Jesus’ followers will face, demonstrates how these mirror Jesus’ own experience, and illuminates the underlying cause of these things by setting the word of Jesus in such uncompromising opposition to the word/will of the biological family and the Jewish elite.
Speech elements. As discussed, these Plain Speech elements are typically parable-specific,\textsuperscript{111} and like the parables are sufficiently open, dependent, and (sometimes) enigmatic so as to allow for a genuine dialogue between the two, without one being dominated by the other. In this dialogue, and with reference to the parable's narrative context, a parable's indeterminacy is situationally resolved so that it takes on a particular meaning and function, becoming a more defined and concrete literary form, and so may then contribute in its own way to developing and enriching the narrative and theology of the wider Gospel. In this way, the parables of Jesus may function as building blocks, contributing their own unique shape and strength to the multi-faceted edifice of each Synoptic Gospel's narrative and theology, rather than functioning only as decoration heightening the appearance and appeal of blocks already in place.

My approach is an alternative to scholarship where less interpretive weight is given to the parables' contextual data and interpretation is instead informed by the parables being brought directly into interpretive dialogue with their Gospels' wider narrative, its general theological themes, or with other non-proximate textual segments connected by similar language, motifs or subject.\textsuperscript{112} These approaches, while producing interpretive outcomes coherent with the theology of the Gospel as a whole, may obscure the contextual concern of a parable and prevent its distinct voice from emerging. When read with reference to Luke 11.5-13, the JW is readily seen to reinforce Friends at Midnight's assurances of answered prayer, but this line of interpretation is often pursued at the expense of developing the JW's eschatological dimension and its concern with the relationship between prayer and faithfulness (essential aspects of a contextual reading).\textsuperscript{113} Interpreting the TS with reference to Matthean passages emphasising doing the will of God (e.g. Matt 7.21-27; 23.2-3) has diverted many scholars from the emphasis on belief/faith in the material that precedes and follows the Story. Reading the S with reference to the Markan narrative as a whole has meant that the parable's contextual concern with legitimating Jesus' “word”, as a word having authority above that of the biological family and the Jewish elite, has been widely neglected in scholarship. Reading the WV with reference to wider Matthean themes has diverted scholars’ attention away

\textsuperscript{111} Or in some cases specific to a small group of parables.

\textsuperscript{112} This includes scholarship where there is an explicit rejection of the Gospel context and instead, the parable is brought into dialogue with a passage elsewhere in the same Gospel (e.g. see the discussion of Curkpatrick's work on the JW in Chapter V). As has been shown, while this approach may produce some interesting interpretive outcomes, it has the peculiar characteristic (at a literary level) of implying that an author was mistaken in their understanding of the parable, but that we can correct them by drawing on their own material from elsewhere. Further, this approach relies too heavily for its justification on the fact that the parable “works” in this new setting, something we might generally expect given the Plasticity of the parables.

\textsuperscript{113} E.g. Hultgren, Parables, 253, who begins his exegesis of this parable by briefly discussing its literary context, but the implications of this for the parable are not explored, since he moves on immediately to note that the JW “is a twin of the Parable of the Friend at Midnight (11.5-8)”. As a result, there is no eschatological aspect to his reading of the parable, which has more in common with Friends at Midnight than with the JW's literary context and the sayings that follow it. Cf. similarly the recent treatment of the parable in Kister, “Parables”, 15-20, where Luke 11.5-13 and Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana 24.11 entirely dominate his reading of the JW.
from the parable’s connection to the narrative events that immediately precede it,\textsuperscript{114} and contributed to the neglect of the particular concern with envy that emerges from Matthew’s juxtaposition of the two.\textsuperscript{115}

**CONCLUSION**

This chapter evaluates the results of applying my methodology to six NT parables. In my view, I have demonstrated that the NT Gospels’ arrangement of the parables anticipates and is able to inform the kind of situational and contextual approach to reading the parables envisaged by my methodology. I have also demonstrated that my methodology represents a genuine alternative to adapting the parables to a hypothesis and that it provides more specific and varied interpretive outcomes than when parables are adapted to a general hypothesis. My contextual readings, for which each parable’s immediate literary context provides the crucial interpretive signals, have contributed new interpretive insights for individual parables, and opened new lines of inquiry for exploring the relationship between the parables and the theology and narratives of their respective Gospels. Further, I have shown that the NT Gospels’ arrangement of the parables is sufficiently detailed and situational to inform an analysis of the communicative strategies by which the parables achieve their prophetic and didactic aims, as anticipated by my model of the Parabolic Process. The application of my model has provided new insights into the rhetorical strategies that give the parables their enhanced persuasive power, showing how they undermine existing perspectives, paradigms and worldview and open alternative perspectives for an audience so that new ways of participation in the kingdom of God become possible.

In this Chapter I have also made a preliminary and tentative assessment of the applicability of my methodology to the wider corpus of NT parabolic material, an assessment that needs to be further tested and refined through detailed analysis of additional parables.

\textsuperscript{114} E.g. Schottroff, *Parables*, 215-6 discusses the parable’s narrative context (215), but then moves away from it to bring the parable into dialogue with the Matthean Beatitudes and other Matthean passages concerning Israel, which determine her eventual interpretation. Similarly Doyle, “Place”, 41 acknowledges the link between WV and 19.23-29, but makes nothing of it for reading the parable, instead introducing (arbitrarily) a wider Matthean concern with Gentile inclusion in a once predominantly Jewish church, so that the parable is a “cameo” of the Matthean presentation of the Jesus-community, “open to all… treating each, old and newcomer as equal” (55). This is particularly unexpected given his prior analysis of 19.1-20.34, where the WV is seen to be thoroughly integrated (structurally and thematically) into that section (43-7).

\textsuperscript{115} A similar approach is evident elsewhere, e.g.: (i) Emphasis on the wider Lukan concern with helping the poor when reading the RF (e.g. Scott, *Hear*, 138; Gowler, “Enthymematic”, 202-209) may detract from the particular concern of the RF with the relationship between life and wealth (which e.g. Scott gives no emphasis to at all). (ii) The Good Samaritan is often brought into dialogue with wider Lukan themes of reversal, inclusion of the marginalised, and compassion, without adequate weight being given first to the parable's contextual concern with obtaining eternal life. (iii) Lischer, *Parables*, 126 rightly observes how in interpreting the final scene of the Wedding Banquet, “every explanation of the garment, however, is imported from other parts of Matthew or from Paul or the larger tradition”. (iv) Dietzfelbinger, “Gleichnis”, 222-3 rightly critiques Felder’s reading of the HT, which brings the parable into dialogue with various Synoptic passages, asking: “Was hat das Kreuztragen von Lk 14,27, was das Gehäßtwerden von Lk 6, 22, was die Furcht vor potentiellen Totschlägern in Mt 10,28 mit der Furcht des Knechtes in Mt 25, 24 zu tun?” (223). (v) Tolbert, *Perspectives*, 22 rightly observes how in the application of Redaction Criticism to the Gospels, “the parable story itself is often subordinated to or at least made to share centre stage with some other concern, for example, the theology of Matthew…”
To further develop and reinforce my argument for the importance of a contextual reading of the parables, an engagement with two related areas of scholarship is required. Firstly, the argument in modern parable scholarship that the parables of Jesus are polyvalent is not entirely consistent with my proposed methodology, and it is important to identify areas of agreement and disagreement (Chapter VIII). Secondly, I address the question of the relationship between the NT Gospel arrangement of the parables (upon which my methodology depends, and which it seeks to honour) and the parables’ function within the ministry of the historical Jesus (Chapter IX).
Chapter VIII
THE PARABLES’ POLYVALENCE AND CONTEMPORARY RECEPTION

It cannot be said that the Synoptic narrative meshalim simply are themselves the message. - Gerhardsson

You can’t live by teaching that you don’t understand in the first place. Does the parable of the Sower mean that we should be more careful about throwing seeds on the road, so that we don’t waste the things that God has given us? And when Jesus says that “there is nothing outside a man that is able to make him unclean by going into him” (Mark 7.14-15), does he mean that I can eat anything I want, or that I can have free sex with prostitutes at the Serapis banquet with no fear of moral contamination? - Thatcher

The historical question forces us, so it seems, to stand at a distance from the text. In reality, however, it forces us to stand at a distance from our own thoughts and ideas, values, and hopes, from our usual language... In this way the historical problem helps us against the danger of mistaking ideas that are dear and familiar to us for the word of God. While it makes long-familiar stories seem strange to us, it gives us the chance of understanding them anew. - Linnemann

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1 Gerhardsson, “Illuminating”, 280.
2 Thatcher, Jesus, 137.
3 Linnemann, Parables, 34.
INTRODUCTION
Reading the parables of Jesus with reference to their immediate Gospel contexts gives significant - textually derived - direction to the interpretive process, leading to particular interpretive outcomes. This approach appears inconsistent with scholarship that emphasises parables' polyvalence and the importance of multiple interpretations. My approach may also appear to confine the parables of Jesus to their historical or literary context, limiting their relevance for contemporary audiences. In this chapter I critically evaluate representative scholarship associated with these ideas, with a view to demonstrating that the importance of my methodology is not undermined by these arguments. I argue that the polyvalent nature of the genre does not close off the possibility of parables being used situationally and toward particular rhetorical aims. And I argue that the NT parables' literary contexts have the potential to facilitate, rather than frustrate, their contemporary reception.

Section I: POLYVALENT PARABLES?

Introduction: Who is My Neighbour?

Suppose my neighbour's home catches fire, and I have a length of garden hose four or five hundred feet away. If he can take my garden hose and connect it up with his hydrant, I may help him to put out his fire. Now, what do I do? I don't say to him before that operation, "Neighbour, my garden hose cost me $15; you have to pay me $15 for it." What is the transaction that goes on? I don't want $15 - I want my garden hose back after the fire is over. All right. If it goes through the fire all right, intact, without any damage to it, he gives it back to me and thanks me very much for the use of it. But suppose it gets smashed up - holes in it - during the fire; we don't have to have too much formality about it, but I say to him, "I was glad to lend you that hose; I see I can't use it any more, it's all smashed up." He says, "How many feet of it were there?" I tell him, "There were 150 feet of it." He says, "All right, I will replace it." Now, if I get a nice garden hose back, I am in pretty good shape.

The fictitious scenario portrayed in this short piece has a rhetorical quality to it, as signalled by the opening "Suppose..." (and again mid-piece), the inclusion of rhetorical questions, and the sense of a developing argument throughout. It is a story leading somewhere, though the precise destination is not clear from the story alone. It could be a hypothetical scenario, narrated (for example) by an established resident of a street to explain neighbourly expectations to a newcomer. It could be didactic, used to stimulate discussion on the ethics of neighbourliness, or even to teach a certain kind of neighbourliness. The story could potentially be metaphorical, speaking of something other than its subject. There are no signals (in the story itself) that demand or direct a metaphorical
As a matter of historical record, the narrative featured in a speech by President Roosevelt during WWII,\(^4\) in which he argued for the USA to provide military hardware to support the UK war effort. The narrative's metaphorical nature is signalled contextually by: (i) the subject of the speech up to that point is the war, not household fires; and (ii) the narrative is introduced as an "illustration", so that we would expect its ultimate concern to lie with the immediately prior subject.\(^5\) Those listening to the President at the time readily made the connection between the two fictitious neighbours and the USA/UK. The precise function of the parable becomes clear as the President moves immediately on to propose that America might "lend certain munitions and get the munitions back at the end of the war", a point having parallel motifs in the narrative.

While the story is introduced as an "illustration", it does more than merely "illustrate" a possible future scenario. The parable takes the audience away from the subject of war, to the familiar world of neighbourly relations. Appealing to the good nature and shared ethics of the audience, the parable provides a new perspective on the situation confronting the USA at that time. The UK is a neighbour in urgent need, and the USA is a neighbour with the means to help. The relationship between the two has been re-framed by locating it rhetorically within a paradigm of neighbourliness. The associated ethics of neighbourliness will resonate strongly with the audience, so that the demands of the parable are difficult to refuse. This is its rhetorical power. The speech anticipated (and helped prepare the US public for) enactment of the Lend-Lease Act, authorising the US government to supply military hardware to other nations where deemed vital to the defence of the USA.

As noted initially, this narrative, in itself, has the potential to function in a variety of ways; it is inherently versatile. But when the narrative is told by a particular speaker, in a particular historical situation, with particular rhetorical aims, and surrounded by direct speech concerning a particular topic, the narrative becomes univalent in its intended function and univalent in its reception.\(^6\) In Chapter IV I argued for a distinction between the nature of the parable genre, which may rightly be described as polyvalent, and the use and reception of individual parables, which - in theory and in practice - may be polyvalent or may not. In my view, modern parable scholarship emphasising the polyvalence of the parables of Jesus has given insufficient attention to this distinction. In this

\(^4\) On Dec 17, 1940.

\(^5\) The narrative is introduced by "Well, let me give you an illustration..."

\(^6\) Questions that followed the President's speech concern details of how his proposal would be implemented, and the legality of certain aspects of his proposal, etc, but indicate that the President's intended use of this story was clearly understood by the audience.
Tolbert: Polyvalence and Multiple Interpretations
Tolbert argued that the parables’ literary form means they are open to multiple interpretations. Parables have an "indeterminate" nature, in that of themselves they lack a “direct, immediate connection” between the second-order “signifier” and its “signified”. This indeterminacy “invites even compels” interpretation so as to “complete the signification”. Drawing on Wheelwright’s theory of metaphor, Tolbert similarly observes how the “epiphoric” aspect of a parable (the extension of meaning through creation of a comparison) relies on a combination of vehicle (the known element that forms the basis of the comparison) and tenor (the less well-known element). In the parable itself, the tenor is left “unstated and unsupplied”; thus “the need to complete the epiphoric-type movement in the parable by supplying a tenor is the impulse behind parable interpretation”. That there are a “variety of tenors” in some way similar to the parable, “furnishes one basis in the rhetorical model for multiple interpretations”. Tolbert also recognises that the purpose of a comparison will not usually be clear in itself. For a metaphor to “function adequately” and for a “full elaboration” of a parable's meaning, a further interpretive step is required, the “diaphoric” movement. The diaphoric movement describes the potential for creating new meaning through combining motifs and textual units. A parable's meaning arises through “a synthesis of the parable story itself and the specific images, notions, and ideas that are juxtaposed to it”. "Some kind of context must be supplied" to complete the

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7 Tolbert, Perspectives, 33-50. While there are limitations to Tolbert’s application of semiotic and rhetorical theories to parables (acknowledged to some extent; see 36-7: semiotics; 41-3: metaphor), Tolbert argues that metaphor and parable, despite their differences “function similarly” in many ways at the “semantic level” (43-4).
8 Wittig, “Theory”, 87.
9 Tolbert, Perspectives, 44-5.
10 Tolbert, Perspectives, 45.
11 Tolbert, Perspectives, 45.
12 Tolbert, Perspectives, 45.
13 Tolbert, Perspectives, 47-8. Cf. how “very few if any metaphors can stand alone without a specific surrounding context to specify the comparison being drawn or enrich the depth and resonance of the images… metaphors [are] dependent figures of literary language” (47).
14 Tolbert, Perspectives, 45-9 (quotations from 48). Her argument is that the parables contain “not only an epiphoric-type element but also a diaphoric-type element” (48). Tolbert is drawing on Wheelwright’s scholarship here (see the discussion of Wheelwright in Chapter IV).
15 Tolbert, Perspectives, 48-9 (italics mine).
diaphoric movement.\textsuperscript{16} As “every different context into which [the parables] are placed will result in a different interpretation”, this is a further basis for multiple interpretations of the parables.\textsuperscript{17}

Tolbert also rightly emphasised the specificity and proximity of the data needed to inform the diaphoric interpretive movement,\textsuperscript{18} and thus the tendency for parable scholars working with contexts defined in only \textit{general} terms to supply “the particular nuances and emphases of the parable context” from their “personal background and persuasions”.\textsuperscript{19} This important insight might have led Tolbert to value the Synoptic presentation of the parables, since it provides sufficiently detailed parable-specific data, in literary proximity to the parables, to inform both the epiphoric and the diaphoric movement of their interpretation. Tolbert recognises this possibility but rejects it; her arguments for doing so are not persuasive.\textsuperscript{20} She begins by posing the question of whether “the gospels suggest themselves anew as normative guides for interpretation?”\textsuperscript{21} This is followed immediately by an inquiry into whether “the gospel presentations of the parables really do support one clear, unambiguous interpretation”.\textsuperscript{22} Tolbert argues that because “many of the parables appear in two or three of the Synoptic gospels, often in quite different contexts” they do not provide one clear unambiguous interpretation.\textsuperscript{23} This argument is unconvincing on two accounts. Firstly, Tolbert overstates her position; the supporting data is meagre.\textsuperscript{24} Secondly, even if a small number of parables are found in different contexts in the Synoptics, this does not - of itself - mean the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} Tolbert, \textit{Perspectives}, 48.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Tolbert, \textit{Perspectives}, 48.
\item \textsuperscript{18} E.g. (i) the “full meaning of each story includes a synthesis of the story itself and its \textit{specific, juxtaposed surroundings}” (Tolbert, \textit{Perspectives}, 49); (ii) the parables’ meaning is “partially a result of a synthesis of the parable story itself and the specific images, notions, and ideas that are \textit{juxtaposed to it}” (49); (iii) a parable’s interpretation “lies at least partially in the interaction between the parable itself and its \textit{immediate, specific context}” (50); (all italics mine). This emphasis coheres with the argument earlier in this thesis. While a general theological/historical framework may inform the epiphoric interpretive movement, its general nature means it is less able to provide specific data, in proximate relationship to the parables, to inform the diaphoric movement.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Tolbert, \textit{Perspectives}, 48. Or, as I have noted elsewhere, the diaphoric interpretive movement may not occur, in which case the parable may have an illustrative function (for whatever it stands in comparison to), but does not carry further interpretive significance.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Tolbert rightly saw that “the gospel writers themselves, or perhaps the tradition before them, clearly sensed this demand of the parable form for a specific context by providing them with a framing story or setting” (Tolbert, \textit{Perspectives}, 49). To summarise Tolbert’s view on the Synoptic contexts: they (i) do not give us access to what the parables meant on the lips of Jesus; (ii) “may suggest, with some ambiguity, what the parables meant for certain elements” in early Christianity; and (iii) “do not assist” in the contemporary hermeneutical task (62).
\item \textsuperscript{21} Tolbert, \textit{Perspectives}, 51. I understand Tolbert here to use “anew” in the sense of “in light of my prior arguments”.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Tolbert, \textit{Perspectives}, 54; italics mine. This is a very different question to the first. Tolbert fails to acknowledge the distinction between the two questions and after answering the second question, simply transfers this answer to the first question. This is an unstable form of argument.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Tolbert, \textit{Perspectives}, 55.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Tolbert, \textit{Perspectives}, 555-7 cites only the Lost/Wandering Sheep. By p61, “many” has become “some”. It should be “few”. Tolbert’s prior theoretical discussion suggests that varied use of the same parable might be expected as the norm. What is surprising is how rare this is within the Synoptics.
\end{itemize}
Gospels anticipate multiple interpretations of these or other parables, or that historical Jesus told parables anticipating multiple interpretations.\textsuperscript{25}

Tolbert also argues that the Synoptic contexts cannot be normative for parable interpretation because “some of the contexts into which [the parables] have been placed seem at odds with the parable stories themselves, and the summaries attached to them are often contradictory,”\textsuperscript{26} so that the Gospel contexts “as often as not confuse and obscure any attempt to understand them”.\textsuperscript{27} This is a surprising claim, and Tolbert’s supporting argument is weak. For example, Tolbert argues that the Lukan setting of the Prodigal Son “makes the second part of the parable [15.25-32] seem unnecessary”.\textsuperscript{28} To support this claim, Tolbert wrongly classifies 15.10 as an “introduction” to the parable\textsuperscript{29} and overlooks the importance of 15.1-2 (the narrative context for the parable), with its dual themes of Jesus’ table fellowship with sinners \textit{and} opposition from the religious elite, which together correspond to \textit{both halves of the Story}. Tolbert’s claim that the Gospel contexts “violate the story”\textsuperscript{30} is not supported by convincing exegetical work.\textsuperscript{31}

Tolbert has rightly demonstrated that the parables are an indeterminate literary form, demanding interpretation, dependent on external data to complete that interpretation, and thus shaped by

\textsuperscript{25} That the Synoptics use the Lost Sheep, for example, in more than one way, cannot be automatically construed as evidence that this dual usage originates with the Synoptic authors. The Matthean and Lukan uses of the Lost/Wandering Sheep may respectively point to the use of this parable within two different contexts in the ministry of the historical Jesus (as argued by e.g. Snodgrass, \textit{Stories}, 103-4; also other scholarship at 617n42). Tolbert’s case would have been stronger had she been able to argue that the Gospels present the parables without giving interpretive guidance, anticipating readers will make their own interpretations. But as I have argued in the previous chapter, the evidence is strongly against this view.

\textsuperscript{26} Tolbert, \textit{Perspectives}, 54-61 (here 57). The Gospel contexts are deficient in that they “seldom fit the parable stories” (54); they “fit just part of the narrative…are inconsistent…simply do not relate to the story, or….are self-contradictory…[they] often violate the stories…” (61). This is at best hyperbole; my analysis so far suggests it is a serious misconstrued of the (literary) evidence.

\textsuperscript{27} Tolbert, \textit{Perspectives}, 61.

\textsuperscript{28} Tolbert, \textit{Perspectives}, 57-8: the “second half of the parable seems completely out of place in the [Lukan] context” (58).

\textsuperscript{29} Tolbert, \textit{Perspectives}, 57. This is implausible. 15.10 begins with οὐτος (similarly 15.7) linking it tightly to the preceding Story. 15.11 begins with Εἶπεν ὃ (also 15.3). As I have argued in the previous chapter, the entire passage is carefully constructed so that 15.1-2 remains the narrative context, which all three subsequent parables speak to.

\textsuperscript{30} This is one of Tolbert’s “practical rules” of interpretation - the Story is the “controlling element” in the interpretive process, and the context must not violate the Story (Tolbert, \textit{Perspectives}, 61).

\textsuperscript{31} Regarding the other examples Tolbert, \textit{Perspectives}, 57-61 uses to argue that the Gospel settings are inappropriate: (i) The Judge and the Widow and the Workers in the Vineyard are considered in Chapter V and Chapter VII respectively, and coherence with their literary settings demonstrated. (ii) The movement in focus from “the neighbour we are to love” in the introduction to the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.27-29) to “the neighbour we are to be” in its concluding comments (10.36) is not an example of an “inconsistent” context, that “confuses the attempt to follow the narrative’s logical movement” (59-60), but rather Jesus’ skilful use of parable to turn the lawyer away from \textit{defining} neighbours to \textit{being} a neighbour. See also the recent treatment of this parable in Proctor, “Neighbor?”, 203-19, rejecting arguments for dissonance between parable and frame and proposing a new reading (informed by the reciprocity of neighbourly relations in the ancient world) that argues for the importance of the Lukan farming of the parable. (iii) Tolbert translates ἐκ τοῦ μακροχρόνου ἡδονικίας (Luke 16.9) as “make friends of money”, an unusual reading that she then claims is contradicted by with the warning of 16.13. Read the more likely way, 16.9 speaks of using money to create community/friends, which is the essence of the trustworthy use of wealth called for in 16.10-11, an example of using rather than serving money as per 16.13. On the coherence of Luke 16.9-14 see e.g. Hays, \textit{Luke’s}, 144-6.
whatever context in which they are placed. In my view, subsequent parable scholarship would have benefited from giving more weight to her arguments concerning the need for specific and proximate data to complete the diaphoric movement in interpretation, and on the interpretive limitations of contexts defined in general terms.\(^{32}\) But Tolbert has not argued convincingly for rejecting the data provided in the Synoptic presentation of the parables, as the basis for their interpretation. This data is able to fully inform parable interpretation (as Tolbert describes that process of interpretation) in that it gives clear definition to the epiphoric movement and provides proximate and specific data to make the diaphoric movement possible. Data of similar specificity, and linked to the origins of the parables, is not available outside the Synoptics. Tolbert has not given us reason for setting this data aside. This failure, at a central point in her overall argument, means that the related question she posed (whether “the gospels suggest themselves anew as normative guides for interpretation?”) continues to demand serious consideration in scholarship.

Thus while Tolbert has rightly explained the possibility of multiple interpretations of a parable, the necessity or importance of multiple readings of the parables of Jesus has not been adequately demonstrated. Despite their limitations, Tolbert’s arguments, have been influential,\(^{33}\) including for Crossan and Zimmermann.

**Crossan: Polyvalence and Interpretive Play**

In *Cliffs of Fall*,\(^{34}\) Crossan considers the parables in a playful\(^{35}\) interaction with studies in linguistics, literary criticism and philosophy of language, arguing against any one (including one canonical) reading and in favour of multiple interpretations. He argues that parables were designed

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\(^{32}\) Tolbert, *Perspectives*, 49: the parables “demand for their interpretation something more specific than a general reference to the complex symbol Kingdom of God or a general orientation to the eschatology of Jesus”. These general frameworks are “all that can be provided with some degree of assurance by historical scholarship”. She rightly observes that unless historical criticism can provide “a much more specific picture of the historical Jesus or the particular situation in which the parables were first told”, interpretations of parables will be diverse and defined by “all the specific colouring of… the personal orientation of the particular critic”. These observations cohere with my arguments in Chapter II concerning the limitations of interpreting parables with referent to a hypothesis that is general in nature.

\(^{33}\) Scholars as diverse as Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 46, 151-2, 157, 167-8, 205; Kelber, *Oral*, 62; Curkpatrick, “Parable”, 34, 37; Shillington, “Engaging”, 18; Crossan, *Cliffs*, 51 all cite Tolbert’s study in support of parables having multiple readings, as if her study conclusively established this point.

\(^{34}\) I have chosen *Cliffs of Fall* from among Crossan’s many writings on the parables, because it is specifically concerned with polyvalence in the parables, and because it contains the most developed expression of the approach to parable interpretation that defined Crossan’s initial phase of parable scholarship.

\(^{35}\) I use this term - borrowed from Crossan - to describe Crossan’s unusual methodology which involves juxtaposition of a large number of quotations from various disciplines, often in a manner that makes it hard to understand the basic train of thought. Moore, *Literary*, 143 describes a lack of “rigorous argument” and too heavy a reliance on “apodictic declarations” and perceives a “mischievous disregard for the proprieties of scholarly discourse”. See also Adam, *Postmodern*, 61-71 on what he calls “transgressive biblical interpretation” that involve scholars mixing “discourses and genres without careful attention to the rules of the realms they invade” (62), citing *Cliffs of Fall* as an example (71).
to facilitate a form of interpretive “play”; they are a form of “ludic allegory”. Ludic allegory has at its core a “primordial paradox… that makes a story polyvalent or allegorical since it both invites, permeates and relativises each and every reading”. Interpretation is a game that can never be "absolutely won", but can be played “repeatedly and continuously…since you cannot interpret absolutely, you can interpret forever”.

It is not clear from Crossan’s theory (perhaps deliberately so!) how playful interpretation should proceed in practice. As Crossan turns to interpret the Sower, he has recourse to historical argument:

1. In the briefest of sketches of the historical Jesus, Crossan contrasts Jesus with the “official teachers” of the day, since he taught “outside this group authority…outside the synagogue… outside the ‘canonical texts’”, and his teaching was “paradoxical and provocative”. This Jesus was primarily concerned with the kingdom, defined in non-apocalyptic terms.

2. Crossan sees the “ultimate root” of the Sower in the “aniconic monotheism” of Israel, which “can only generate single paradoxical images, or double contradictory images, or multiple and polyvalent images of its God”.

3. Crossan expends considerable energy distilling an “original” form of the Sower.

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Crossan, Cliffs, 73-90. For further discussion of Crossan's concept of "play", see Crossan, Raid, 25-43.

37 Crossan, Cliffs, 99-100: ludic allegory is defined as “plot rendered radiantly self-conscious of its creative isomorphism across all the levels of world and reality” and which facilitates “the creative human imagination creating isomorphic plot as an act of supreme play”.

38 Crossan, Cliffs, 101-2.

39 Crossan, Cliffs, 102. This eventually leads Crossan to describe the parables as stories “whose central structure is a model for allegory itself…a paradox formed into narrative so that it precludes canonical interpretation and becomes a metaphor for the hermeneutical multiplicity it engenders…” (102). He illustrates this with his interpretation of the Sower, a “metaparable…a parable about parables of the kingdom” (49), and ultimately a “metaparable of hermeneutical polyvalence” (54) finding the different yields of the seed falling on good soil (30, 60, 100) “do not symbolize hierarchy but simple plurality” (48). Similarly, he finds the Prodigal Son to be an “allegory for allegory itself”, in that “the father is reality, the elder or dutiful son is mimesis, and the younger or prodigal son is play”, so that the Story may be regarded as “an allegory of Western consciousness’s path from mimetic to ludic realism” (103). This is a very speculative aspect of Crossan’s argument. As Scott has rightly noted, “how he knows this is never clear” (Scott, “Review”, 204).

40 Crossan, Cliffs, 16-17.

41 Crossan, Cliffs, 49.

42 Crossan, Cliffs, 58. Thus in Jesus’ parables, the “aniconicity of Israel’s God” has been turned “onto the very forms and content of human speech” (20). See Crossan, Raid, 55-60 for further discussion of this argument.

43 Crossan, Cliffs, 26-51. He argues the Gospel of Thomas and “antepenultimate Mark” versions are the earliest (45) and that his analysis takes him back to a version originating with the historical Jesus (48-9).
Crossan finds the Sower to be a parable “about three stages of loss and three degrees of gain”.\textsuperscript{44} These different stages symbolise “simple plurality”.\textsuperscript{45} The parable is about the “necessary self-negation” of Jesus and also “announces an eschatological advent not marked by overpowering apocalyptic victory and transcendental apocalyptic yield but rather by the normal inevitability of losses and gains…The parable proclaims, in other words, a Kingdom whose eschatology is as polyvalent as the processes consequent upon the sowing of the seed”.\textsuperscript{46}

Crossan’s analysis of the Sower evidences a tension between his theory of playful polyvalence - worked out in dialogue with twentieth century thought - and the historical realities of this parable’s origins. To introduce historical considerations into the interpretive process not only restricts polyvalence, but gives actual direction and content to the interpretive process. To say the kingdom is non-apocalyptic is to make a historical judgment, that affects how we interpret all parables that concern the kingdom, ruling out interpretations from apocalyptic perspectives. Nothing in Crossan’s theory anticipates or coheres with placing this kind of constraint or giving this kind of direction to the interpretive process.\textsuperscript{47} Why, for example, if the “metamodel” is “play”, should any interpreter be forbidden from \textit{playing} in the apocalyptic field? Equally, when Crossan claims that the Sower “proclaims” a certain kind of kingdom he uses language that suggests first century Jewish prophetic use/origins of the parable form. Evoking Jewish prophetic origins for the parables sits awkwardly alongside the idea that the parables were designed for playful polyvalent interpretation. Proclamation and play are not the same thing.

These methodological tensions are not resolved in \textit{Cliffs of Fall}.\textsuperscript{48} Thus while Crossan - rightly in my view - recognises the origins of the parables of Jesus within a particular socio-historical context, he does not adequately explain how interpretive practice can give adequate weight to these historical realities and still retain a playful and polyvalent nature.

**Zimmermann: An Open Interpretive Paradigm**

Zimmermann, drawing on the analysis of both Tolbert and Crossan, argues for the importance of multiple interpretations for any one parable. With Tolbert, he asserts the “literary necessity for
polyvalent interpretation", and similarly appeals to the “earliest reception of the parables” by the Synoptic authors, where the “variations in tradition and diversity of interpretation alone perhaps force us to recognise the polyvalent meaning” of the parables. However, to justify this later statement he appeals solely to the Lost Sheep, evidence of how limited the data is. The dual Synoptic usage of the Lost Sheep illustrates only the (genre-derived) possibility of a parable being used in more than one way, but not the necessity of every parable being read in multiple ways, nor that the historical/Synoptic Jesus told the parables in order to facilitate multiple interpretations among those who heard him. The distinction is important.

Zimmermann’s main argument for polyvalent parable interpretation is informed by reception theory and reader-response criticism, identifying the reader as a significant player in the interpretive process. A parable sets cognitive (conceptual), emotive and communicative processes in motion which involve the reader in the world of the Story and open up a range of possible interpretive paths. As a “player” in the process of interpretation, the reader “discovers, tries on, discards, and finds meaning”. Contemporary persons will “read the parables of Jesus from different standpoints, areas of interest, and motivations... to reach his or her own ‘true’ interpretation of a parable”. Zimmermann recognises that giving weight to the reader in the interpretive process results in a liberating “breadth of interpretive scope” but at the same time creates “the danger of drifting off into arbitrariness and thus into irrelevance”. To minimise such danger, Zimmermann argues parable interpretation should occur within a “hermeneutical triangle” whose three corners are: (i) a literary approach; (ii) a historical approach; and (iii) a reader oriented approach. Zimmermann calls for a “balance among the various approaches” and that “every approach should have a ‘veto right’ vis-à-vis the others”.

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49 Zimmermann, Puzzling, 152: “polyvalent interpretation genuinely corresponds to the form of metaphorical texts” (153).
50 Zimmermann, Puzzling, 166.
51 Zimmermann, Puzzling, 149; also 149n162, 165. Likewise Hedrick, Many, 13, 49, 92; Tolbert, Perspectives, 55; Crossan, Power, 40-2 all cite this sole example from the Synoptics. It is notable how Zimmermann and Hedrick return several times to this one piece of data. Lischer, Reading, 11 describes the data more accurately: “occasionally variants of the same story appear to make different points” (italics mine), citing the Lost Sheep and the Great/Wedding Banquet.
52 Zimmermann, Puzzling, 151-163.
53 Zimmermann, Puzzling, 154-7.
54 Zimmermann, Puzzling, 172.
55 Zimmermann, Puzzling, 208.
56 Zimmermann, Puzzling, 170.
57 See Zimmermann, Puzzling, 15, discussed here at 172.
58 Zimmermann, Puzzling, 172. So that “…an interpretation is acceptable only insofar as it is possible within the knowledge of the historic communication situation and the linguistic form. Thus textual signals (e.g., the semantic traditions of a word) or signals in the historic environment can support an interpretation but can also weaken it or make it seem impossible”.

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While Zimmermann rightly calls for an integrated approach to parable interpretation, in practice it is not always possible to give each discipline an equal weight without upsetting the balance between them that his model requires. In particular, there is an unresolved tension within the model between elevating the role of the reader and retaining coherence with historical and literary approaches.\(^{59}\) Zimmermann’s analysis of the Ten Virgins illustrates this tension. His “Christological-eschatological interpretation” and subsequent “Ethical interpretation” of the Ten Virgins\(^{60}\) are both informed by meticulous socio-historical research and careful literary analysis, giving due weight to the Story, the discourse in which it is set (Matt 24-5), accompanying Plain Speech (Matt 25.13), and the interpretive connections between them.\(^{61}\) The parable functions to profile Matthean eschatology and to encourage the audience to “do everything possible to enter with the bridegroom”.\(^{62}\) In constructing these readings, Zimmermann demonstrates the high level of reader/scholar engagement required for literary analysis and socio-historical research to combine into coherent readings of this parable. However, his involvement does not ultimately determine the shape of these readings, which are given definition primarily by his literary analysis (as informed by his socio-historical research). A different picture emerges with Zimmermann’s “Feminist interpretation”,\(^{63}\) where he presents the scholarship of Balabanski and Schottroff. This interpretation is far more reader/scholar directed than the previous two, since Balabanski and Schottroff approach the interpretive task from a feminist ideological position which heavily shapes their interpretive direction at crucial points. Their readings stand in some tension with Zimmermann’s historical and literary analysis.\(^{64}\) The lack of coherence is at times striking, to the point where Zimmermann’s veto on literary or historical grounds might well have been expected to

\(^{59}\) Cf. Porter, “Why?”, 284 on the inherent tension between (some forms of) reader-response criticism (with the importance they place on “the contemporary reader in defining and establishing the text and, consequently, meaning”), and “the historical preoccupation which lies at the heart of Biblical studies”. Zimmermann, in moving to more reader-directed horizons of interpretations, show-cases this tension, without satisfactorily resolving it (in my view).

\(^{60}\) Zimmermann, Puzzling, 283-8.

\(^{61}\) The Matthean literary context plays a determinative role as Zimmermann comes to establishing the theological/ethical focus of both of these “horizons of interpretation”, in an interpretive practice that coheres with the methodology I have argued for in previous chapters. See Zimmermann, Puzzling, 283 re the importance of the connection between 24.42 and 25.13 (the Christological-eschatological interpretation) and his reference to 24.3-31 and 25.31-46 (the Ethical interpretation) (285).

\(^{62}\) Zimmermann, Puzzling, 288.

\(^{63}\) Zimmermann, Puzzling, 288-91.

\(^{64}\) E.g. (i) Balabanski, “Opening”, 80-2 relativises and ultimately rejects φρονίµος by contrasting it to sophia wisdom (which she claims to be able to identify within Matthew as a superior form of wisdom). This sets aside the Matthean use of φρονίµος, where it is a characteristic of Jesus’ disciples (7.24; 10.16; 24.45), of those who “recognise and respond decisively to their eschatological situation” (Hays, Luke’s, 143). (ii) Schottroff’s socio-historical analysis, that reads the parable as a sketch of the experience of young women presenting themselves publicly for marriage (Schottroff, Parables, 29-31: thus depicting “the separation of good future wives from bad ones”), is without secure grounds in ancient literature or known ancient customs (see the far better historical research in Zimmermann, Puzzling, 270-7). (iii) Schottroff’s reading of 25.1a to refer to “the beginning of the birthpangs” rather than to “the end” (36) strains against the most natural reading of the literary context, with its clear focus on the day of the Son of Man’s coming (see especially Matt 24.36-51; Zimmermann, Puzzling, 269,281-4; Balabanski, “Opening”, 92-3). In my view all of these points are inconsistent with literary or historical realities, thus illustrating an unresolved tension within Zimmermann’s methodology.
be invoked. The delicate balance Zimmermann called for between reader-oriented, literary, and historical approaches unravels as a strong reader/scholar perspective shapes interpretive outcomes. The tension between these readings and Zimmermann's literary and historical analysis points to the potential for reader-directed readings that stand in no obvious relationship to the Jesus of history and of the Gospels. In my view this issue is inadequately addressed by Zimmermann.

Zimmermann's model rightly identifies the three main areas of analysis that shape parable interpretation (literary analysis, socio-historical research, and audience participation). However, the particular role of each requires careful definition, to avoid loss of coherence between them and irresolvable tension in the interpretive process. My argument in this thesis is that while the audience/reader plays a vital role in discovering the meaning/function of a parable, he/she does not determine that meaning/function to the same extent as historical and literary factors. A readers' contribution to the interpretive process is of a different order of interpretive significance. Zimmermann has described historical and literary realities as "boundaries" to the "field of play" within which interpretive practice takes place. The analogy is helpful in recognising that interpretation of the parables of Jesus typically occurs within parameters defined by historical and literary factors, beyond which we can no longer talk about a meaningful connection between an interpretation and the parable's historical and literary origins. However, the analogy itself has limitations, because historical and (particularly) literary approaches not only create boundaries but give significant direction to the interpretive process and significant shape to interpretive outcomes. This is the nature of the data. Perhaps a better analogy is to regard the parables as a dense tropical forest. The signs, provided by historical and literary analysis, mean a reader may find their way along the interpretive path that leads into and among the trees and foliage to the point where the beauty of the forest is most clearly seen. The reader must take the journey, and read the signs to do so, but does not determine the direction of the path, which he/she simply cannot discover alone given the nature of the terrain. Where the role of the reader is to discover rather than

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65 See Zimmermann, Puzzling, 322, where he illustrates how a historical veto works in his analysis of the Good Samaritan. He rejects a reading that sets cultic purity over against love, on the grounds that "the pre-Christian joining together of the love commandments into one so-called 'double love commandment'... disallows this position". Reference to "the Jewish audience", Torah and the intentions of Jesus ("Is Jesus truly interested in a discussion of the norms of various Torah laws?") evidences a desire to honour historical realities associated with the parable's origins. On these grounds Zimmermann rejects this reading (despite acknowledging that a group of scholars/readers have read the parable this way). It is not clear to me why he is willing to use his veto here, but is unwilling to do so in relation to the readings of Balabanski and Schottroff where similar (or even less contested) inconsistencies with historical research and literary analysis can be identified.

66 It is notable how Balabanski and Schottroff essentially veto other readings of the Ten Virgins (similar to Zimmermann's first two) on the basis of incompatibility with their ideological paradigm (see Schottroff, Parables; 29-34). I suggest that if the veto rights of Zimmermann's model were taken seriously, none of the readings he has proposed would be left standing. The first two would be vetoed by Balabanski and Schottroff, and their readings would be vetoed because of incompatibility with Zimmermann's historical research and literary analysis.

67 Zimmermann, Puzzling, 205-6. Thus it is possible to speak of boundaries outside of which “the game is no longer possible” (205; see examples on 205-6).
determine meaning, the range of interpretive outcomes will be more narrowly defined than Zimmermann recognises, but a strong and meaningful link between interpretations and the parables' origins will be retained.

**Summary**

Parables, by virtue of their Plasticity, are able to be used to various literary and rhetorical ends (in a range of contexts), and to carry multiple meanings in reception. In this sense they are polyvalent. However, the parables' inherent Plasticity also means that a particular parable may be deliberately assigned a *particular* function and made to carry a *particular* meaning, in regard to a particular circumstance or situation. The use of conventional rhetorical and/or textual signals in presenting a parable means that its intended situational function and meaning may also be expected to be recognised in reception. Thus polyvalence, while an accurate description of the parables' nature, is not always an accurate description of the use or reception of the parables.

The interpretive paradigms espoused by Tolbert, Crossan and Zimmermann, inasmuch as they argue for polyvalence in the contemporary reception of the parables of Jesus, are in my view incompatible with their Synoptic presentation. As demonstrated in the previous three chapters, the Synoptics situate the parables within a narrative, juxtapose material alongside them having interpretive significance, and provide other textual signals that inform interpretation. In this way the Synoptics seek to guide reception of the parables of Jesus (by readers ancient or modern) toward particularity of meaning and function. Even on those few occasions where a similar parable is used in more than one way, it *is still used in a particular way in each situation*. Further, the way the Synoptics describe Jesus' use of parables suggests he told parables with particular didactic and prophetic aims. The disciples’ questions to Jesus concerning the parables, his “explaining everything” to them (Mark 4.34), and his rebuking the disciples for misunderstanding his parabolic speech (e.g. Mark 7.18) all point to communicative intent, as do the sometimes hostile responses of Jesus’ opponents on their reception of a parable (e.g. Mark 12.12). Neither is Tolbert’s or Zimmermann's concept of polyvalence coherent with Synoptic or historical Jesus portraits that characterise Jesus as a first century Jewish apocalyptic, prophetic or rabbinic figure, the speech of which typically has definable communicable content and intent that is closely related to audience and circumstance. While there is debate over whether Jesus’ parables sit within Jewish wisdom or prophetic traditions, neither tradition typically evidences speech acts that have as their

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68 See Chapter VII.

69 See e.g. Meier, *Marginal V*, 36-41 for an overview of the issues. Meier argues (rightly in my view) for Jewish prophetic antecedents to Jesus’ parables, even while admitting they deal with ethical issues. See also N.T. Wright, *Victory*, 177 on how the parables of Jesus are situated “within precisely the *Jewish prophetic tradition*” (italics original). Crossan, *Historical*, understands Jesus (and his parables) in more “sapiential” terms (292; see his discussion of the parables in 276-82), but still sees Jesus speaking parables with specific, discoverable communicative intent, in that they portray the kingdom of God in a particular way.
communicative mode the generation of multiple reader-directed readings as suggested by the polyvalent paradigm. The polyvalent paradigm stands in tension with what is known of the historical and literary origins of the parables of Jesus.

Section II: POLYVALENT PARABLES AND CONTEMPORARY AUDIENCES

Some scholars argue that recognising the parables’ polyvalence and encouraging multiple interpretations is essential to securing the parables’ contemporary relevance. This argument suggests a serious limitation to the value of my methodology, with its emphasis on the parables’ literary particularity. While larger hermeneutical questions cannot be addressed here (due to space constraints), in what follows I critically evaluate (and ultimately reject) scholarship arguing this way. Further (in Section III), I point beyond these arguments by showing that the particularity of the Synoptic arrangement of the parables may in fact facilitate rather than frustrate contemporary reception of the parables.

Tolbert: Parables and Modern Paradigms

Tolbert claimed that interpreting the parables “within their gospel contexts…fails to support the hermeneutical concern of the modern Christian community for what the parables can mean today”.\(^{70}\) It is only in “learning to exploit the polyvalency of the parable form” that we “discover the ways in which ancient scriptural material can interact with contemporary cultural concerns”.\(^{71}\) Rather than “holding fast” to the NT Gospel authors’ interpretations, “we should follow their example of hermeneutical activity”.\(^{72}\) For Tolbert, this means bringing the parables into interpretive relationship with contemporary paradigms, an approach she illustrates using Freudian psychoanalytic theory to inform a reading of the Prodigal Son. In Tolbert's reading, the parable is understood to dramatise “the most basic conflicts and relations of the human psyche”,\(^{73}\) expressing the “basic human desire for unity and wholeness” that takes the form of a “continuing conflict and attempt at resolution” at a personal psychic level.\(^{74}\) This interpretive approach is a “defensible choice” if the aim is to “relate the parable to the contemporary interest in psychological development”.\(^{75}\)

\(^{70}\) Tolbert, *Perspectives*, 52.

\(^{71}\) Tolbert, *Perspectives*, 65.

\(^{72}\) Tolbert, *Perspectives*, 115; just as the early church “exploited the polyvalency of the parable form to bring the word to bear on issues of concern for the early church, so we also must exploit it in order to confront the various problems of the modern church”; see also 62-5.

\(^{73}\) Tolbert, *Perspectives*, 102.

\(^{74}\) Tolbert, *Perspectives*, 93-107; here 107. The parable “speaks to our deepest desire for reconciliation” (101). “It speaks to the wish of every individual for harmony and unity within” (102).

\(^{75}\) Tolbert, *Perspectives*, 112.
In Tolbert’s analysis Freudian psychology provides for the epiphoric movement in interpretation (linking vehicle to tenor). The interpersonal drama of the Story corresponds neatly to elements of Freud’s concept of inner psychic life, establishing a comparative relationship between the two. But a subsequent diaphoric movement of interpretation, producing new meaning through the juxtaposition of parable and specific proximate ideas and images, does not occur in Tolbert’s analysis. Freudian psychology is a general paradigm (having no direct or proximate relationship to the parable), unable to supply the specific and proximate data required to inform the diaphoric interpretive movement. As a result, the parable functions in Tolbert’s analysis mainly to illustrate Freudian psychology (by being analogous to it) for the reader. This is the most basic, simple use of a parable; the potential (anticipated in Tolbert’s earlier analysis) for new meaning and new perspectives to emerge in the interpretive process remains unexplored. The Story does not, for example, contribute anything to develop or enrich the Freudian paradigm, or critique it in any way. For it to do so a diaphoric interpretive step is needed (such as would be facilitated by the data placed in literary proximity to the parable in its Lukan arrangement), following which a genuine dialogue with Freudian psychology would be possible, and no doubt productive.

**Zimmermann: The Moral Impact of the Parables**

In his discussion of the parables’ ethical potential, Zimmermann also anticipates multiple interpretations. He argues that the parables not only portray “God’s world order” but are designed to allow that world order to “engage directly in the lives of the reader”. For Zimmermann, the Stories - in themselves - are capable of having a “moral impact” that is closely connected to their “linguistic form and mediality”. Zimmermann proposes a concept of “transferability” to allow the

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76 See e.g. “The picture of the younger son presented in the parable is very close to the kind of picture Freud presents of the psychic element which he terms the id” (Tolbert, Perspectives, 102); “the elder son exhibits some striking analogies with the... superego, as Freud calls it” (104); “the ego’s success... much like that of the father... the ego, like the father in the parable...” (106) (all italics mine). Thus narrative and psychological paradigm are analogous. See also her summary comments (113-4).

77 Tolbert’s explanation of the significance of her interpretation is only that people appreciate the parable because it “depicts the continuing conflict and attempt at resolution that form the basic fabric of everyday psychic life” (107). In other words, the parable as informed by Freudian psychology, is an illustration of something important to people, but also something already known, quite independent of the parable. This is to assign a very limited role to the parables of Jesus.

78 Cf. the important observations of Curkpatrick, “Parable”, 306 who like Tolbert recognises how the “metonymic possibility” of the L parables “can assume any number of possibilities either tangible or figurative in reference”. However, he also recognises that the Gospel framing serve to “ameliorate [their] boundless possible dissipation, and give [them] a ‘reality shattering’ dimension within the kerygma of gospel narrative”. He rightly argues that the L parables “do require a gospel kerygma and therefore theological framing for this dimension” (italics mine).

79 While Tolbert saw interpretations arising from bringing a parable into dialogue with a contemporary paradigm, Zimmermann anticipates a direct dialogue between a parable and a contemporary reader. Both approaches inevitably lead to multiple interpretive trajectories being pursued.

80 Zimmermann, Puzzling, 174.

81 Zimmermann, Puzzling, 175; “thus we are dealing with narrative ethics”. The stories make their appeal through “narrative elements such as plot in space and time, characterisation and relationship among the characters, or literary stylistic devices like inner monologues...or gaps”.
stories to speak to contemporary circumstances. Transferability means the “transfer of plot situations onto different and new situations”, so that a “pattern of action becomes a model for a new, alien situation”. The ethical impact of the Story occurs “in the emotional participation” of the reader and the questions the Story stimulates for them. For example, the Good Samaritan’s “specific geographically…and sociologically…defined situation shows us a plot that can become a model for similar situations in other regions and times”. The dramatic scenes of the Story allow a reader to “enter the story emotionally” so that they will ask “Why does no one help? Someone should do something!...What would I do?” Thus parables facilitate “subtle, inviting ethics”; they act as “‘discussion starters’ about ethical norms, proper actions, and moral principles”, leaving it up to readers “to come to their own conclusions and make their own decisions concerning their own actions”.

In Zimmermann’s approach, a reader’s engagement with the parables may be limited to engagement with the world of the Story. This is problematic on two accounts. Firstly, the NT parables seldom “model” ethical behaviour in the way Zimmermann finds the Good Samaritan to do. The Good Samaritan is one of a small number of “single indirect narrative” parables, that concern the subject at the centre of the parable, and thus bring the reader directly to the ethical issue at hand. The majority of the NT parables are ultimately about another subject to the one the Story narrates. Their ethical significance will not be apparent, or at least not fully apparent, with reference to the Story alone. For example, Zimmermann discusses the response of adolescent girls to the relational dynamics portrayed in the Ten Virgins, which cause them to reflect on “competition among girls and young women”. Zimmermann feels “much has been achieved” when adolescent girls feel the Story denounces a competitiveness they experience in their own relationships. It must also be true that much is lost if these girls never hear in the parable the promise of “Christ’s eschatological appearance” and the related invitation to “do everything possible to enter with the bridegroom”, ethical dimensions that only become clear as the parable is considered in its literary context. Crucial elements of the NT parables’ ethical content are unlikely

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83 Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 177.
84 Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 177.
85 Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 178.
86 Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 178.
87 The terminology is from Snodgrass as discussed in Chapter IV. Elsewhere they are labelled “example stories”, recognising how they profile behaviour that others may emulate. Only 4-5 of Jesus’ parables function this way.
88 Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 281, citing the pastoral work of Oldenhage.
89 Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 291.
90 As shown by Zimmermann’s first two readings of the parable; the quotations are from Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 284, 288.
to ever emerge for a reader whose engagement is limited to the world of the Story. The ethical content of the parables - as informed by literary analysis and socio-historical research - is rich and multi-faceted (as Zimmermann's own analysis of the Ten Virgins shows). It seems unnecessarily reductionist to confine parable ethics to Story-based transferability.

Secondly, the parables profile a wide range of human behaviours (not all of which are evaluated) so that a contemporary reader, with reference to the Stories alone, may find (and emulate) "patterns of action" that are sometimes coherent and at other times discordant with Synoptic ethics. In that sense, the Stories, *in isolation*, are characterised by a high degree of moral and ethical ambiguity. Zimmermann has considerable confidence that a reader, in their engagement with the Stories, will find encouragement for constructive moral and ethical behaviour. In my view this confidence is not justified, particularly where a reader does not *already* hold to Zimmermann's ethical norms. The parables contain "patterns of action" that include for example, violence and murder, vengeance, apathy toward suffering, corrupt business practice, selfish accumulation of wealth, and injustice. Under Zimmermann's approach, any or all of these motifs have the potential to be picked up by a contemporary reader as a "model" for their own behaviour even where they have no basis in the ethics of the Synoptic Jesus. Kermode rightly warned "that fictions, wrongly or carnally read, may prey upon life". Because the NT parables are parables of

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91 In my view the Good Samaritan has one of the strongest exemplary "patterns of action" of all the parables, but this does not guarantee that the parable (when considered in isolation from its Lukan context) will always contribute toward Biblical ethics. See e.g. Spencer, *Political*, 31-82 for how the Good Samaritan has featured in UK Political discourse in support of a very diverse range of economic, social and foreign policy positions, some of which have nothing to do with Lukan theology and ethics. As Zimmermann himself has rightly observed elsewhere, even for the Good Samaritan, the crucial "intertextual and metaphorical references" that make the ethics of the parable explicit, "can only be uncovered or created by considering the narrative in its context", and that "only the embedding of the deeper context brings the motif of love into play" (Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 304). Cf. the discussion of narrative and ethics in Nelson, *Morality*, especially his treatment of Hauerwas' scholarship (148-50) and his conclusion that "narrative is necessary but insufficient for Christian ethics" (149).

92 Cf. how Curkpatrick, "Parable", 303 finds "various forms of oppression such as slavery, violent imposition of obedience, violent hegemonic rule, militarism, rapacious greed, surplus wealth, antipathy toward ethnic religious leadership, patriarchal structures, and less than altruistic reasons for justice" in the "L parables". He rightly questions the parables' ability, in isolation from their Gospel framing, to subvert or challenge exploitation, discrimination, oppression and injustice (301-6), finding them instead to mirror the ambiguities of life "without being particularly kerygmatic or world reversing" (306). It is the Gospel "framing" of these parables that creates "theological direction amid the ambivalent and diffuse threads of moral and social life" depicted in the parables; "the moral lessons belong to Luke's parable frames" (306).

93 For an example involving another parable see Ukpong, "Parable", 201-5 who finds in the Hidden Talent condemnation of exploitative lending practices in Nigeria, but only because he has imposed ethics from elsewhere (Matt 25.31-46) into the Story. Without this imported ethic, the Story may well evoke modern exploitative lending practices for a reader such as Ukpong (an example of Zimmermann's transferability), but in itself it does not condemn them. It seems equally legitimate under Zimmermann's methodology to find in the parable "praise for a homespun capitalism on the lips of Jesus" (as Rohrbaugh, "Peasant", 32 notes has been common in scholarship; similarly Luz, *Matthew 21*-*28*, 261 bemoaning how the parable is "used by sharks and business people as spiritual legitimation"). And surely it is equally valid to find a critique of "relational/event-oriented cultures" and the "laziness" and lack of stewardship they sanction, and confirmation of the recent economic development achievements of countries such as "Japan, South Korea, and Singapore" reflecting how "their cultures value stewardship" (Carpenter, "Parable", 170-1). Under Zimmermann's methodology there appears no basis to question these readings, or to prefer one and reject another, since they all follow his lead in making a transfer of "patterns of action" from the Story into a contemporary reader's own context.

94 Kermode, *Genesis*, 20. Kermode wrote of the dangers of "a privileged interpretation, propounded by an elite believing that it alone has access to the true spiritual sense of a text". I agree with Kermode here, but suggest that *any individual, sharing the same convictions about their own particular interpretation*, can be equally dangerous.
Jesus they will, for many readers, legitimate whatever ethical positions are derived from them.\textsuperscript{95} Hence the importance of forms of contemporary engagement with the parables that encourage ethics that cohere with the life and teaching of (the historical and/or Synoptic) Jesus. Socio-historical research and literary analysis make an indispensable contribution to preserving this link.

Zimmermann assumes readers will “veto” readings that involve unacceptable ethical positions. For example, he asserts that from a reader-oriented perspective, “an anti-Jewish reading of Mark 12.1-12…cannot be tolerated”.\textsuperscript{96} But such a reading has been acceptable to some readers throughout the centuries and is consistent with the world-view and value system of some contemporary persons.\textsuperscript{97} The veto of an anti-semitic reading of Mark 12.1-12 can be invoked on literary-historical grounds,\textsuperscript{98} but there is no guarantee it will come from a reader. As a further safeguard Zimmermann proposes that individual readings must be “integrated into an interpreting community” where the readings of others “necessarily call our own insights into question”.\textsuperscript{99} There is considerable potential in this suggestion, though risks remain. The post-modern mind may well observe a desirable plurality of perspective where Zimmermann expects to see one view calling another into question. Also, strong communities (in which a discussion like this is most likely to occur) tend toward shared and tightly held ethical and ideological positions, that will shape the lessons drawn from the parables under Zimmermann’s method. Contrary viewpoints are likely to be associated with “outsiders” and vetoed accordingly. Thus a challenge to the ideology of such a group is unlikely to come from their own (internal) reader-directed interaction with the parables; it is in practice far more likely that the parables will be mined for elements that affirm the group’s ideology. It is only as the parables of Jesus are read in connection with the historical circumstances which gave birth to them and the literary form in which they have been preserved, that they are able to speak with a voice of their own to affirm, refine, or to challenge an individual’s ethics or a group’s ideology.

\textsuperscript{95} See e.g. Spencer, \textit{Political}, 31-82 on how UK politicians have made public reference to the Good Samaritan to “justify economic policy, to vindicate military intervention, to defend overseas aid… to legitimate state intervention….” (81-2; italics mine). His study evidences the powerful legitimating role this parable has played in contemporary UK political/public discourse. Cf. Irenaeus, \textit{Adversus Haereses}, 1.8.1 on how the Gnostics adapt the parables “in a manner worthy of credence” in order that their fabrication (πλάσμα) “might not appear to be without witness” (1.8.1: ἵνα τὸ πλάσμα αὐτῶν μὴ Ἀμφιβολοῦν ἐνιαί δοκῇ; \textit{ut pigmentum illorum non sine teste esse videatur}). See Behre, “Scripture”, 181-2 for this translation and for how in Hellenistic literary theory, πλάσμα (fabrication) refer to “stories that are… not true but seem to be so”.

\textsuperscript{96} Zimmermann, \textit{Puzzling}, 206.

I cannot imagine a member of the present Iranian ruling elite wishing to exercise a veto right over an anti-Semitic reading of a parable.

\textsuperscript{98} See e.g. Snodgrass, \textit{Stories}, 296-7, finding that “this parable is not anti-Semitic and is not a rejection of the Jewish nation”.

\textsuperscript{99} Zimmermann, \textit{Puzzling}, 172-4; by community he envisages an academic or church community, or the community of other readers through history.
Oldenhage: Tainted Parables

The importance of these issues becomes apparent in Oldenhage’s semi-autobiographical account of her own experience of the “transferability” Zimmermann describes. Reading the Murderous Tenants, she finds herself:

…being powerfully referred to limit experiences of ‘death, suffering, guilt, and hatred’ in my own time, memories of excessive violence…Images of Nazi atrocities flashed before my eyes as the story took its catastrophic course…I made a transfer from the world of the story to my own ‘context of discourse’.

The parable becomes contemporary for Oldenhage because “the excessive violence of the parable can cause a transfer to the extreme horror of the Holocaust”. Oldenhage is troubled by the parable’s history of anti-Semitic readings. However, she sees no particular value in literary or socio-historical analysis that suggests the parable was not anti-Semitic in its origins. What is important for Oldenhage is that the parable “very soon turned into a weapon against Jewish communities.” Oldenhage pursues with remarkable integrity the personal implications of this reader-directed interpretation of this parable. The parable is and will remain for her “a tainted text…part of a poisoned Christian reservoir”, not a “meaningful scripture” but “a cause for trouble”. Because readers have found, in the plot of this Story, patterns of behaviour readily transferrable to their own context, providing sanction for behaviour Oldenhage finds morally reprehensible, the parable is forever spoiled for her.

The parable’s residual value for Oldenhage lies in its ability to facilitate remembrance. But Oldenhage overlooks the morally risky nature of remembering where the emphasis lies on the reader and not on the text as normative for ethics. Remembering carries the past into the future in different ways, and for different purposes. The assumption behind Oldenhage’s own inquiry is

100 Oldenhage, Parables, 144. Oldenhage is transparent in approaching the parables as “a German who sees herself confronted with the legacy of the Holocaust”; from that position she (using language similar to Zimmermann), “picks up, responds to, and interacts with” the parables (Oldenhage, Parables, 9).

101 Oldenhage, Parables, 148.

102 Oldenhage, Parables, 150, citing Milavec’s study, which argues the Murderous Tenants was a “true Jewish story” regarding “inner-Jewish conflict”, not an anti-Jewish story.

103 Oldenhage, Parables, 150.

104 Oldenhage, Parables, 150.

105 Oldenhage, Parables, 150. The parable can facilitate a “work of remembrance…[involving] explorations of both the anti-Jewish legacy carried by this text and its contemporary resonances with the events of the Holocaust”. The parable “may be an important venue for German Christians to try to integrate these crimes into their cultural and religious self-understanding”, leading to “an effort to identify and remember the violent acts committed by Germans in the first half of the twentieth century” (149).

106 For example, war/violence has throughout history been remembered to sustain nationalistic hopes, and/or as the basis for revenge, sustaining ongoing cycles of violence and war. Within families, (past) poverty has been remembered to encourage self-reliance and wealth accumulation. Individuals, groups and nations have remembered past failure as a lesson to avoid taking risk in the future.
that the Holocaust is a moral and ethical disaster of immense proportions. But for other contemporary persons, the Holocaust may well have aspects of coherence with their own ambitions.\textsuperscript{107} Where will “remembering” take them? Oldenhage’s analysis should (in my view) alert us to the very real risk that Story-based hermeneutics may similarly lead to other parables becoming “tainted texts” because they have been used to legitimate amoral and unethical actions that have had tragic implications for others’ lives. Thus in my view a different approach to bringing the parables of Jesus to bear on contemporary ethical issues is needed.

Summary
The two different interpretive approaches discussed in this Section both emphasise the importance of multiple interpretations of the parables of Jesus and of exploring the parables’ contemporary relevance without reference to their Gospel contexts. Tolbert brings Story into direct dialogue with a contemporary paradigm. Zimmermann brings the contemporary person into direct engagement with Story. My analysis highlights the risk that in doing so the parables may say very little, only illustrating existing contemporary paradigms (Tolbert), or may speak only within the confines of an audience’s existing ethical paradigm (Zimmermann), with the associated risk of legitimising contemporary paradigms/ethics incompatible with NT theology and ethics (Zimmermann and Tolbert). These limitations suggest the need for an alternative approach to establishing the contemporary significance of the parables of Jesus.

Section III: AN ALTERNATIVE PROPOSAL FOR THE CONTEMPORARY RECEPTION OF THE PARABLES OF JESUS

Introduction
In this section I outline - in broad terms - a hermeneutical strategy that incorporates both a contextual reading of the parables of Jesus and contemporary audiences and the circumstances of their lives. Given space constraints my proposal is not developed in great detail. My aim is only to sketch out a possible hermeneutical pathway that points us beyond the assertion that the parables’ literary or historical particularity is a barrier to their contemporary relevance. I demonstrate that a contextual reading may actually facilitate rather than frustrate contemporary engagement with the parables. Also, this proposal is tabled because it builds on and explores the hermeneutical implications of, aspects of the central argument in my thesis. As I have shown, the Synoptic arrangement of the parables brings three pieces of data into interpretive dialogue with each other: Story, Plain Speech and Underlying Circumstance. My argument here is that all three are important in the contemporary reception of a parable, particularly for an audience that is concerned to retain

\textsuperscript{107} E.g. those contemporary persons/organisations who have the publicly stated ambition of overthrowing the State of Israel by violence means (which inevitably - as with the Holocaust - must involve the deaths of many Jewish persons).
a meaningful link between their own reception of a parable and the (historical and/or Synoptic) Jesus with whom the parables' origins lie.

The Parables' Contemporary Reception: Story, Plain Speech, Underlying Circumstance

Introduction

The matters discussed so far in this chapter inevitably raise wider (and complex) questions concerning Biblical interpretation and the role of the contemporary reader in that task. These issues ultimately lie beyond the scope of this thesis. However, in order to position my arguments in this chapter within the broader scholarly debate, I will interact briefly with one major and recent contribution to Biblical hermeneutics, that of Christoper Spinks. Spinks' study in theological interpretation of Scripture involves a sympathetic engagement with the scholarship of Vanhoozer and Fowl, scholars who have both made ground breaking contributions to Biblical hermeneutics, but who have very different ideas about the associated role of the contemporary reader (or reading community). Vanhoozer argues for recognition of the importance of an author's communicative intentions, as “embodied in the text”, if the Scriptures are to “address and transform” contemporary readers. Fowl in contrast emphasises the role of the Christian community (past and present) in Biblical interpretation. For Fowl, Biblical interpretation involves a “complex interaction in which Christian convictions, practices and concerns are brought to bear on scriptural interpretation in ways that both shape that interpretation and are shaped by it”. Spinks finds much to value in both proposals, but seeks to move beyond “dyadic” models of meaning and to transform the proposals of Vanhoozer and Fowl by incorporating their strengths into a more comprehensive, triadic model of theological interpretation. Drawing on Speech Act theory, Spinks argues that we must recognise an interdependence between “conventional”, “referential” and “affective” aspects of a communicative event, or what is described in other literature as the “locutionary”, “illocutionary” and “perlocutionary” elements of communication.

108 See Spinks, *Bible*, 69-111; the major work with which Spinks engages is Vanhoozer, *Meaning*.

109 See Spinks, *Bible*, 41-67; the major work with which Spinks engages is Fowl, *Engaging*.

110 I have chosen Spinks because his is a relatively recent study and because he gives an extended (and insightful) treatment to Vanhoozer and Fowl, two major contributors to Biblical hermeneutics scholarship, and representative of major schools of thought. Further, Spinks' own proposal may be seen to build on (and further develop) the ground-breaking work of Thiselton (see Thiselton, *New* and Thiselton, *Two*), in its insistence on a substantive role for both text and contemporary readers/communities in the interpretive process.


115 Spinks, *Bible*, 140-41, discussing the scholarship of McClendon and Smith.

116 Spinks, *Bible*, 116-37. Cf. similarly Gadamer, *Truth*, 306-9 insisting on a definition of hermeneutics that includes “understanding”, “interpretation” and “application” (306); also how any “distinction between cognitive, normative, and reproductive interpretation has no fundamental validity, but all three constitute one unitary phenomena” (309).
He sees these “triads” as models for a “triadic” concept of meaning that points to the possibility of biblical interpretation taking the form of a “conversation”, to which author, text and communities (past and present) all contribute substantively. Theological interpretation is then not so much discovering meaning or creating meaning, but is better understood as “participating in something that manifests itself only in the interplay between author, text and reader, in the total speech situation, in the mediation of God’s truth”. Spinks does not discuss the practical shape of this conversation, but his proposal is reasonably clear at a conceptual level. It is not my intention to evaluate Spinks’ triadic hermeneutical model here, but merely to use it as a means of situating the arguments in this chapter in relation to wider hermeneutical scholarship.

**Story, Plain Speech and Underlying Circumstance**

In undertaking a literary-critical study of the parables (in the main body of this thesis), I make no pretence to have been involved in the full conversation that constitutes “theological interpretation” as Spinks defines that. Rather, my study is focused primarily on the text, and may in this sense be understood to concern the contribution of one party only to Spinks’ conversation. Spinks recognises the vital contribution of this component of the conversation, insisting on the ongoing importance of “thick descriptions” of the Biblical text alongside similarly “thick” descriptions of authorial intentions and of Christian communities. In particular, he recognises that without attention to the text we have “no recourse to the necessary referential conditions” that must inform the conversation that is theological interpretation.

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117 Spinks, *Bible*, 153-57; 162-78. Each party contributes to “the vital conversation that is theological interpretation and in which Scripture’s meaning is made manifest” (157; italics original).

118 Spinks, *Bible*, 155; italics original. Thus, the “meaning of Scripture is a complex reality of the entire dialogue Christians understand is taking place within their community, through their texts, and with their God” (153; italics original); “meaning is the mediation of God’s truth that takes place between authors, readers and the community of which they are all a part” (182). See 154-55 on Spinks’ appeal to trinitarian theology to support his triadic notions of meaning and theological interpretation. On meaning as “mediation” see 153-55.

119 A point he acknowledges (Spinks, *Bible*, 183: “we are left with the questions of practicality”; also “mine is not an argument of practice; it is rather an argument of conception” (185)). This lack of practicality explains in part the potential importance of Zimmermann’s model, discussed earlier in this chapter, for advancing the hermeneutical debate. Zimmermann is fully conversant with scholarship on hermeneutics (see e.g. Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 4-19, where he discusses Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Gadamer, Iser, Eco, Bühler and others), but his singular contribution to parable scholarship (despite the limitations I have identified) is his attempt to translate these often very theoretical discussions into a practical interpretive model that gives both text and reader a substantive role in the interpretive process.

120 Spinks, *Bible*, 183, using the terminology of Vanhoozer. See Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 284-86; “a description is sufficiently thick when it allows us to appreciate everything the author is doing in a text” (28; drawing on the work of Gilbert Ryle and Clifford Geertz).

121 See Spinks, *Bible*, 177-8: “I cannot stress strongly enough the continued need for the tools of historical criticism. They are indispensable…” (177; italics original); “We cannot do without historical, grammatical and sociological investigations of the texts…” (177-8). At the same time, Spinks is arguing that historical critical (and by implication literary critical) approaches do not account for the “meaning” of Scripture under his broad definition of meaning; neither are they the “ultimate regulator of the conversation” (178), but rather they are one participant alongside author and communities. Spinks is also calling for historical-critical inquiry to broaden its scope beyond the text to examine the “communities within which the text has been interpreted and… the historical evolution of the interpretation of the community itself” (173). Spinks is using a broad definition of historical criticism (172-3) that includes a study such as mine.

122 Spinks, *Bible*, 178; historical critical approaches “continue to be vital elements in the theological conversation… a holistic account of meaning… must ‘suppose appropriate referential or representative conditions obtained’” (173, citing Nancey Murphy).
The present chapter, making no claim to be a comprehensive treatment of hermeneutical issues in regard to the parables, seeks only to draw out from my main analysis some implications for how a conversation between author, text and community (such as Spinks calls for) might take place in regard to the Synoptic parables. Earlier in this chapter I discussed scholarship asserting that to read the parables within their literary and historical contexts is to deny them relevance for a contemporary audience. This is tantamount to saying, in Spinks’ terminology, that if the hermeneutical conversation is to include contemporary readers or reading communities, the parables cannot contribute constructively and meaningfully to that conversation if their Synoptic contexts are retained. This conviction leads scholars such as Tolbert to insist on taking the parables out of their Synoptic contexts, thus truncating the text, in order for the “text” to retain its place at the table of conversation. This is to deny author and text (as whole-text) their rightful place in Spinks’ conversation. In my critique of this scholarship I have also cast serious doubt over whether the proposals of Tolbert and Zimmermann, for direct engagement between reader and parable, can really be classified as a conversation. Rather, I have shown how their proposals lead too readily to what Thiselton calls a “premature assimilation” of the text (parable) into the “perspectives projected by the horizons of readers”, having the potential to leave a reader “trapped within his or her own horizon”. As discussed above, the result of these approaches is often to place serious limitations on the nature and scope of the text’s contribution to the hermeneutical conversation, so that (for example) important Synoptic theological/ethical concerns are easily overlooked or marginalised. Further, this approach often results in undue weight being given to the voice of the reader/hearer in the hermeneutical conversation, leading to hermeneutical outcomes lacking substantive textual shaping (for example, legitimation of ethics having no or only a highly tenuous connection to the Synoptic Jesus). For example, a contemporary reader of the Judge and the Widow - in isolation from its Gospel context - may easily not perceive the relation to prayer. A validation of physical violence, or at least the threat of it, as a means to justice, may be found by those looking for it. The possibility of outcomes of this nature should not be minimised. After all, the history of the parables’ reception (a history Spinks rightly insists we must critically engage with), is replete with examples of the parables (considered without reference to their Gospel contexts) functioning primarily as echo chambers or legitimation devices, rather than being given their own voice in a genuine (hermeneutical) conversation.

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123 Thiselton, New, 8; preventing what he elsewhere calls a “premature ‘fusion of horizons’” (546). To treat the parables in isolation is to risk meaning being “subsumed within the prior horizons of the reading-community” so that “we no longer stand where, with Gadamer, we construe engagements between readers and texts as interaction between two horizons, each of which is first to be respected before a fusion of these two horizons can take place” (516). See further the discussion in Thiselton, Two, 10-23; Gadamer, Truth, 304, on how “it is constantly necessary to guard against overhastily assimilating the past to our own expectations of meaning”, and his warning against “a naive assimilation” of the past into the present (305).

124 The physical violence (ὑπωπιάζω) the judge perceives as possibly coming his way is an example of the “patterns of action” Zimmermann proposes that a contemporary audience may find legitimated by the parable. Does Jesus tell the parable to promote physical violence, or the threat of it, as a means to justice? The Story itself cannot answer this question.

125 See Spinks, Bible, 172-78.
Constructively, my analysis provides important insight into the necessary conditions under which true dialogue - or conversation as Spinks calls it - may occur between the Synoptic parables and contemporary audiences. In particular, my analysis argues for the importance of the Story-Plain Speech relationship in defining the contribution of author and text to the hermeneutical conversation. This is not always appreciated in parable scholarship, where the emphasis is often on either Story or Plain Speech when connecting the parables and contemporary audiences. As discussed earlier, the Plasticity of the parables means that they are not usually able - in themselves - to function effectively as a dialogue or conversation partner (where the conversation is a serious one in which a genuine contest of ideas occurs and new understanding emerges). The parables - at the table of hermeneutical conversation - will typically defer to other conversation partners, whose viewpoints may dominate, preventing the parables’ voice from being heard on its own (Synoptic) terms. My argument has been that the parables’ Synoptic frames are designed to facilitate an interim interpretive step in which the literary intentions concerning the parables are realised, thus ensuring text and author their place at the table of hermeneutical conversation, and allowing the parables to contribute on equal terms with other parties to the hermeneutical conversation. This interim interpretive step makes an essential contribution to establishing what Thiselton calls the “distinctiveness of the horizons” of individual participants in the hermeneutical conversation, an essential prerequisite to “a creative and productive interaction” of author, text and community.126

Equally importantly, my analysis argues against allowing the sayings/statements that frame the Synoptic parables to represent the author/text in the hermeneutical conversation. These sayings/statements are frequently understood to distill the essence of a parable into a theological principle or ethical norm having direct relevance for audiences of every generation. My earlier analysis suggests limitations to this approach. Firstly, it tends to overstate the didactic value of the Synoptic parable frames, which are often at least partially open or cryptic, or dependent in some way on the parables.127 Secondly, the telling of parables presupposes the rhetorical limitations of direct speech and seeks to harness the more sophisticated rhetorical power of narrative. The persuasive power of metaphorical narrative is lost to a contemporary audience if the parables are “reduced” to a summary statement, or seen as nothing more than an illustration of what can be

126 Thiselton, New, 8; Thiselton adapts the concept of a “fusion of horizons” from Gadamer (see especially Gadamer, Truth, 299-306).

127 As discussed in Chapter II and Chapter VII, these frames are are designed to function in collaboration with the parables, not to function alone. Cf. Dixon, “Fables”, 73 (regarding the use of fables in “character education” of children) on the temptation to “hurry through the circumstances of the fable story to reach the concluding moral”. She rightly observes how easily it is to “overestimate the usefulness of [a] general rule or principle in guiding behaviour in the real world” and argues for encouraging engagement with the Story on the grounds it provides children with the opportunity to practice assessing the link between the Story and their own circumstances, and to “explore how the action-guiding fable moral applies to particular contexts” (italics original), thus developing practical wisdom and judgment. Cf. Calvin, Commentary, 101-2: despite the fact that a parable’s teaching may be given more plainly, once an “exposition is added, the figurative discourse has greater energy and force than if it had been simple”.

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expressed more simply in direct speech. The Story has an indispensable - even if dependent - contribution to make to the hermeneutical conversation.

The Synoptic authors, in presenting the parables for their own and subsequent generations, situated Plain Speech and Story in literary proximity, signalling an interpretive connection between the two that will shape their reception by a careful reader. I am arguing that this interpretive relationship between Story and Plain Speech has a vital and ongoing role in the contemporary reception of the Synoptic parables.

My thesis also suggests that the narrative circumstances associated with the parables in their Synoptic arrangement (the Underlying Circumstance) may provide fruitful grounds for dialogue between the participants in Spinks’ hermeneutical conversation. As I have shown, the Synoptic parables are typically addressed (within the world of the narrative) to an audience facing (or about to face) particular circumstances, and who understand, react to, and are affected by those circumstances in various ways. These circumstances, and the narrative audience’s reaction to them, are often as contemporary as they are ancient, having a persistent place in human experience throughout the ages (and especially in the history of human relations between each other and with God). I propose that these circumstances may serve to stimulate constructive dialogue in the hermeneutical conversation Spinks envisions. Questions naturally arise, that more than one party to the conversation must be involved in answering. For example: (i) How do we best define the Underlying Circumstance and its (literary) relationship to the parable? (ii) Are the circumstances of a contemporary audience analogous to, or in other ways comparable to, the Underlying Circumstance? (iii) Are there elements of material difference between the two circumstances, and what are the implications of these differences for the contemporary reception of a parable? These are practical examples of questions that have the potential to bring text and contemporary persons into productive hermeneutical dialogue concerning the parables of Jesus.

One possible outcome of a conversation like this is that a parable’s Underlying Circumstance may be seen (directly or analogously) to be both ancient and contemporary in highly material ways. Where this is the case, a parable’s Underlying Circumstance has the potential to act as a point of

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128 E.g. a contemporary person who has brought the lie of Western capitalism, that wealth is the key to the good life (and organised their life accordingly), will likely be unable to accept the simple statement that life is not made up in the abundance of possessions (Luke 12.15b). However that person’s engagement with the Rich Fool may open perspectives on life previously shut out by the deception of the capitalist paradigm, so that the ultimate bankruptcy of his/her life dream is exposed, and the desire for an alternative way of life awakened.
transference for Jesus’ parables for a modern audience. One possible form of that transference is that a parable may be understood to carry the same significance for a contemporary audience’s circumstances as it did in the circumstances of its (Synoptic) origins. For example, the Judge and the Widow may provide assurance, exhortation, and self-understanding for a contemporary audience suffering persecution and injustice and longing for the day of the Son of Man (cf. Luke 17.22), just as Luke anticipates the parable will provide these same things for the first generation of Jesus’ disciples facing similar persecution and longing for the justice of the day of the Son of Man. The Barren Fig Tree may function as a cautionary warning to contemporary persons outraged at modern day massacres in places of worship, just as it functioned within the Lukan narrative as a warning to those who brought news to Jesus of Pilate’s Temple massacre. The parables are, in these examples, functioning for both audiences as determined by their Synoptic arrangement, the analogous circumstances of both audiences giving that particular function both historical and contemporary relevance. In this way the Synoptic voice of the parables may be heard by a contemporary audience, speaking with direct relevance to their present circumstances.

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129 In the case studies of Chapters V and VI, the Underlying Circumstances were: (i) the Sower: Jesus and his followers experience trouble and persecution, including from family members, and the legitimacy and authority of their words/actions are brought into question; (ii) the Rich Fool: a man is in dispute with his brother over their inheritance and wanting Jesus to take up his cause; (iii) the Barren Fig Tree: some persons report violence and murder by an imperial regime in a place of worship; (iv) the Judge and the Widow: followers of Jesus are longing for the day of the Son of Man but not seeing it, and are vulnerable to the temptation to lose heart and join the way of life of the age; (v) the Two Sons: the authority of Jesus, and his right to speak/minister in the seat of religious/political authority, is publicly challenged; (vi) the Hidden Talent: the disciples of Jesus, about to be entrusted with responsibility for the expansion of the mission of God throughout the world, lack the courage and ambition to carry out that task. These (or highly analogous) issues are readily recognisable within contemporary Christianity, even if (in some instances) moreso for some parts of the contemporary church than for others.

130 Cf. similarly (i) Ricoeur, “Biblical”, 134: “And I am ready to admit that the initial application and interpretation (in the case of the parables: the ‘historical’ interpretation)… has a kind of priority and, in that measure, is controlling with respect to reinterpretation… Our interpretations have only to be related to our particular situation as the original one was to the initial situation. It is in this analogical way (A is to B what C is to D) that the original import, i.e., the historical interpretation is controlling with respect to reinterpretation” (though he gives way on this position in what follows); (ii) Dodd, Parables, 195, acknowledges that his concern with the parables’ historical particularity may seem to reduce them to “no more than an historical interest”, but counters that in fact a “just understanding of [a parable’s] original import in relation to a particular situation in the past will put us on right lines in applying them to our own situations” (citing an example that works similarly to my approach (196)).

131 As first understood in dialogue with its Lukan frame.

132 As first understood in dialogue with its Lukan frame.

133 The contemporary significance of this parable for the people of my own country has been emphasised by recent local events having a remarkable similarity to those described in Luke 13.1b. During the final months of completing this thesis (on 15 March 2019) a gunman entered a mosque in the city of Christchurch and massacred 51 worshippers.

134 In popular preaching of the parables this point is often assumed. The similarity of the circumstances of the Synoptic narrative audience and the circumstances of a modern audience’s may be set out explicitly, as in John Bunyan’s discourse on the Barren Fig Tree, where he draws an explicit link between the arguments used by the parable’s Lukan narrative audience to deflect messages of judgment (their “old and foolish Salvo which they alwaies had in readiness against such Prophecies”), and his audience’s confidence in their “outward Privileges” (Bunyan, “Barren”, 12). Or it may be implicit. One technique that facilitates this implicit connection is where a preacher gives particular emphasis to a character in a parable and some aspect of their situation, knowing that this corresponds to both the circumstances of the Synoptic audience and the (analogous) circumstances of the preacher’s audience. An example of this technique is Martin Luther King’s sermon on the Rich Fool (King, Strength, 69-76). King makes no direct mention of the circumstances of the man whose request of Jesus precipitated the telling of the parable. But this man’s greed and dispute with his brother are indirectly profiled throughout in King’s description of the Fool and in how he describes the analogous circumstances of his audience. That the parable’s narrative circumstances had an important influence on King’s sermon is strongly suggested by how, toward the end, the Rich Fool is unmasked as “western civilisation”, materially rich but having “not learned the simple art of living together as brothers” (Italics mine), a statement that strongly evokes Luke 12.13 (but has no parallel in the parable itself).
This is not the only way for a conversation between parable and contemporary audience to take place; neither is it an inevitable result of identifying analogous aspects between contemporary persons’ circumstances and a parable’s Underlying Circumstance. However, I table this proposal because it draws directly on central arguments made in the main part of my thesis, it is suggestive of a connection between the Synoptic parables’ literary context and contemporary audiences that is often overlooked in parable scholarship, and because in my view this approach may contribute constructively to any hermeneutical endeavour that takes the text seriously as a conversation partner.

To further demonstrate the potential for the Synoptic parables’ consistent reception across time, by audiences facing similar or analogous circumstances, I discuss how a modern parable - similar to Jesus’ parables in form and function - has been able to make a consistent contribution to multiple (but analogous) circumstances.

**The Parable of the Mountaineer**

Lord Hoffman, at the House of Lords, considered a legal case regarding three banks who had obtained professional valuation advice concerning property offered as security for loans. On the basis of the valuations received, loans were made. The valuations overstated the properties’ value. A subsequent decline in the property market and default by the borrowers, led to the banks suffering loss on these loans. The banks sued the valuation firm, and were awarded substantial damages by the Court of Appeal on the grounds that had accurate valuations been given, the loans would not have been made. Lord Hoffman agreed that the valuation firm was liable, but not for the full amount of the banks’ losses. In his argument explaining this viewpoint, Lord Hoffmann told the following parable:

> A mountaineer about to undertake a difficult climb is concerned about the fitness of his knee. He goes to a doctor who negligently makes a superficial examination and pronounces the knee fit. The climber goes on the expedition, which he would not have undertaken if the doctor had told him the true state of his knee. He suffers an injury which is an entirely foreseeable consequence of mountaineering, but has nothing to do with his knee.

This parable’s relationship to the situation before the court is signalled by analogical elements between the two (doctor giving advice, patient suffering injury - valuer giving advice, banks suffering loss). However, the parable itself does not make clear the purpose of the connection between the two. The parable's initial function is to establish two distinctions: (i) between providing advice that enables a person to decide a course of action, and advising a course of action; and (ii) between the consequences of an action a person takes after considering professional advice, and

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135 South Australian Asset Management Corp v York Montague Ltd [1996] 3 All ER, 365-381.

136 South Australian Asset Management Corp v York Montague Ltd, 371.
the consequences of that advice being wrong. While the parable illuminates these crucial distinctions, it does not signal a preferred choice among them, so that the significance of the parable for the case at hand remains unclear. There are different ways to “interpret” the parable (in relation to the case), with millions of pounds of damages between them.\textsuperscript{137} Lord Hoffmann’s particular application of the parable to the case at hand only becomes evident as he takes up elements of the parable to develop his argument immediately following the parable. The usual view of the Law, he writes, is that even though the doctor was negligent in the advice given, since he was merely asked for “information on only one of the considerations which might affect the safety of the mountaineer on the expedition”, he was thus not responsible for “all the foreseeable risks of the expedition”.\textsuperscript{138} The doctor is not liable since “the injury was not caused by the doctor’s bad advice”.\textsuperscript{139} Distinguishing between a “duty to provide information for the purpose of enabling someone else to decide upon a course of action and a duty to advise someone as to what course of action he should take”, Lord Hoffmann articulated the following general principle of law:

\begin{quote}
A person under a duty to take reasonable care to provide information on which someone else will decide upon a course of action is, if negligent, not generally regarded as responsible for all the consequences of that course of action. He is responsible only for the consequences of the information being wrong.\textsuperscript{140}
\end{quote}

On these grounds the valuation firm was found to be liable for losses that arose because of inaccurate valuations, but not for losses that resulted from the general decline in property values. Through a parable, as taken and developed in subsequent direct speech argument, Lord Hoffmann has provided an alternative perspective (to that held by the Court of Appeal judges) on the liability of the valuation firm, opening the way for the amount of damages for which they were liable to be substantially reduced.

The parable of the Mountaineer features in various subsequent legal cases. One involved a plaintiff seeking damages for losses incurred on a loan to a friend, from a solicitor who had been negligent in the preparation of the loan documentation.\textsuperscript{141} Another involved a plaintiff seeking compensation for the costs of caring for a child with autism and haemophilia, from a doctor whose incorrect

\begin{footnotes}
\item[137] For example: (i) the Dr is liable for all that happened to the mountaineer since had he rightly assessed the knee the mountaineer would have stayed home; (ii) the Dr is not liable since the accident had nothing to do with the mountaineer’s knee; or (iii) the Dr is only liable to the extent the mountaineer suffered because of his knee. Lord Hoffmann articulates reading (i) as the position of the Court of Appeal before articulating reading (iii) as his own position \cite{SouthAustralianAssetManagementCorpyorkMontagueLtd372}.
\item[138] \textit{South Australian Asset Management Corp v York Montague Ltd}, 372.
\item[139] \textit{South Australian Asset Management Corp v York Montague Ltd}, 372.
\item[140] \textit{South Australian Asset Management Corp v York Montague Ltd}, 372.
\end{footnotes}
medical advice led directly to the plaintiff giving birth to the child (rather than terminating the pregnancy). Notable is how the parable (Story) is cited in full in both cases, and that close attention is also given to the particular way Lord Hoffmann drew on the parable to develop his argument (Plain Speech). Both elements make an essential contribution. The parable (Story) is essential to distinguishing between two different understandings of professional liability. Lord Hoffmann’s associated argument (Plain Speech) is essential because the parable itself can be variously interpreted, with some interpretations pointing to judicial outcomes regarded within the UK legal system as injustice rather than justice.

The reason that lawyers made reference to this parable in subsequent cases, is that these cases’ circumstances had (or were seen by some of the parties to have had) central elements that are analogous to those of the case heard by Lord Hoffmann. All three cases involve recipients of (allegedly negligent) professional advice, who suffered subsequent adverse consequences, and who felt those consequences would have been avoided if they had received accurate advice. These analogous aspects meant the parable was able to contribute in the same way to all three cases (and others similarly), helping ensure professional liability was consistently understood as Lord Hoffman first defined it. It is the analogous aspects of the three cases’ underlying circumstances that allows the parable to provide important clarification of the issues for all. Thus the historical particularity of the parable’s initial telling does not confine its significance to those circumstances, but rather provides the basis for its transference to subsequent analogous situations.

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143 See Meadows v Khan, 35; BRE Solicitors and another v Hughes-Holland, 2. In the latter case, Lord Sumption observed how the parable “over-simplifies the issue and will not bear too much analysis”, but nonetheless “serves the purpose which its author intended, of introducing one of the main dilemmas of the law of damages”. This concept of “introducing” (or illuminating) rather than resolving the dilemma of professional liability coheres with my analysis of the particular function of the parable in the initial case (above).

144 See BRE Solicitors and another v Hughes-Holland, esp. 10-14; also Meadows v Khan, 35, where the way Lord Hoffmann develops his argument by drawing on the parable’s motifs is cited in full by the defence.

145 In Meadows v Khan, the defence’s argument did not prevail on the judge (due to the judge identifying a material point of difference between the circumstances of the two cases), but the parable still played an important role in illuminating how the question of professional damages should be understood by the courts. My argument here relates to how the parable was used in the defence’s argument, not to the outcome of the case.

146 It is important to distinguish between the creation and use of a legal precedent (which I am not writing about) and the use of a parable to fortify an argument in favour of a particular legal position (which I am writing about). My discussion above concerns how a single parable has contributed to the legal arguments presented in three legal cases, not with the application of legal precedent in those cases (though the former supports the latter, it is not the same as the latter). It is this concern with the rhetorical function of the parable (not the application of legal precedent) that means this case study shares common ground with the use of parables in the ministry of Jesus. Cf. Gadamer, Truth, 307-8, 321-26 on the similarities of the legal and theological hermeneutical tasks.
**Historical Particularity and Contemporary Significance**

In presenting this case study, my argument is not that Jesus was like a judge, or used parables to create legal, ethical or theological principles having general application. I am concerned only with the similarity between the rhetorical function of Lord Hoffmann’s parable and the rhetorical function of Jesus’ parables. In my view such a similarity can be argued. Lord Hoffmann’s parable about a mountaineer seeks to alter an established viewpoint on the nature and extent of professional liability. To do so, the parable creates distance from the matter before him (bank lending) and in the world of the parable, with the help of Plain Speech argument, a new perspective (from that of the Court of Appeal) is provided on the extent of professional liability, that is then brought to bear on the case at hand. In this sense (and this sense only), Lord Hoffmann’s parable functions similarly to how I have argued the parables of the Synoptic Jesus function.

The above case study involves the highly situational use of a parable (the Mountaineer), and a parable functioning in a precise and particular way within that situation, as signalled by accompanying Plain Speech argument. The case study illustrates that reading a parable with reference to the Plain Speech argument accompanying it and the circumstances to which it initially spoke, need not confine the relevance of the parable to those circumstances. Rather: (i) reference to the Plain Speech argument accompanying the parable created a consistency between the parable’s initial and subsequent function/reception; and (ii) the circumstances that gave rise to the parable’s telling provide the basis for its transference to subsequent analogous circumstances. In the same way I am arguing the circumstances to which the parables of Jesus speak in the ministry of the Synoptic Jesus, and the Plain Speech that accompanies them in their Gospel arrangement, need not confine the relevance of these parables to history. Rather, the narrative circumstances to which the Synoptics connect the parables of Jesus may function as a point of hermeneutical transference, signalling the parables’ relevance for analogous contemporary circumstances. Reference to both Story and Plain Speech will ensure consistency between how the parables function in their gospel contexts and how they function in analogous contemporary contexts. In this way, where a contemporary audience faces circumstances analogous to a parable’s Underlying Circumstance, the parable may carry the same meaning and significance for that audience as it did for its Synoptic audience(s).\(^{147}\)

In summary, I am arguing in this Section that Story, accompanying Plain Speech, and Underlying Circumstance all retain an important role in the contemporary reception of the parables of Jesus.

\(^{147}\)This possibility has been given inadequate attention by those who have insisted on the need to free the parables from their historical/literary particularity in order to give them contemporary relevance. I am not suggesting this is the only means by which the parables of Jesus gain contemporary relevance (a larger subject beyond the scope of this thesis). My argument here seeks only to point beyond scholarship that has sought to deny the parables’ contemporary relevance on the grounds of their historical/literary particularity (e.g. Tolbert, as noted above), arguments which have overlooked the possibility of the kind of “circumstance-based” transference I have outlined here.
where there is a desire to retain, through the process of reception, a substantive link to the parables' Synoptic origins. And I am arguing that the particularity of the parables of Jesus (as per their literary arrangement) need not deny them contemporary relevance (as some have argued), but may in fact facilitate their contemporary reception in ways that retain a consistency and coherence with the parables’ function in the ministry of the Synoptic Jesus.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have explored the interpretive significance of the literary arrangement of the NT parables of Jesus, providing an interpretive model that brings together Story, accompanying Plain Speech and narrative context. This textually grounded interpretive approach will, due to the nature of the textual data, give particular shape and direction to interpretive outcomes, and thus stands in some tension with contemporary trends in parable scholarship toward polyvalent and audience-directed interpretive approaches, with the inevitable diversity of associated interpretive outcomes. Amidst this interpretive diversity, I have argued for the contemporary importance of interpretation directed by the Synoptic presentation of the parables, and in this chapter have proposed a means by which the associated interpretive outcomes may come to bear on contemporary circumstances. This is not the only way that the parables can and will be read. However, I have argued that my methodology has a particular importance for the contemporary reception of the parables, where there is a desire for the parables to function in the circumstances of a contemporary audience in a way that is consistent with how they functioned in the ministry of the Synoptic Jesus. Two important implications for the contemporary reception of the parables follow:

1. The interpretive outcomes associated with my methodology can be expected to contribute to theology and ethics for contemporary audiences that have a high level of consistency and coherence with the theology and ethics of the Synoptic Jesus.

The parables come to us as the parables of Jesus. Because of this, where the parables inform teaching, Gospel proclamation, theological reflection, ethical instruction and public or political debate, they will play - for many - a legitimating role, signalling that what is derived from the parables carries with it all the authority a particular audience associates with Jesus. The Plasticity of the genre means that as we have seen (from the gnosticism of Irenaeus’ age to the anti-Semitism of the twentieth century) the parables may readily be co-opted to legitimate ethics, values and ideologies that bear no relation to NT theology and ethics, particularly where readers engage

148 This diversity is not entirely a modern phenomena. See for example Gowler, *Parables* on the diverse reception of the parables of Jesus over the past two millennia in art, literature, music, film and drama, apologetic argument, liturgy and worship, theological reflection and debate, and preaching, not to mention many acts of responsive obedience. Gowler's study makes no claim to be comprehensive, but notably excludes twentieth century ideologically driven, reader-directed and existential approaches (with one exception). In my view the extent of diversity in reception greatly increased in the twentieth century.
with a parable without reference to its Gospel frame. It may surprise the modern reader that the Wheat and the Weeds has been read so as to legitimate physical coercion of unbelievers and capital punishment for heretics, but this reading is grounded in a serious engagement with the parable.\textsuperscript{149} It did surprise some contemporary persons to hear the Good Samaritan deployed to encourage UK military intervention in Syria, but this appeal was made with reference to a "pattern of action" within the parable.\textsuperscript{150} Such application of the parables is not altogether unexpected when they are considered in isolation from their literary context.

By way of an alternative, I have argued that the NT Gospels' literary presentation of the parables, in which Story, associated Plain Speech and Underlying Circumstance carry interpretive significance for each other, remains important in the contemporary reception of the parables. The Gospels' literary arrangement of the parables has the potential to shape and inform their contemporary reception so as to ensure a consistency between the meaning and function of the parables within the ministry of the Synoptic Jesus and their meaning and function in the (similar or analogous) circumstances of a contemporary audience. Associated theology and ethics are expected to have a high level of coherence with the theology and ethics of the Synoptic Jesus, with whom the origins of the parables lie.

2. My methodology allows the parables of Jesus to be brought into a genuine two-way dialogue with the paradigms, ideologies, religions, philosophies, cultural norms, and ideas shaping modern society.

The open nature of the parable genre means that it invites interpretation, and when brought directly into dialogue with a contemporary paradigm, will typically be "interpreted" as illustrating or otherwise reinforcing that paradigm. The transfer of meaning will tend to only occur in a single direction (from reader/paradigm to parable), so that it is more likely a reader’s paradigm or perspective will be left unaltered (and even legitimated), than for it to be enriched or critiqued through genuine dialogue. Thich Nhat Hanh, for example, uses the Mustard Seed to illustrate the Buddhist concept of mindfulness,\textsuperscript{151} and to argue for the importance of prayer and mediation by

\textsuperscript{149} See Thomas Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologica}, II.II.10.8; II.II.11.3. In his argument he particularly engages with a single motif of the parable (the Master’s instruction not to uproot the weeds, so as to avoid the wheat being uprooted also). Part of his argument is that capital punishment is a means of uprooting weeds that has a positive (rather than negative) affect on the church.

\textsuperscript{150} See Spencer, \textit{Political}, 79-81 on the UK politician Hilary Benn’s call (in 2015, in a speech in the UK Parliament) for the UK to join air strikes in Syria, on the grounds that “We never have, and we never should, walk by on the other side of the road” (80-1). This surprising application of the parable, appealing directly to a "pattern of action" within the parable, led to a notable response by David Mitchel in the Guardian a few days later: “Hilary Benn has quite a robust interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan. In his version, the Samaritan doesn’t just help the traveller who’s been mugged, he volunteers to seek out and blow the living crap out of the poor chap's assailants… This is the Good Samaritan as played by Charles Bronson” (81).

\textsuperscript{151} Thich, \textit{Living}, 155: “Buddha nature, the seed of mindfulness, is in the soil of our consciousness. It may be small, but if we know how to care for it… It has the power to transform everything”.

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Buddhists and Christians alike. The parable functions mainly as an illustration of spiritual practices and teaching established quite independently of the Mustard Seed. Margaret Thatcher’s recurrent recourse to the Good Samaritan when discussing her Government’s neo-liberal economic policies was an attempt to justify and commend policies formed on other grounds, rather than an example of a parable contributing in its own way to public policy formation. To use a parable in this or similar ways is to reduce it to its most basic function, leaving unrealised the potential for Jesus’ parables to contribute substantively and in their own right, bringing new meaning and new perspective for a contemporary audience.

If indeed the parables were an essential and substantive component of Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God, then they can be expected to have a revelatory capacity enabling them to make an important, first order contribution to the substance of contemporary paradigms and culture - to enrich, critique, develop and renew. For the parables of Jesus to play this role, through a genuine dialogue between parable and paradigm, an interim interpretive movement is required so that the voice of the parable is first established. My argument has been that the Synoptic arrangement of the parables is designed to enable this diaphoric interpretive movement to occur, following which a genuine dialogue with contemporary paradigms and ideologies becomes possible. Martin Luther King’s sermon on the Rich Fool demonstrates how a parable, in collaboration with its Gospel frame, may enter a genuine dialogue with a contemporary paradigm (Western capitalism). King quotes Luke 12.15b directly near the end of the sermon, but its influence on his exposition is seen throughout in how he repeatedly contrasts material wealth/progress and spiritual poverty. Reading the parable in collaboration with its Gospel frame (Luke 12.15b, 21), King offers a powerful critique of US capitalism in the mid-twentieth century (exposing spiritual poverty amidst economic and technical progress), even while identifying possibilities for his society’s redemption.

152 Thich, Living, 167-8: in order to “touch the most valuable seeds that are within us… [and to] put us in contact with the ground of our being”, so as to experience the transforming “energy of mindfulness” or “energy of the Holy Spirit”.

153 See Spencer, Political, 54-61. Thatcher gave particular emphasis to the Samaritan having money and thus being able to help the wounded man: “No one would have remembered the Good Samaritan if he’d only had good intentions; he had money as well” (58).

154 Cf., in a very different context, Robitaille, “Aesop”, 21-3. While claiming to use Aesopic fables to “provide insight” into business practice (21), it is notable how the fables’ role is only ever to illustrate business principles firmly enshrined in ISO9000/10011 quality standards, quite independent of the fables (or similarly to illustrate what the author already regards as good business practice).

155 The sermon is in King, Strength, 69-76. For examples of how Luke 12.15b pervades King’s line of argument see e.g. (i) the rich man was a fool “he permitted the ends for which he lives to become confused with the means by which he lived” (70); (ii) “The richer this man became materially the poorer he became intellectually and spiritually” (71); (iii) The means by which we live are marvellous indeed. And yet something is missing… Our abundance has brought us neither peace of mind nor serenity of spirit” (75); (iv) “Like the rich man of old, we have foolishly minimised the internal of our lives and maximised the external. We have absorbed life into livelihood” (76); (v) “What shall it profit a man, if he gains the whole world of externals - airplanes, electric lights, automobiles, and colour television - and lose the internal - his own soul?” (76).
My analysis in this thesis so far largely concerns the literary origins of the parables. But what of the historical Jesus? Is there a relationship between the Synoptic arrangement of the parables and the parables’ meaning and function in the ministry of the historical Jesus? And how is that relationship best understood? Such questions ultimately go beyond the scope of this thesis, and tend to be decided for many by their view of the general relationship between the Synoptics and the historical Jesus. Such matters cannot be dealt with in detail here. However, in the following chapter I draw on my analysis so far to contribute in a small way to this matter.
Chapter IX
THE NT GOSPELS’ ORIGINS AND THE PARABLES OF JESUS

As important as these [narrative-critical] approaches are, the question of the events that underlie the first Jesus narratives may not fall from view in their interpretation. - Jens Schröter¹

A parable is not an explanation. A parable is not an illustration. We cannot look at a parable as a spectator and expect to get it. A parable does not make a thing easier; it makes it harder by requiring participation. - Eugene Peterson²

… I had the sense the deeper meaning of the story was in the gaps. - Edith Wharton³

¹ Schröter, Jesus, 29.
² Peterson, Tell, 59-60.
³ Wharton, Ethan, 14.
Section I: THE PARABLES AND THE HISTORICAL JESUS (OVERVIEW)

Recent Developments in Gospel Origins Scholarship

During the twentieth century, the application of form criticism and redaction criticism to the NT Gospels meant (for many scholars) that there was no substantive link between the NT Gospels’ arrangement of most parables, and their function/meaning in the ministry of the historical Jesus. While the parables themselves were, in some form, generally seen to originate within the ministry of the historical Jesus, their Gospel “framing” came to be widely understood as an adaptation of the parables to the issues and concerns of the early church communities. Serious critique of form criticism in recent decades means its tendency to treat sayings and parables in isolation (from each other and from the Gospel narratives) should no longer be seen as normative. Redaction criticism, despite its many helpful insights, can now be seen (at least in the form it is most often practiced), to have far too readily assumed that the relevance of redactional material for the early church implied the origins of this material in the early church.

Evidence of a Gospel author’s style or theological concern is not, in itself, evidence against the historicity of the material that constitutes these emphases. Alongside these critiques a significant body of NT Gospel scholarship has emerged that proposes new ways of understanding the origins and transmission of the Jesus tradition, and that points to a far more substantive link between the NT Gospels and the life and ministry of the historical Jesus. It is possible, from this diverse body of scholarship, to identify several major lines of argument that have been highly influential.

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4 Form criticism understood the NT Gospel material to be “collectively and kerygmatically shaped in the Sitz im Leben of the Christian community” (Byrskog, “Century”, 5-6). Redaction criticism, seeking to identify the theological and pastoral concerns of the individual Gospels, came to share with form criticism “the conviction that tradition reflects primarily the contemporary historical situation out of which it arose and within which it was handed down” (Byrskog, “Century”, 10).

5 E.g. Byrskog, “Century”, 5-10; Bauckham, Eyewitnesses, 240-9; Schröter, Jesus, 28-9,100-113; Bird, Gospel, 113-124; Gerhardsson, Reliability, 82-86; Eddy & Boyd, Jesus, 237-306; Sanders, Tendencies, 13-26; Theissen and Merz, Historical, 90-118; Baukham, Eyewitnesses (2017), 607-10; Kirk, Memory, 1-5; scholarship listed in Allison, Constructing, 10n51, n52. Early Christian communities were regarded (wrongly) “not only as the formative contexts in which Gospel traditions were shaped and transmitted, but also as the primary generative force behind these traditions” (Kirk and Thatcher, “Jesus”, 30; italics original); similarly Hooker, “Wrong”, 573: “the trap into which the form-critic so often falls is that he equates the Sitz im Leben with the origin of the material”; Le Donne, Historiographical, 2-5; Schröter, Jesus, 116.

6 Even if historical skepticism is not “intrinsic to the method of redaction criticism” (Tan, “Recent”, 606), see e.g. Kelber, “Redaction”, 11-16 on how it can easily be applied in a way that “precludes the quest for the historical Jesus” (13). As an example, related to the parables, see Kingsbury, Parables, 10, explaining the implications of redaction criticism for his study: “just as Jesus employed parables to meet the demands of his own situation, so Matthew employed parables that had come down to him to meet the demands of the situation of the Church to which he belonged... Matthew has placed the parables of chapter 13 in the service of his own age and theology, and... these parables, when studied within the context of his Gospel, will likewise reflect this age and theology.”

7 See Marshall, Luke, 33 making a distinction between Jesus tradition being “modified...in order to express its significance for new situations” and being “created by the early church” (italics original); Tan, “Recent”, 612: “the evangelists' mastery of their material need not entail historical inaccuracy or historically baseless creations by them”; Snodgrass, Stories, 33-34 in relation to the parables: “evidence of an evangelist’s style is not a determiner of origin” (33; italics original). For further assessment of redaction-criticism, see e.g. Gathercole, “Redaction”, 41-2: it can lead to a “considerable downgrading of what the NT authors all have in common” (42); Osborne, “Redaction”, 309-15; Blomberg, Historical, 67-75; Byrskog, “Century”, 10-11; McKnight, “Form”, 153-64; Donahue, “Redaction”, 27-48; Carson, “Redaction”, 119-42.
One group of scholars argue that eyewitnesses to Jesus’ life and ministry played the primary role in the “emergence and development of the gospel traditions”. The Jesus traditions “were originated and formulated by named eyewitnesses, in whose name they were transmitted and who remained the living and active guarantors of the traditions”, with their role continuing up to the time of Gospel writing.

Another group of scholars, studying the dynamics of oral cultures and social memory, argue that Jesus’ life and ministry gave rise to oral tradition, initially formulated among Jesus’ first disciples, which was preserved and transmitted within the early church communities, according to culturally well-established processes of oral performance and communal memory preservation. This scholarship demonstrates how oral tradition evidences some variability (at its point of origin in the ministry of the historical Jesus, and in its transmission within the Jesus communities), even whilst retaining stability at its core. While the exact parameters of variability and stability are variously (or more frequently imprecisely) defined, in general it is held that because of the foundational significance of the Jesus traditions for the early Jesus communities, “a loyalty and a natural conservation develop” in regard to the tradition, meaning these communities will tend to “resist

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8 Byrskog, Story, 91, citing in particular Peter, the women in the Gospels, members of Jesus’ family and “the local people” (see 65-91). On the importance of eyewitness testimony for the NT Gospels see especially Bauckham, Eyewitnesses (esp 114-154, 264-89); also Hengel, Four, 141-4; Hengel, “Eye-witness”.

9 Bauckham, Eyewitnesses, 290.

10 Bauckham, Eyewitnesses, 309-10; they were written “over the period from the death of Peter to that of the Beloved Disciple” (310) and relied on “immediate access to the eyewitnesses, or in other cases, probably no more than one intermediary” (309).

11 Gerhardsson, Memory, had earlier proposed that Jesus taught his disciples using the techniques of early Jewish rabbincic teachers, emphasising a structured process of repetition and memorisation within a formal teacher-disciple relationship. Bailey, “Informal” (also Bailey, “Middle”) then argued for preservation and transmission of Jesus tradition in the early church through a well-established community process of “informal controlled oral tradition”. Dunn, Remembered, 173-254 developed Bailey’s theory, arguing “the principle conduit” for transmission of the Jesus tradition in oral form was “the communities which had been called into existence” by early apostolic preaching (244). For orality and social memory studies, see the diverse contributions in e.g. Horsley, “Emergence”; Hezer, “Oral”; Hearon, “Written”; Kelber, Oral, 1-89; Kelber, “Oral”; Kelber, “Jesus”; Foley, “Words”; Byrskog, “Century”; Byrskog, “Transmission”; Le Donne, Historiographical; Le Donne, “Theological”; Rodriguez, Structuring; Hurtado, “Oral”; Foster, “Memory”, 193-212; Young, Jesus, 29-33, 70-106; Dunn, “Altering”; Kirk, “Enman”; Mouret, Oral, Schröter, “Contribution”, 435-445; Schröter, “Memory”, 85-107; Gregory, “Memory”; the essays in Kirk and Thatcher, Memory; Weissenrieder & Coote, Interface; Stewart & Habermas, Memories; and the scholarship cited in Bird, Gospel, 98 n96; Eddy & Boyd, Legend, 350-361, esp n156, n189-90. On oral tradition and social memory as ‘closely related terms’ see Kirk & Thatcher, “Jesus”, 41. For surveys of scholarship see Mouret, Oral, 54-99 (up to Dunn); Kirk, Matthew, 1-28; Rodriguez, Oral. More recently Kirk, Matthew, argues that in exploring Gospel origins and Synoptic relations, orality scholarship must give more attention to ancient scribal memory capabilities (on which see 93-102), recognising how the scribe “constituted the living nexus where the normative cultural tradition intersected with the exigencies of the community” (113).

12 Kelber, “Jesus”, 151; variability in the Jesus tradition had its roots in the “multiformity” of Jesus’ own proclamation; Dunn, “Altering”, 173: the original “impact” of Jesus was “diverse in character from the first”.

13 See Kelber, Oral, 33: “variability and stability, conservatism and creativity” are the typical “pattern of oral transmission”; Dunn, Remembered, 212-38: his case studies of select Synoptic texts found a “combination of stability and flexibility... recognised as typically oral in character” (254). Mouret, Oral, 192-286 tested Dunn’s theory using statistical analysis of various Synoptic pericopes, with mixed results (278-84, 291-2), but finding some pericopes evidencing the “variability and stability” that Dunn’s theory anticipated (292), evidence for “the significant explanatory power of an oral performance model of early Christian tradition transmission”. See the assessment of Mouret’s study in Blomberg, “Orality”, 88-90, and Blomberg’s own analysis (91-127), which presents evidence in support of Dunn’s theory.
significant alteration of the shared beliefs that matter to them”. This scholarship outlines a possible process by which a reliable core of Jesus tradition (arising among the earliest followers of Jesus) came to be available within the early churches to inform eventual Gospel writing.

Scholars also observe the similarities between the NT Gospels and ancient Greco-Roman βίοι, arguing on account of these similarities that the Gospel authors “composed them to explain their understanding of the person of Jesus, and that the original audiences would have interpreted them accordingly”. While producing a βίος inevitably involved selection and editing of historical sources, “because this is a Life of a historical person written within the lifetime of his contemporaries, there are limits on free composition”. Even while recognising the Gospel authors’ theological agenda, “the very fact that they chose to adapt Graeco-Roman biographical conventions to tell the story of Jesus indicates that they were centrally concerned to communicate what they thought really happened”.

Other scholarship has argued that the earliest Jesus communities, in the development of their theology (especially soteriology), self-identity, community life and worship, and in their pursuit of missionary endeavours, would have placed a great premium on having access to the actual words

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14 Allison, *Constructing*, 162, noting how the “earliest construction of an historical object limits the range of things a subsequent generation can say about it”, so that there is “a social constraint on memory”. Arguing toward a similar view are Dunn, *Remembered*, 224: editing and shaping of the Jesus tradition does not “constitute any radical change in the substance or character or thrust of the story told”; Le Donne, *Historiographical*, examining social memory and typology in the Jesus tradition, argues against “dramatic refractions” on account of “societal constraints and the need for internal continuity”, so that “memory progresses without dramatic shifts… the essential continuity of tradition (commemoration) must be emphasised” (72-3, see 58-9 on constraints on innovation, particularly where a collective memory is “central…to a cultural identity”); Kirk, *Matthew*, 5: “the interplay of variability and stability in tradition is not adventitious” (7); Allison, *Theological*, 29: “Jesus…was a real person and a real memory, and he became a living tradition that encouraged some construals and discouraged others”.


16 Burridge, *What?*, 259-60; similarly Keener, *John I*, 18: while selectivity was “inevitable”, the genre “did prohibit the creation of events”. Keener judges the editing of sources by the Evangelists as “minimal by ancient standards” and argues the Synoptics “represent substantial historical data” (31-33; cf. similarly Lincoln, *John*, 17). The Gospel writers’ use of recent traditions, careful use of sources, and access to eyewitnesses, lead him to suggest “the gospels should be placed among the most, rather than the least, reliable of ancient biographies” (25)

17 Aune, “Biography”, 125.
and deeds of the historical Jesus. These arguments are less significant for some than the above, but cohere in arguing for the words and deeds of the historical Jesus tradition to have been valued and preserved among the earliest communities of Jesus’ followers.

The above scholarship, collectively, is rightly seen to represent a “turning point in Jesus research”, a substantive departure from the broad consensus achieved in twentieth century historical-critical scholarship, in that it argues for the Gospels to be understood as “narratives that are interwoven in diverse ways with the underlying events of the life and fate of Jesus of Nazareth”. While this body of scholarship is diverse and has points of disagreement (e.g. over the respective importance of community-preserved oral tradition and eyewitness testimony for Gospel writing), it shares the conviction that tradition concerning the historical Jesus was: (i) valued among the earliest Jesus-communities; (ii) faithfully preserved within these communities; and (iii) available to the NT Gospel authors at the time of Gospel writing.

The significance of the above scholarship for evaluating the historicity of the NT Gospel arrangement of the parables is yet to be fully explored in NT scholarship. In what follows, I briefly discuss points of intersection between the above scholarship and the central argument of my

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18 See Hengel, Eye-witness, 70-5 on the need for “concrete information concerning the ‘words and deeds of the Lord’” (75; italics original) in support of evangelism and catechesis as impetus for the early collection and transmission of the Jesus tradition (similarly Bird, Gospel, 273-5; Gerhardsson, Memory, 333; Dunn, Remembered, 177-8). See Bauckham, Eyewitnesses, 277 on the “profoundly theological” (especially soteriological) reasons “early Christians were concerned with faithful memory of the really past story of Jesus”. See Rodriguez, “Reading”, 160-1; Bailey, “Informal”, 10; Theissen and Merz, Historical, 104; Kea, “Writing”, 583-586 on the role of the Jesus tradition in the development/legitimation of a distinct self-identity for Jesus’ earliest followers. See Bird, Gospel, 273 on the necessity of “Christ-centred narrative” in early church worship and teaching in order to “create a Christ-shaped community” (similarly Dunn, Remembered, 178-80).

19 Schröter, Jesus, 96. Cf. similarly Marshall, “Consensus”, 183: this scholarship represents “a new consensus on how the Gospels are to be understood”.

20 Schröter, Jesus, 96: “the judgment that the Gospels are ultimately unfruitful for a historical presentation of the activity of Jesus due to their kerygmatic character or their literary presentation can, however, no longer convince”.

21 The focus of my study does not leave me room to evaluate the above scholarship in detail, but there is extensive discussion among these scholars and critique from others, especially in relation to the seminal works of Bauckham and Dunn. A major point of difference is that Bauckham argues eyewitnesses played the primary role in forming and preserving the Jesus tradition that informed Gospel writing (the effect of which is a “direct, dramatically foreshortened line of transmission” (Kirk, “Ehrman”, 101)), whereas Dunn sees a longer period of oral transmission in which the early church communities played the primary role in preservation of the tradition that then informed the Gospels. My arguments in what follows build on the common ground between the two schools of thought. For the ongoing debate see: the articles in Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus 6, 2008, 85-105, 157-253; the exchange between Holmberg, Dunn and Byrskog in Journal for the Study of the New Testament 26, 2004, 445-87; Gerhardtsson, “Secret”, 5-18; Kirk, Matthew, 18-20; Witherington, What’s, 121-42; the exchange between Weeden and Dunn in Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus 7, 2009, 3-62; Allison, Constructing, 1-10; 27-30; the exchange between Bauckham and Allison in Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus 14, 2016,13-51; the essays in Stewart and Habermans, Memories; Foster, “Memory” (esp 207-11); the subsequent exchange between Porter, Ong and Paul Foster in Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus 12, 2014, 143-183; the subsequent response in Keith, “Narratives” (esp 433-6). Further on eyewitness testimony see McIver, “Eyewitnesses”; Redman, “Accurate”; the articles by Schröter, Evans and Bauckham in Journal for the Study of the New Testament 31, 2008, 195-235; Bauckham, Eyewitnesses (2017), 607-10; Bauckham, “Psychology”, 136-55. My own view is that a lot depends on the dating of the NT Gospels. If the Gospels were written when eyewitnesses were still alive, and if these eyewitnesses were available to Gospel writers, they are likely to have been the primary point of reference (in my view).
thesis so far, that bring into question the differential in historicity between the parables and their Gospel frames that is still widely asserted or assumed in NT scholarship.

**Literary Analysis and Historical Authenticity**

This thesis, literary in nature, has not *directly* addressed questions of historical authenticity in relation to the Synoptic arrangement of the parables. However, my literary analysis does have implications for this historical question in that it exposes the inadequacy of various *literary* arguments that have been influential in denying a *historical* connection between many parables and their Synoptic settings and frames.

The main literary arguments made throughout this thesis that have implications for inquiry into the historicity of the Synoptic arrangement of the parables can be summarised as follows:

1. **Real or apparent dissonance between a parable and its Gospel frame is not - of itself - an argument against the historicity of that frame.** The Plasticity of the parables makes it more difficult to argue for dissonance than has generally been acknowledged. Further, I have argued that a parable’s frame should not be seen as an interpretive summary, or the distillation of its main point, and thus expected to cohere precisely with the parable. Rather, a frame may be designed to contribute to Jesus’ prophetic or didactic aims through a process of dialogical interaction with the parable. A frame need not be repetitive of meaning (i.e. saying directly what the parable has already said metaphorically), but in dialogue with a parable may be generative of meaning. Thus what some have seen as literary dissonance, calling into question the authenticity of a parable’s frame, may in fact be the skilful literary arrangement of a parable with particular didactic strategies and aims in view (see further below).

2. **That a scholar can demonstrate that a parable functions meaningfully in an alternative context to its Synoptic one (within the Gospel narratives, or in a reconstructed situation in the ministry of the historical Jesus), does not provide sufficient grounds for arguing that this context accounts for the historical origins of that parable.** The Plasticity of individual parables means they are able to function in a variety of contexts, which may or may not be associated with their historical origins.

3. **The fact that the parable genre is polyvalent *by nature*, so that a parable may be used in different contexts and to various ends, does not - of itself - exclude the possibility that the parables were used in the ministry of the historical Jesus for *particular* didactic, rhetorical and/or prophetic purposes (which will inevitably be of interest in any associated historical inquiry).** To argue (or imply) that the parables were understood in multiple ways within the ministry of the historical Jesus *and* that this was the didactic intention of the historical Jesus, is to make historical assertions that must be demonstrated on historical grounds; they cannot be substantiated merely by appealing to the nature of the genre. There is, after all, plenty of
While these literary observations do not prove a historical connection between any parable and its Gospel frame, they do refute various arguments that have been influential in denying such a connection. My literary observations, together with the general critique of Form and Redaction Criticism profiled above (these disciplines having both contributed to the denial of an authentic link between parable and frame), and the new proposals in recent Gospel Scholarship concerning the transmission of the Jesus tradition, may collectively suggest the need to re-visit the historical question of the relationship between individual parables and their Gospel frames (though such an inquiry inevitably lies outside the scope of this thesis).

Further, the first two points above call into question some central methodological elements of Jeremias’ highly influential study on the parables of Jesus (see Chapter II). While there were various strands to Jeremias’ methodology, fundamental to his whole project was: (i) his dismissal of many parables’ Gospel frames on the grounds they were unsuited to the associated parable (which is to use a literary argument to make an historical point); and (ii) his ability to identify a coherent fit between what he saw as the prophetic/didactic intent of a parable and his own choice of setting for it in the ministry of the historical Jesus (a historical argument that reflects insufficient attention to the literary realities of the genre concerned). For the reasons set out immediately above, these are unsound lines of argument. Jeremias’ conclusions - historical in nature - are (in my view) called into question by the literary arguments I have made in this study, which undermine central aspects of his methodology.

Jeremias’ study was particularly influential in how parables addressed to the crowds and/or the disciples (in their Synoptic arrangement) came to be understood, with these parables being over-represented in his “relocations”. When Jeremias’ own proposals, for new historical contexts for these parables, were called into question in subsequent scholarship, these parables were left somewhat “contextless”. Thus Jeremias succeeded (in the eyes of many scholars) in discrediting the Synoptic contexts of these parables, but without being able to propose new contexts that would gain widespread support. Given the flaws in Jeremias’ argument, a new line of thinking about the

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22 Baasland, Parables, 19, 607, rightly describes Jeremias' dismissal of Gospel contexts as overly “dogmatic”.

23 See e.g. the saying that follows the Workers in the Vineyard’s is dismissed on the grounds it “does not tally with [the parable’s] meaning” (Jeremias, Parables, 37); Luke 18.1 is set aside because the two parables that follow are “very far from being a lesson on how to pray” (156); the explanation of the Sower is set aside because it “misses the eschatological point of the parable” (78-9); the interpretation of the Wheat and the Weeds is accused of “missing the point of the parable” by “passing over in silence the obvious motive of the parable” (81); the Matthean “application” following the Two Sons (21.31b-2) is “utterly foreign” to the parable; the saying following the Ten Virgins “misses the meaning of the parable” (52). These examples show that while Jeremias argued on various grounds (including that the Synoptics evidence widespread adaption of parables to suit the needs of the early church communities), the incompatibility of frame to parable was a recurring and important part of his overall argument.
relationship between the Synoptic arrangement of the parables (and especially those parables addressed to the crowds/disciples), and their function in the ministry of the historical Jesus, is long overdue. Is it possible to define a link between the Synoptic arrangement of the parables and their function within the ministry of the historical Jesus? What follows is a new proposal to these ends.

Section II: DISCIPLING THE READER IN PARABLES

The Synoptic Arrangement of the Parables: Economy as Textual Strategy

The above arguments are suggestive of a direct and substantive relationship between the Synoptic arrangement of the parables and their meaning and function within the ministry of the historical Jesus. However, questions remain as to the precise nature of this relationship. Are the parables’ Synoptic narrative contexts the precise contexts in which the parables were told within the ministry of the historical Jesus? Are they the typical contexts of parables told on multiple occasions? Does accompanying Plain Speech preserve the actual words of Jesus,\textsuperscript{24} or summarise more detailed explanations? Do variations in the Synoptic arrangement of the same parable originate within oral transmission of the Jesus tradition, or within the ministry of the historical Jesus? The nature of the material begs these and similar questions, for which concrete answers tend to be elusive. In arranging the parables, the authors have undoubtedly edited, selected, and arranged aspects of the tradition available to them. Of itself, this does not call into question the historicity of this arrangement. But it does pose a question concerning the \textit{nature of the Synoptic editorial strategies}, and how they relate to the parables’ meaning and function within the ministry of the historical Jesus.

\textbf{Economy in the Synoptic Arrangement of the Parables}

Throughout this thesis I have argued that the NT Gospels’ arrangement of the parables creates literary indeterminacy. This indeterminacy is a function of an economical approach to arranging the parables. “Economy” or brevity is a general feature of the Synoptic arrangement of the parables, evident in relation to most parabolic material. For example, Mark provides a narrative setting (2.18) for the Wedding Guests that Do Not Fast, Patching the Cloak, and the Wineskins, but does not explore the connection between the two, or provide introductions for these parables, or concluding comment. While Mark arranges the Sower to suggest a connection between the parable and Jesus’ (prior) ministry, the detailed explanation that follows (4.14-20) stops short of making this connection explicit, and does not supply a metaphorical referent for the parable’s central figure (the sower) and for the motif of fruit. No explanation of comparable length is provided for any other Markan parable, including the Murderous Tenants, where a similarly extended and semi-allegorical explanation was surely possible. If explanations of the Growing Seed and of the Mustard Seed

\textsuperscript{24} Clearly sometimes - e.g. Luke 18.1,9 - it does not.
were - as Mark claims (4.34) - made available to the disciples, and if they were known to Mark (as seems likely), he has chosen not to disclose them to the reader, stipulating only that these parables reference the kingdom.

Matthew and Luke in general follow Mark’s economical approach to arranging the parables. Matthew makes extensive use of Mark’s literary technique of arranging parables in “collations”, which, as we have seen (Chapter VII) are masterpieces in economy.25 A similar approach in Luke 15 allows all three parables to share a common narrative context (15.1-2) and the Prodigal Son to be arranged without introduction or concluding comment. Also, Matthew and Luke arrange many short parables or parabolic sayings within a dialogue or discourse, often without pausing to explore the relationship between the two.26 Both Matthew and Luke, in arranging some of their longer parables (outside the collations), connect them to a short narrative setting, but without explicitly identifying correspondences between parable and narrative. These parables are often followed by short sayings, themselves sometimes enigmatic, that do not (of themselves) capture the full significance of the parable, or its relationship to the events that precipitated its telling.27 Further, the response of the audience to most parables is not recorded.

Thus, while the Synoptics provide sufficient textual signals to direct the careful reader concerning the meaning and function of the parables, they also evidence considerable reserve in making that meaning explicit. In what follows I will argue that this economy, in the Synoptic arrangement of the parables, was a deliberate textual strategy having its own didactic function for the reader.

**Synoptic Economy as Textual Strategy**

The economical nature of the Synoptic arrangement of the parables creates relatively high levels of literary indeterminacy. As we have seen, the Synoptics combine Story, narrative elements and Plain Speech discourse into carefully structured literary segments, i.e. parabolic episodes or collations. Indeterminacy within these textual segments is a function of one or more of the following factors: (i) the enigmatic nature of the parables; (ii) parable frames that are dependent on the parables for their full significance (thus incomplete in themselves), contain metaphorical elements,

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25 In that all parables relate (even if in different ways) to a shared Underlying Circumstance, and later parables in the collation may be arranged with no adjacent narrative elements and minimal accompanying Plain Speech. I have argued (Chapter VII) that the reader is still given adequate interpretive direction on account of these parables’ close interpretive relationship with the initial parable or two in the collation.

26 See e.g. Matt 5.13-14; 6.22-4; 7.6; 8.20, 22; 15.13-14; 15.26; 17.20; 19.24; 20.22; Luke 4.23; 5.10; 6.39; 6.41-2; 9.58-62; 11.33-5; 11.39-41; 12.49-50; 13.18-21; 14.34; 17.6; 17.7-10.

27 See e.g. the Forgiven and Unforgiving Servant and the Workers in the Vineyard, which are arranged as (part of) Jesus’ response to a question from the disciples (Matt 18.21-22; 19.27-30), and followed by a short saying (18.35; 20.16). The Lukan Barren Fig Tree, Great Banquet, Pharisee and Tax Collector, Hidden Mina all have brief narrative introductions, but lack a concluding saying. The Wedding Seating and the Widow and the Judge are briefly introduced (Luke 14.7; 18.1) and followed by short, enigmatic sayings (14.11; 18.6-8).
and/or are cryptic in nature; the combining of parable, sayings/introductions and narrative elements into textual segments gives rise to further indeterminacy because the relationship between these textual components is often left wholly or partially unresolved at a textual level. At the same time, the very combining of these components within a literary segments is highly suggestive that exploring the relationship between them is necessary for the full communicative intent of a parabolic episode/collation to emerge, and for the indeterminacy of individual textual components to be resolved. It is this task that the text demands of the reader. My proposal is that the economic nature of the Synoptic arrangement of the parables, creating both indeterminacy and the conditions for its resolution, is designed to enable, guide and demand a high level of reader participation in reading the parables.

There is recognition of economy as a literary and rhetorical device, designed to facilitate audience engagement and participation, in ancient and modern literature. Classical rhetoricians “understood the value of encouraging the audience to become co-creators with them”, and used a range of literary techniques to demand and enable audience participation, including placing fables and parables within a narrative, to provoke the imagination of the audience who must then take an active and exploratory role (including by inferring “similarities and connections”) in order to resolve the relationship between the parable and the narrative. For example, Herodotus situates the Flute Player and the Fish as a response to particular historical circumstances, but does not explicitly explain the parable’s significance for those circumstances. This skilful but economical arrangement of the parables means Herodotus is able to “communicate more than what he actually writes”, while at the same time “encourag[ing] audience participation by… leaving the conclusion of the comparison as the audience’s responsibility”. In his analysis of Rabbinic parables, Stern

See the discussion on the indeterminacy of the parable frames in chapter II; also Thiselton, Thiselton, 407: “even when certain specific maxims are placed at the end of the parable, there remains an element of open-endedness or ambiguity”; Thatcher, Jesus, 62-3: many of the comments following the parables “don’t actually look like answers [to the ambiguity of the parables]” because they don’t appear to “directly respond” to the issues of the parable, or because they themselves are “complex and/or indirect”. Similarly Iser, Act, 197: The relationship between “the segments present… gives rise to a tension that has to be resolved”. Cf. also Tannehill, “Freedom”, 273: “Readers seek meaning by drawing connections… we may ask about connections between part and part”. Thus an author will “assume the reader’s tendency to draw connections and seek to guide it”.

See her survey (27-78) of the techniques of classical rhetoric (including those that rely on “gaps” (51-68)), that are designed to “encourage audience participation in the rhetorical piece” (77).

Similarly Schlecht, Fabula, 128 on the thirteen century Italian poet Thomasin von Zerclaere’s positioning the fable of the Lion and the Fox so that its relationship to a preceding argument is not recognisable at first glance: “Die Unterbrechung durch den Einschub der Fabel schafft sozusagen eine „Passage“, einen Aufschub, um den Text zu reflektieren. Die im Detail uneindeutige Analogie zwingt den Leser oder Zuhörer förmlich, diese Verrätelsung zu überdenken”.

Herodotus, Histories, 141; so van Dijk, Fables, 274: “Cyrus leaves the interpretation of the fable to his audience”.

Maxwell, Hearing, 85-6. See also Herodotus, Histories, 5.92, which records the parabolic action of Thrasybulus (breaking off the tallest ears of corn), in response to Periander’s inquiry (via a herald) concerning how he best rule with honour. There is then a narrative delay (as the herald journeys back to Periander, and then wonders out loud as to why he was sent to a person having lost his senses, who gave no reply but only destroyed his own property), before the parabolic actions are explained. This literary delay provides the reader with narrative space within which to resolve the meaning of the actions for themselves.

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identifies “the strategically placed point of discontinuity, technically called a gap”, as among “the most distinctive characteristics of the mashal’s poetics”.34 These gaps are “significant precisely for the response they elicit from the reader”.35

The concept of literary economy and the demands and possibilities it creates for the reader is explored in Iser’s scholarship. The combining of Plain Speech discourse, narrative elements, and a parable within a literary pericope creates what Iser calls a literary “gap”, a “vacancy in the overall scheme of the text”,36 such as occurs where there is an “abrupt juxtaposition of [textual] segments”.37 These gaps:

...indicate that the different segments of the text are to be connected even though the text itself does not say so. They are the unseen joints of the text, and as they mark off schemata in textual perspectives from one another, they simultaneously trigger acts of ideation on the reader’s part... [The presence of such gaps] should be construed not as a deficiency but as an indication that the textual schemata must be combined, as this is the only way a context can be formed that will give coherence to the text and meaning to the coherence.38

Thus, textual gaps “function as a kind of pivot on which the entire text-reader relationship revolves”.39 Marking the “suspension of connectability between textual segments”, the gaps “simultaneously form a condition for the connection to be established”, and in doing so become a “propellant for initiating communication”.40 On account of these gaps the reader:

...is drawn into the events and made to supply what is meant from what is not said...Communication in literature, then, is a process set in motion and regulated not by a given code but by a mutually restrictive and magnifying interaction between the explicit and the implicit, between revelation and

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34 Stern, Parables, 74: a gap is a “deliberatively withheld piece of information in a narrative”, so that reading is “the practice of filling in or closing gaps, of constructing hypotheses and solutions... to answer the questions raised in the narrative” (75). These gaps take the form of (i) disparities between narrative and nimshal; (ii) unexplained motives; (iii) unexplained, improbable, or excessive acts; (iv) gaps in plot; and (v) violation of norm (77-82).

35 Stern, Parables, 76. Cf. similarly Stern, “Rhetoric”, 262 on how parallels between mashal and situation are implied rather than explicit, so that “the task of understanding the parallel and its implications, or levels of implication, is left largely to its audience... the mashal is a narrative that actively elicits from its audience the solution of its meaning, or what we could call its interpretation”.

36 Iser, Act, 182.

37 Iser, Act, 195.

38 Iser, Act, 182-4.

39 Iser, Act, 169.

40 Iser, Act, 195.
concealment. What is concealed spurs the reader into action, but this action is also controlled by what is revealed; the explicit in its turn is transformed when the implicit has been brought to light.41

I am arguing that economy in the Synoptic arrangement of the parables is an example of the literary strategy Iser describes. The relationship between parable, narrative and accompanying Plain Speech is not usually made explicit (or at least not fully explicit) at a textual level, even while the literary proximity of these textual components (within episodes/collations) calls for the relationship between them to be explored in order for coherence and meaning to emerge. Resolution of this indeterminacy creates meaning that coheres with but ultimately transcends what is explicit in individual textual components. Thus the Synoptics invite, guide, and remain reliant on, the reader’s active participation, for the full meaning and function of individual parables to be established.42

There is some recognition in NT scholarship of the role of economy in the Gospel presentation of the parables, though its purpose is little explored.43 Ahearne-Kroll is an exception, demonstrating how the Markan narrative makes the reader both an insider and outsider, including through economy in the Markan arrangement of the parables. In Mark 1-3, the reader is privy to more than is known by participants in the narrative,44 and so will assume an “insider status”.45 However, this status is called into question in Mark 4, where the disciples are portrayed as recipients of special

41 Iser, Act, 168-9; italics mine. The “structured blanks of the text stimulate the process of ideation to be performed by the reader on terms set by the text”. See further Maxwell, Hearing, 16-22, on the role of “gaps” in modern literary theory; Rimmon-Kenan, Narrative, 128-30 on how a literary gap “enhances interest and curiosity… and contributes to the reader’s dynamic participation in making the text signify” (130).

42 See similarly Kreglinger, Storied, 56 on how parables “demand that the reader make connections that have never been made before. These connections are suggested by the parable but have to be made by those who hear it”, and observing that parables demand a higher level of “engagement and imaginative participation” than allegory (56-7); Thiselton, Thiselton, 407 on how even where parables are accompanied by introductions and concluding comments, ambiguity remains “that can be resolved only when the hearer or reader actively wrestles with the text. The reader has to put two and two together”. Cf. Oden, Parables, xv on how Kierkegaard’s parables, as a form of “indirect communication”, require the reader’s “participation”; they are “like a gift that one first needs to open and then has to figure out what to do with it”.

43 Regarding various forms of economy in relation to the Synoptic parables, see e.g.: Marcus, “Blanks”, 250-62, on “blanks” and “gaps” in the Sower; Thatcher, Riddler, 67-82, on the ambiguity inherent in the parables and the absence of complete resolution of this ambiguity; Maxwell, Hearing, 133-146, on the general absence of parable endings/responses, an example of the “rhetorical tool of omission”, as a means of stimulating audience engagement (similarly Tannehill, “Freedom”, 268-70; Rindge, “Luke’s”, 408-13); Seccombe, “Incongruity” on “incongruity” in the parables - “Does it not force us into enquiry?” (166); Okure, “Case”, 458 on the “mysterious” dimension to the parables, which by “intensifying the hearer’s desire to know the mysteries of the kingdom… serves as additional incentive to grow in discipleship”. Cf. Spencer, Rhetorical, 124-5 on “enthymematic argument” in the Lukan lamp sayings (8.16-18); Robbins, “Enthyme” on Lukan “enthymematic discourse” in Luke 11.1-13 (finding “enthymemes throughout” (213); though see the critique of aspects of Robbins’ work in Aune, “Use”, 314-6). On the nature and rhetorical force of the enthymeme see e.g. Kraus, “Theories”, 95-111; Aune, “Use”, 209-306; Bitzer, “Anstelle’s”, 407-8: because the audience must contribute in constructing the enthymeme, it “provide[s] the strongest possible proof… [having] the virtue of being self-persuasive” (408).

44 Ahearne-Kroll, “Audience”, 720-1, “particularly by virtue of access to the perspective of the narrator”, so that the reader has “a status above that of the disciples”.

explanation of the parables (4.34), not made available to the reader.\textsuperscript{46} This deliberate pattern of reader inclusion (through conveying to the reader special knowledge hidden from the disciples within the world of the narrative) and reader exclusion (by withholding from the reader information that is available to others in the world of the narrative) occurs repeatedly throughout Mark, especially in relation to figurative language and parabolic material.\textsuperscript{47} That the reader is left knowing that there is more to the parables than Mark has provided explicitly in the text, and needing to uncover this for themselves, is a deliberate Markan rhetorical strategy designed to create “an audience motivated to be insiders”.\textsuperscript{48} In this way the text encourages and enables a high level of reader participation, which is an essential aspect of Markan discipleship.\textsuperscript{49}

Synoptic Parable Arrangement: Discipling the Reader
Throughout this thesis I have argued that the Synoptic arrangement of the parables is sufficient to enable interpretation to occur, and provides textual signals that guide interpretation along particular lines. However, it has also been evident throughout that “economy” in the Synoptic arrangement of the parables means a reader/scholar’s active engagement with the text is required in order for interpretation to take place. As I have shown, a central task of the reader is to bring the various textual components within a parabolic episode/collation into dialogue with each other, so as to resolve any indeterminacy within each component, and within the episode/collation as a whole. Thus I am arguing that the Synoptic arrangement of the parables is at the same time deliberate

\textsuperscript{46} Ahearne-Kroll, “Audience”, 721-3, thus leaving the precise status of the reader unclear.

\textsuperscript{47} See Ahearne-Kroll, “Audience”, 724-29.

\textsuperscript{48} Ahearne-Kroll, “Audience”, 734-5. “The combination of inclusion and exclusion hints to the audience what is possible without fully revealing it, which entices the audience to want more...Mark’s narrative is a riddle that confounds without creating despair”. Similarly Lehnert, Provokation, 145-8, regarding Mark 4.10-11. Ahearne-Kroll’s proposal is consistent with Lamb, Catena, 113-18, who argues that in patristic exegesis of Mark, “the enigmatic quality of the text” was seen to be “directly related to the pedagogical intentions of Jesus and, in some cases, the evangelists” (117).

\textsuperscript{49} Ahearne-Kroll, “Audience”, 735: “Mark’s inclusion and exclusion of the audience seek to maximise audience participation in his narrative revelation of the kingdom because ultimately discipleship for Mark requires participation”.

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and determinative, and also cryptic and demanding of the reader. The enigmatic literary form and arrangement of the parable is textually resolvable, but only through a reader’s careful and demanding engagement with the text. And because the reader must engage with what is in the text, he/she thus does not interpret in a purely subjective way. Enigma and the conditions for its resolution are skilfully combined in the Synoptic presentation of the parables.

My proposal is that this combination of textual signals (informing interpretation) and literary economy (demanding reader engagement for interpretation to occur) in the Synoptic presentation of the parables represents a deliberate literary strategy that serves a didactic purpose. In demanding, guiding, and enabling reader engagement with the parables of Jesus, the Synoptic arrangement of the parables is designed to facilitate an active and intensive discipleship of the reader, in which they develop a capacity to receive what they have not previously known, nor been able to accept, concerning the kingdom of God. As I have shown, the power of the parable lies in their ability to open a new perspective for an audience on themselves, others, the world, and the kingdom of God. Because this new perspective must radically subvert, aggressively confront, and ultimately reframe readers’ existing perspectives and paradigms, it is not likely to be acceptable if

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50 Similar dynamics of reading and interpretation have been recognised elsewhere. For example, Merenlahti, *Poetics*, 61-76 recognises that Mark contains literary gaps and does not always make connections between juxtaposed scenes in the gospel explicit (65-7), and so “is counting on the reader’s competence to solve the riddle and fill the gaps…” (66). “It is up to the reader to draw the strings together and read the text complete” (67). At the same time Merenlahti argues that ambiguity is not ultimately “what [Mark] is aiming at” (68), but that the Gospel’s “narrative rhetoric… [aims] to get a comprehensible message through. If there are riddles in the text, the audience is… expect to solve them” (68). Critiquing Fowler (72-5), Merenlahti argues that intentional ambiguity in Mark is not designed in the interests of reader-directed “interpretive freedom” (72), but rather to contribute to the Gospel’s wider and more explicit textual strategy, where there is a clear “rhetoric of direction” (72, Fowler’s term) provided by textual signals throughout, so that things are only hidden “in order that these matters might [ultimately] be disclosed” (73, with reference to Mark 4.22). While Mark plays with “mystery, secrecy and indirectness… the ‘clear, direct and authoritarian’ side nevertheless does its best to take the upper hand” (75). Tannehill, “Freedom”, observing the “brevity and simplicity of many synoptic scenes”, recognises how “much remains unsaid” so that “much is left to the hearer or reader” (268) but also rightly argues that a reader will follow “the lines of provocation in the text”; the imagination is being “led [by the text] in a particular direction” (267). For a similar dynamic in other genres see e.g.: Sternberg, *Poetics*, 188, discussing gaps and “gap-filling” in biblical narrative, identifies the “active role played by the reader in constructing the world of a literary work” but also how this is far from “arbitrary” because “literature is remarkable for its powers of control and validation” (listing various factors that guide the reader (189)); Aune, “Apocalypse”, on how in the Apocalypse of John, through the “minimal use of explanation [of visions]… the ingenuity and imagination of the audience is allowed greater challenge and fuller scope” (85-6), even while “the direction of the audience’s response… is exerted through [the author’s] creative utilisation of hymns and hymn-like choral passages” (86); Moran, “Artifice”, on the rhetorical purpose of the Aristotelian tension within metaphor (between lucidity and strangeness (388)), and how this facilitates a form of audience participation where there is scope for “personal discovery”, even while “the direction taken by the [audience’s] mind remains under the guidance of the speaker’s choice of figures” (396); Iser, *Implied*, 282: despite the “whole panoply of narrative techniques” that allow an author to “exert plenty of influence on the reader’s imagination”, still authors typically refrain from setting “the whole picture before [a reader’s] eyes”.

51 Cf. Iser, “Phenomenological”, 299: in entering the world of a text, the reader will not only perceive and understand new things, but in this process “formulate” a new capacity that makes this perception/understanding possible. The reader has the chance to “formulate the unformulated”, in a process carried out on terms set by someone else. This is not merely the reader’s “discovery of the unformulated” in the text, but “the possibility that we may formulate ourselves and so discover what had previously seemed to elude our consciousness” (italics mine; see 297-9 for the full discussion; also Iser, *Implied*, 290-4).
presented directly. A communication strategy is required that facilitates a process of audience discovery and formation, requiring active reader participation, so that the reader will develop the highest possible levels of ownership of the associated interpretive outcomes, having played a vital role in their production. In that process a reader will also develop (or enlarge) their capacity to receive and embrace the new meaning and perspective the parables bring concerning the kingdom of God. One cannot be helicoptered in to oxygen-poor alpine heights, and expect one’s body to accept and enjoy the lifestyle and the view; this is to attempt to enter a new world for which one is not prepared by life in a sub-alpine world. One must journey slowly and personally to these mountainous heights, and in the process of acclimatisation that the journey facilitates, develop the physical capacity to enter life at altitude. The Synoptic arrangement of the parables enables a similar journey of formation, in which a reader may learn the discipline of active, inquiring, and responsive engagement with the text, and in doing so enlarge their capacity to hear, understand (or understand more fully), accept and practice the teaching and proclamation of Jesus concerning the kingdom of God.

Hearing the Parables in the Ministry of the Historical Jesus

In what follows I propose that there is an important point of congruence between the literary reception of the parables, as enabled by their Gospel arrangement (described above), and the reception of the parables in the ministry of the historical Jesus. To argue this point, I move now from talking about the Synoptics’ literary strategy, to examine what they hold out as happening within the ministry of the historical Jesus.

52 Similarly Reich, Figuring, 96: the Lukan Jesus resorted to rhetorically powerful communication “to implant his most challenging role-reversing message in the minds of his hearers”. “Luke needed to draw on all of his rhetorical ability to form his message to be as powerful, memorable, and forceful as possible. Because the message was so radical and challenging to the upper classes, it was precisely the form of this message, the rhetoric used to communicate the message, that might be able to penetrate the minds of those who only stood to lose in the short run if they accepted it” (101; italics added). Reich’s study is focused on Lukan rhetorical figures of speech, which includes selected parabolic material (101-134).

53 Cf. similarly Iser, “Determinacy”, 14: where a reader must “participate actively” to realise the intent of a text, they will then tend to “regard the text… as real”; Moran, “Artifice”, 395-6, on how metaphorical or figurative speech stimulates “imaginative activity on the part of the audience… [which] may easily present itself as a process of discovery, something one is experiencing and working out for oneself… [by which] the speaker may hope to produce a sense of conviction on the part of the audience… shifting the imaginative labour onto the audience makes the ideas thereby produced infinitely more valuable rhetorically than they would be as products of the explicit assertions of the speaker… the ideas elicited will borrow some of the probative value of personal discoveries, rather than be subjected to the skepticism accorded to someone else’s testimony” (italics original). Moran is writing about metaphor in Aristotle (“something set before the eyes”); his observations apply equally to parable. Cf. Demetrius, Libro de Elocutione, 3.222, citing Theophrastus on how in persuasive rhetoric, “all possible points should not be punctiliously and tediously elaborated, but some should be left to the comprehension and inference of the hearer”, so that “when [the hearer] perceives what you have omitted [he/she] becomes not only your hearer but your witness, and a very friendly witness too”; Quintilian, Institutes, IX.2.69-71, on how figures of speech used in a judicial setting “should not be too obvious” (69), and how things should not be stated too explicitly so that a judge “will be led to seek out the secret which he would not perhaps believe if he heard it openly stated, and to believe in that which he thinks he has found out for himself” (71; italics added).

54 The argument that follows does not rest on the historicity of the Gospel arrangement of any individual parable, but on the historicity of the following general points: (i) that Jesus frequently told parables; (ii) that many of those parables, and especially many of those told to the crowds/disciples, were not (or at least not fully) understood immediately by those who heard them; and (iii) that at least some of Jesus’ audience sought him out to discuss the parables, and received further explanation from Jesus. The historicity of these points is supported by multiple attestation, and their fit with ancient practices of teaching-learning (see further below).
Introducing the Sower, the Markan Jesus issues a clear imperative (Ἀκούετε! (4.3)) to the large crowd that has gathered (4.1-3).\footnote{Regarding the importance of ἀκούω in 4.1-20: it features in the parable’s “frames” (4.3,9); in the excursus on the purpose of parables (4.12 (negatively)); in the parable’s explanation (negatively in 4.15-19; positively in 4.20); in the subsequent parabolic sayings (4.23-4). It defines the parenetic thrust of the entire section. Cf. Dronsch, “Fruchtbringen”, 304 on hearing in the OT: “Dem Menschen kommt die grundlegende Aufgabe zu, auf das Wort zu hören.” (also Müller et. al., Gleichnisse, 88).} A smaller group (4.10: those around him together with the twelve), ὃς ἔχει ὑπάρχολ άκούειν (4.9), make inquiry of Jesus concerning the parable, and in doing so practice the kind of active, inquiring, and engaged listening that Jesus had called for.\footnote{Cf. Thatcher, Jesus, 33 on ὃς ἔχει ὑπάρχολ as always used in the NT Gospels to “highlight ambiguous statements that ‘you have to puzzle over’... indicating that Jesus expects some response that will clarify what he is talking about”.} It is this form of listening that leads the disciples to perceive (ὁράω) and understand (συνίημι), things denied the crowd, who hear only the parable (4.12).\footnote{See similarly the disciples’ inquiry of Jesus, concerning What Comes Out of the Mouth. Despite Jesus actively calling the crowds to him, and the inclusive nature of his imperative (7.14: ἄκούοντες μοι πάντως καὶ σύντομον); the crowds hear only the parable. The disciples, through inquiring of Jesus privately (7.17), are given explanation (7.18-23). Despite the Markan Jesus’ frustration with the disciples’ slowness to learn (7.18a), their request is honoured in his explanation. Whilst Mark frequently presents the disciples as being slow or unable to understand, in my view this relates particularly to the necessity of the cross, and does not otherwise rule out the disciples gaining incremental knowledge of the kingdom in the pre-Easter period.} The Markan Jesus draws an important distinction between the crowds and those around him (even if the latter group is open,\footnote{E.g. Moule, “Mark”, 98-101; France, Mark, 195.} the distinction is still clear). While the basis of this distinction is (divine) gift (4.11), at a narrative level the realisation of this gift occurs as the disciples make active inquiry of Jesus in relation to the parables.\footnote{On divine and human agency in Mark 4.10-12 see the discussion and overview of scholarship in Sweat, Theological, 31-9. Taking account of “the surrounding literary context”, Sweat finds (consistent with my argument above) “evidence for both divine and human agency” (39). Other scholars recognising the importance of human agency in the process of reception: Moule, “Mark”, 100-105: the "giving of the mystery" means "what happens to the responsible hearer, who recognises the parable as a challenge to investigate and who asks the teacher for more light, and is thereby and therewith ‘given’ the very heart of the matter’ (105); France, Mark, 195: the "gift of special revelation (v. 11)... is offered to those who ask for it..."; Guelich, Mark, 215: noting the paradox of the disciples having been given the mystery of the kingdom (4.11), but not understanding the parable (4.13), points to their “positive though confused response to Jesus” and their "shar[ing] in his ministry" as that through which they are “participating in the disclosure of the ‘mystery of the kingdom of God’”; Ambrozic, Hidden, 81. For a similar concept in other Jewish literature, see e.g. how the one who searches out the meaning of parables is honoured in Sir 39.2-3, even while acknowledging the role of divine agency in coming to such understanding (39.6-7); Bockmuehl, Revelation: at Qumran “revelation” takes place... when the diligent search of the priestly exegete-teacher is met by God’s gift" (44-5); also on the need to diligently seek out the hidden secrets of the Torah in the post-exilic period, and how “God meets this search in revelation” (14).} The disciples, on account of their active and inquiring listening, are then given more (i.e. further insight by way of explanation of the parables), exacerbating the distinction between them and those who hear only the parables (4.24-5).\footnote{See the Catena in Marcum (quoting here from Chrysostom) on Mark 4.24-5: “For whoever has a desire and zeal for hearing and asking, more [knowledge and wisdom] will be given to them” (Lamb, Catena, 272; Italic added). Cf. Arida, “Hearing”, 225-8: in the Catena in Marcum, the parables are seen as “a means to draw the audience into a state of reflection that in turn would give rise to questions posed to Jesus... opening the way to fuller comprehension and illumination” (227; italics added).} In practical terms, to actively seek out the meaning of the parables is (at least part of) what it means for Jesus’ followers to be recipients of the mystery of the kingdom of God.\footnote{Moule, “Mark”, 99 rightly cautions against regarding “the giving of the µουτριπον and the hearing of parable as mutually exclusive alternatives”. Within the Markan narrative, the two are intimately related.} Thus Mark attributes considerable importance to the
disciples’ active, inquiring and obedient listening to Jesus (concerning the meaning of the parables), which becomes a formative discipline in the process of their discipleship.\(^6^2\) The enigmatic form of the parable, demanding an audience recognise a mystery and seek its resolution, provides an opportunity for Jesus’ followers to learn this essential discipline. The kingdom is a mystery, given to the disciples. The parables facilitate a process of formation, in active, inquiring, and obedient engagement with Jesus, through which that mystery is received.

Matthew follows Mark in these things. That the Matthean Sower concerns “the word of the kingdom” (Matt 13.19) makes explicit the role of the parables in making known the mysteries of the kingdom (13.11). As in Mark (above), these mysteries are made known as the disciples seek out Jesus concerning the parables (Matt 13.10, 36). Matthew accentuates the Markan distinction between the crowds and the disciples by emphasising the consequences of two different forms of listening, how one leads to understanding (συνίημι), and the other does not. The crowds practice an ineffective listening (hearing the parables only) and do not understand (13.13-15, 19: συνίημι).\(^6^3\) The disciples not only hear the parables, but seek out Jesus concerning them. This active inquiry and engagement with Jesus concerning the parables, leads to understanding (13.23, 51: συνίημι), so that the disciples are those who both have, and those who are given more (13.12).\(^6^4\) As in Mark, this active seeking out of Jesus concerning the parables is a formative discipline for Jesus’ disciples, by which they come to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom is like hidden treasure (θησαυρός) (13.44); it is through seeking and inquiry of Jesus, that the disciples become like one who ἐξάλλει ἐκ τοῦ θησαυροῦ αὐτοῦ καὶ παλαιὰ (13.52). In their inquiry and engagement with Jesus concerning the parables (through which they come to συνήκατε τὰ πάντα), the disciples are being μαθητευθεὶς τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν ὦρανῶν (13.52).

Luke, in presenting the Sower (8.4-15), preserves the Markan distinction between Jesus’ disciples and the crowds (8.9-10). The grounds of this distinction is that the disciples are given to know the

\(^6^2\) Pointing in this direction are: Marcus, Mark I, 302: the disciples’ question concerning the parables, represents a “vital stage in their learning process”; Zimmermann, Puzzling, 239: The Markan parables create “a path to perception for which questions, explanations and insights are necessary”; Moule, “Mark”, 98: parables enable a creative “partnership” between teacher and learner: learning occurs in the “creative union of two minds… cooperating and together reaching something new” (96-7). Cf. Hays, Reading, 29, on the double use of ἵνα in 4.22 (οὐ γὰρ ἔστω κρυπτὸν ἔδωκαί τινι φανερωθῇ, οὐδὲ ἐγένετο ἐπικρύψων ἄλλα ἐκ ἐξήλθε ἐκς φονερᾶν): the saying “highlights the intentionality of the hiding…hiddenness somehow belongs to the revelatory purpose or even promotes the revelation”.

\(^6^3\) Cf. similarly how in Qur’an 2.16 God is said to use parables to both guide many and lead many astray. On this passage see Afsar, “Literary”, 485-6, on how those who do not “show any inclination to get deep down to the underlying message” obtain only the “surface meaning” of the parable.

\(^6^4\) Cf. Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew 45 (on Matt 13), commending the disciples (“longing as they do to learn”) for asking questions, and associating their receiving the mysteries of the kingdom with their willingness (προθυμίαν) and zeal (σπουδήν) (see further, Arida, “Hearing”, 230).

\(^6^5\) Further on μαθητεύομαι (13.52), see Wilkins, Disciple, 160-2; Jones, Matthean, 198-202; Dodd, New, 65.
mysteries of the kingdom (8.10), and actively seek out those mysteries from Jesus (8.9). In doing so, the disciples demonstrate the kind of active and inquiring listening Jesus commands of all who hear his parables (8.8b). Luke links this active, inquiring form of listening (8.18a: Βλέπετε οὖν πῶς ἀκούετε) directly to the disciples being given not only the parables, but also their explanations, thus setting them apart from those who hear only the parable and lose even that in its uninterpreted irrelevance (8.18a). The lamp is disclosing the (otherwise hidden) mysteries of the kingdom, but it is only those who enter the house who are able to see (βλέπω) its light (8.16-17). In the wider Lukan narrative, the parables feature frequently in Jesus’ invitation to the crowds to believe in him and to follow him. While Matthew and Mark record that Jesus spoke many things to the crowds in parables (Mark 4.33-4; Matt 13.34), Luke narrates many actual examples, particularly within the Travel Narrative. Many of these parables are accompanied by (or take the form of) rhetorical questions (e.g. 20.17: τί οὖν ἐστιν τὸ γεγραμμένον τούτο…); others are associated with demanding imperatives (e.g. 14.35: ὁ ἔχων ὄτα ἀκούειν ἀκουέτω). These rhetorical/literary devices call the crowds to move beyond merely “hearing” the parables to further engagement with Jesus, and inquiry or him, in order that they may fully understand the parables and respond appropriately. Speaking in parables, Jesus creates both rhetorical urgency and rhetorical opportunity for audience participation, holding out to the crowds both a summons to discipleship and also a means to begin that (active, responsive, obedient) journey, through further engagement with him concerning his enigmatic parables.

Thus by speaking in parables, Jesus created opportunity for his audience to learn the kind of active inquiry and responsive engagement with him, that is necessary to receive his proclamation of the kingdom of God. Parabolic speech facilitates a participatory form of learning that is formative for Jesus’ disciples, setting them apart from those who listen only superficially and so lose the intent of Jesus’ parabolic teaching and proclamation. That the parables functioned this way is (as outlined above) well established within the Synoptic tradition and may point back to a primary function of

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66 See e.g. Bovon, Luke I, 312: ὕμιν δέδοται γνῶναι (Luke 8.10) speaks “on the one hand” of the disciples’ “privileged position… and on the other, their passive (‘it has been given’, δέδοται) and active (‘to know’, γνῶναι) behaviour via-à-vis this revelation”; Spencer, Rhetorical, 115: all are “potential disciples and ‘hear’ the message proclaimed. The decisive factor is the manner in which they respond” (re Luke 8.5-8).

67 See Bovon, Luke I, 307 on the concern with “the how of hearing”; also how, since “the summons to hear occurs after the message is given… ‘hearing’ is not an outer, acoustic activity, but an inner, consensual attitude” (314; italics original).

68 For the link between 8.18 and 8.8-10, I note: (i) the conceptual coherence of these two passages; (ii) the use of ἀκούειν and διδασκωμ in 8.18 points back to the use of these verbs in 8.8b-10; (iii) the two distinct groups in 8.18 and in 8.10, is highly suggestive that what is “given” in 8.18 is (at least in part), the parables.

69 This “seeing” is precisely that which those who fail to inquire of Jesus concerning the parables are unable to do (18.10).

70 See e.g. how the presence of a large crowd is noted in Luke 5.29; 6.17; 7.24; 8.4; 11.14; 11.29; 12.1(13); 12.54; 14.25; 20.9, with Jesus subsequently speaking to them in parables.

71 See below for further details.
parabolic teaching in the ministry of the historical Jesus.\textsuperscript{72} These dynamics are recognised to an extent by Thatcher, in his discussion of the role of parables in the ministry of the historical Jesus. Using language and concepts similar to those I have used earlier to define the function of parables, Thatcher argues Jesus told parables to subvert conventional beliefs and the conceptual frameworks supporting them,\textsuperscript{73} so that his audience might “develop a new mode of thinking”,\textsuperscript{74} and “look at the world in a new light”.\textsuperscript{75} However, the highly enigmatic nature of the parables means that “a substantial ‘change of mind’, a reconfiguration of conceptual frameworks” was required for an audience to understand the parables.\textsuperscript{76} The knowledge that unlocked the enigmatic parables, bringing understanding, was only obtained by people “asking [Jesus] to give them the answers to his riddles and parables”,\textsuperscript{77} making Jesus an “intellectual broker” to the kingdom of God.\textsuperscript{78} Thus Jesus’ parables provided opportunity for those who inquired of him, to “learn to think the way [Jesus] thought… to develop a way of thinking that would empower them to understand Jesus’ ambiguous discourse” and with that to enter the kingdom.\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{72} Regarding historicity: (1) I have documented a well-attested pattern of parable-not understanding-question-explanation in the NT Gospels (Chapter VII); on various forms of the pattern in OT and Jewish apocalyptic literature see Lemcio, “External”, 325-9; “a long-standing literary phenomenon” (337); Baynes, “Jesus”, 17-23: “Enoch, like Ezra, Baruch, and Jesus’s disciples, cannot understand what he sees, and he requires explanation from a knowledgeable figure” (19); Patten, “Form”, 249-51; cf. Philo, Quod Omnis Probus Liber Sit, 82 on how in the Sabbath synagogue meetings, explanation is provided of Scripture that is “not very intelligible, for a great many precepts are delivered in enigmatical modes of expression, and allegorically”\textsuperscript{72}. (2) On revelation of divine mysteries to a select group, as a phenomena well attested in Greek and Jewish literature of the time, see the many references in Keener, Matthew, 378-9; also Marcus, “Mark”, 559-63 for Jewish apocalyptic literature, especially the literature of Qumran (also Bockmuehl, Revelation, 42-5, 53-6); Baynes, “Jesus”, 21; Freyne, “Disciples”, 8-12 for the phenomena in Daniel; Patten, “Form”, 251-2. (3) On disciples seeking out private explanation to enigmatic sayings, see the Rabbinic references in Keener, Matthew, 379 and Daube, Rabbinic, 141-50; cf. Plutarch, Moralia, 1.47 on how philosophical training is initially difficult, so that there is a need to “persist and stick to the task of getting on”, which means asking questions in a timely manner (1.47B-D), rather than being either too timid to ask for explanation, or so vain as to pretend that one has understood immediately. (4) On the importance of inquiry and seeking (as a pathway to learning and revelation) see Marcus, Mark I, 302: “this sort of inquiring spirit [as seen in Mark 4.10] was highly prized in apocalyptic circles” (citing 1QH 12.23-4); and the negative characterisation of the wicked in 1QS 5.11-12); Bockmuehl, Revelation, on the importance of “searching” the OT (as one searches and mines for treasures”) as a path to revelation in the post-exilic period (13-14); and on “intensive searching of the Torah” at Qumran (44-5); Sir 39.2-3, commending the one devoted to the study of the law who “penetrates the subtleties of parables (προσβολή) . . . seeks out the hidden meanings of proverbs (τροπομηχα)” (as translated by Baynes, “Jesus”, 20). Thus the kind of dynamics associated with the telling and reception of the parables, that I am arguing are a feature of the ministry of the historical Jesus, are well attested in other literature from the time.

\textsuperscript{73} Thatcher, Jesus, 135-142. The parables were a suitable tool for doing so because they “blur mental boundaries by apparently mixing words and/or things that polite society wants to keep separate” and even go as far as to erase boundaries “by disabling the polar oppositions that support the very notion of ‘mental categories’” (139).

\textsuperscript{74} Thatcher, Jesus, 136.

\textsuperscript{75} Thatcher, Jesus, 139. The kingdom of God is a “community of knowledge”, and “entering the Kingdom of God means acquiring information about a set of things, developing a conceptual framework for thinking about those things, and adopting a new set of traditions” (144).

\textsuperscript{76} Thatcher, Jesus, 137.

\textsuperscript{77} Thatcher, Jesus, 148, noting that “Mark’s explanation of how the disciples came to a basic understanding of [the parables] - by asking Jesus to explain them in private” is historically “reasonable”.

\textsuperscript{78} Thatcher, Jesus, 149, and his disciples similarly (once informed) for others, with both “initiating those who heard the call into a community of knowledge and thus empowering these individuals to think and live as though God were on the throne instead of Caesar”.

\textsuperscript{79} Thatcher, Jesus, 149. See his helpful discussion of historicity, in relation to this understanding of the role of parabolic speech within the ministry of the historical Jesus (xvi-xxiii).
This function of the parables, for audiences within the ministry of the historical Jesus, is congruent with the literary function of the parables for readers of the Synoptics that I have argued for above. Thus the proposal that I have been presenting here is that the Synoptic Gospels, in their economical arrangement of the parables, provide opportunity for the reader to practice the same kind of active inquiry and responsive engagement with the teaching of Jesus that the parables first provided for audiences within the ministry of the historical Jesus. In arranging the parables this way, the Synoptics provide readers of all generations opportunity for a textually-based process of formation and discipleship, in which to (further) develop the capacity to receive and embrace the message of the kingdom of God.

Rhetorical Questions and the Parables of Jesus

One further factor that points in this direction is the widespread use of rhetorical questions in the Synoptic arrangement of parabolic material. Questions frequently precipitate a parable or introduce it. Questions also often follow on directly from a parable, sometimes calling for a verdict on the parable. Other questions are placed strategically within the longer narrative parables. And in a surprising number of instances, parabolic sayings or short narrative parables are substantially or completely in question form. Many of these questions involve second person pronouns and verbs

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80 Did the author of Matthew, having been μαθητευθεὶς τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν Οὐρανῶν (13.52), at least in part through his engagement with Jesus concerning the parables, in turn carefully arrange the parables in his Gospel with the idea that this arrangement might make its own important (indispensable?) contribution to μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη (28.19)?

81 As far as I know, this argument has not previously been made in regard to the parables. Thatcher, Jesus, 67-82 points in a similar direction in regard to Jesus’ “riddles”: noting the “ambiguity” that remains in the literary presentation of riddles and parables, he suggests that “the sources do not give answers… because they wish to leave the ambiguity unresolved, both in imitation of Jesus’ own teaching style and in order to exploit the rhetorical effect that this strategy produces on the audience” (82). Cf. the conceptually similar argument in Aune, “Apocalypse”, 89-90, on how apocalyptic literature “mediate[s] a new actualisation of the original revelatory experience through literary devices, structures and imagery which function to ‘conceal’ the message which the text purportedly ‘reveals’” (89), so that “the audience may themselves have the experience of decoding or deciphering the message… thereby maximising participation of the audience in the performance of the apocalypse” (90). The careful structuring of an apocalyptic text replicates “the original revelatory experience in a literary, rather than a ritual or spatial, idiom” that provides “continuing access to a past, ordinarily irretrievable, type of religious experience” (90). The author “does not merely narrate the substance of the divine revelation… he provides the audience with a literary vehicle so that they can… relive the experience of the seer and thereby appropriate for themselves the revelatory message” (90, italics original). While apocalyptic literature is a distinct genre, the fact that it functions to communicate “a transcendent perspective on human experience” (88; italics original), means it has much in common with the Synoptic parables.

82 A question (i) from Jesus: Mark 3.23; 3.30; 4.30; Matt 11.7; 11.16; 21.28; Luke 6.46; 7.24; 12.14; 13.18; 13.20; or (ii) from others: Mark 2.16; 2.18; Matt 8.11; 8.14; Luke 4.22; 5.30; 10.25, 29; 12.41; 13.23.

83 A question (i) from Jesus: Mark 4.13; 7.18; 8.17-21; 12.10-11; Matt 11.9; 12.26-7; 12.34; 15.17; 16.8-9; Luke 7.44; 11.18-19; 11.40; 12.25-6; 12.51; 12.56; 12.57; 16.11; 18.7-8; 20.17 (cf. 3.7); (ii) from Jesus, specifically seeking a verdict on some aspect of the parable: Matt 21.31; 21.42; Luke 7.42; 10.36; or (iii) from others: Mark 4.10; 7.17; 10.26; Matt 13.10; 19.25; Luke 8.9; 12.41; 18.26 (cf. 3.10).


85 Mark 2.19; 4.21; Matt 5.13; 7.3; 7.9-10; 7.16; 9.15; 11.7; 12.29; 18.12; 24.45; Luke 5.34; 6.39; 6.41-2; 7.24; 11.11-12; 12.42; 14.28; 14.31; 14.34; 15.4; 15.8; 17.7-9. Cf. Roth, Parables, 406: “nearly every rhetorical question in Q is found in a parable”.

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so that they address the audience directly. These questions take different forms. Some imply an obvious answer; however, the audience must still (usually) provide the answer and, resolve the relationship between the (sometimes parabolic) question and the situation at hand. In other cases no answer is given or obviously implied, so that presumably an audience must further engage with Jesus in order to find one. In other cases, the questions point to the parable as the answer, but usually a cryptic one that begs (and facilitates) further inquiry.

The persuasive power of questions, and their ability to help establish audience commitment to a rhetorical position, is recognised in classical literature, and modern studies in psychology and communication. The questions associated with the parables demand an audience’s engagement, encouraging and facilitating their participation in the interpretive process, so that the audience play a formative role in shaping interpretive outcomes. Having helped create interpretive outcomes associated with the parables, an audience can be expected to have higher levels of ownership of those outcomes than is typical for forms of communication where the audience is more passive. As Reich has expressed it, regarding the role of rhetorical questions in Luke, including in relation to parabolic material:

> By asking questions… the Lucan Jesus is able to draw the audience into the message of the gospel, causing them to join in the narrative to complete and even create the meaning for themselves… [so that the audience is] invited into an emotional bond with the narrative and message… [B]eing asked to fill in details, answer questions, and complete arguments for themselves, [the audience] have a greater stake in the gospel and in the process are changed by the narrative… Luke uses many

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86 Some illustrative examples, with second person pronouns and verbs underlined for emphasis: οὐκ ἔδωκε καὶ ὃς ἐλέησαι τὸν σύνδυσαν σου, ὡς κἀγὼς ἔδει θεία; (Matt 18.33); ἢ ὁ ὄφθαλμος σου ποινή τρίν ὡς ἔγυς ἡμαθός εἰμι; (Matt 20.15); Τί δὲ ὑμᾶς σοικεί; (Matt 21.28); τίνα δὲ ἐξ ὑμῶν; (Luke 11.11); ἐι σὺν ὑμέτερ; (Luke 11.13); τίς αἰνηρτος ἐξ ὑμῶν; (Luke 15.4); ἐι οὖν ἐν τῷ ἀδίκῳ μαμωνά πιστεύοις οὐκ ἔγνενος, τὸ ἀνθρώπον τίς ὑμᾶς πιστεύεις; (Luke 16.11); καὶ διὰ τί οὐκ ἔδωκες μου τὸ ἄργον ἐπὶ τράπεζαν; (Luke 19.23).

87 E.g. Demetrius, Libro de Elocutione, 5.279: through rhetorical questions an orator “forces his hearer into a sort of corner, so that he seems to be brought to task”; Quintillian, Institutio Oratoria, 2.5.13, urging the use of questions to develop the “critical powers” of pupils, causing them to “find out things for themselves and to use their intelligence” (see also 9.2.6-16 on the force and function of rhetorical questions); Wooten, "Questions", 362-6 (concerning questions in classical rhetoric, especially in Demosthenes' Philippics).

88 E.g. Blankenship and Craig, "Rhetorical", (discussing findings from other literature (111-115,124-5)), tested the impact of rhetorical questions on a group of university students presented with arguments in favour of the use of nuclear energy, finding that inclusion of rhetorical questions in briefing material: (i) “led to more thoughtful processing and greater counterargument generation”; and (ii) resulted in “greater attitudinal resistance to an attacking message” (123). The authors suggest that increased strength and resistance of attitude is the result of a self-validation process stimulated by rhetorical questions (124). See further Zillmann, “Rhetorical”; Petty et.al., “Effects”; Cerovic, “Suspects”; Ahluwalia and Burnkrant, “Answering”.

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questions and riddles to draw the audience into the narrative, making them participants and co-creators of the meaning and message.99

While these questions are addressed to a narrative audience (within the Synoptic narrative), at a literary level they simultaneously address the reader, summoning them also to the same kind of participatory inquiry concerning the parables. The questions easily point in two directions, to their narrative/historical audience and to the reader. The frequent use of second person (sometimes plural) verbs and pronouns aids this dual appeal.90 For example, finding themselves alongside the Markan disciples, struggling to comprehend the Pharisaic Leaven (left without explicit resolution in Mark) the reader is provoked to interpretive endeavour as they hear Jesus’ searing question (8.21: οὔπω συνίετε;) addressing them personally.91 Peter’s question (Luke 12.41: κύριε, πρὸς ἡμᾶς τὴν παραβολὴν ταύτην λέγεις ἢ καὶ πρὸς πάντας;), lacking an explicit answer in the text, points

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90 Reich, *Figuring*, 94-6. See the discussion in 88-94 (including in relation to select parabolic material): these questions function to "hide and reveal at the same time" (94), facilitating audience participation to resolve the ambiguity and unknowns. See further Estes, *Questions*, 62-4, 166-70 on the persuasive function of questions in John: through requiring the reader’s commitment ("answering is more involved than hearing"), shifting power from the reader to the narrator, and communicating implicit assumptions, questions "have unique power to tap into the emotions of readers" (63); Hoffman and Hoffman, “Question”, 69-76, on questions in Mark; Howell, Matthew’s, 219-21, 224 on Matthew rhetorical questions; Rindge, “Luke’s”, 413-4: questions within/regarding the distinctive Lukan parables “expect active engagement and participation from hearers”; Meynet, “Question”, 207-14 on enigmatic questions placed at the centre of concentric constructions in Luke; Roth, *Parables*, 406-7 and similarly Zimmermann, *Puzzling*, 215 on the frequency of rhetorical questions in the Q parable material (also Zimmermann, “Fragen”, 39-45 on how parable-related rhetorical questions in Q become “Brücken vom Text zur Welt des Rezipienten” (42)). Reich, *Figuring*, 68-81 has also shown how the Lukan Jesus used question parables and questions associated with parables, when speaking to his opponents, to gain the upper hand, exposing his opponents questions/statements as flawed, and reducing them to a state of aporia (similarly Thatcher, Jesus, 95-110; Spencer, Rhetorical, 52-3; cf. Quintillian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 9.2.9): In the process Jesus is able to gain the support and admiration of his wider audience, which “is drawn to [his] side” (as victor in the debate), and “if persuaded, becomes a proponent of the message” (68-9). Cf. further Moshavi, “What?”, 93-108; Moshavi, “Between”, 136-49 on the persuasive power of rhetorical questions in OT narrative (their “strengthening effect... [and] intensifying nature” (147)); also Guinness, Fool’s, 161-4 on questions as a “biblical strategy for confronting closed minds and hearts” (161), their persuasive power arising on account of their being “indirect” and “invoking” (163).

91 Cf. Roth, *Parables*, 406-7 on the role of “second person direct addresses” in the Q parables; Morello, “Livy’s”, 66 on Livy’s use of second person verbs to engage the reader; Shiner, *Proclaiming*, 177-8, discussing the dynamics of oral performance of Mark, arguing Mark frequently addresses his audience directly through the dialogues in the Gospel: “Every mention of ‘you’ in the narrative may have a double reference. ‘You’ is heard in the story world as overheard dialogue between characters. Because the narrative is addressed to me in the audience, however, I can hear ‘you’ within the social world as addressed to me” (178).

92 Similarly Mark 7.18: οὕτως καὶ ὑμεῖς ἀκούνετε ἐστε; οὐ νοεῖτε ὅτι...
to the potential for application of the parables to all who hear, within the ministry of the historical Jesus and now for the reader also.\footnote{Also pointing in this direction are Lukan redactional tendencies that broaden the audience for the parables, so that it is only a short step for the reader to see themselves being addressed as well. In particular: (A) the Lukan tendency to designate a primary audience for a parable, even while noting how a wider group is listening; e.g. (i) 8.9-18 is addressed to the disciples as primary audience, but the crowds remain (8.4,19); (ii) 12.22-53 is addressed to the disciples as primary audience, but Peter’s question points to the parables’ wider application, and the crowd of 12.13 returns as audience in 12.54 without a designated change of location; (iii) 16.1-13 is addressed to the disciples as primary audience, but the Pharisees of 15.2 have been listening (16.14); (B) the Lukan tendency to generalise some audiences where Mark is more specific; e.g. (i) 11.15 has τινὲς… ἔξω αὐτῶν (i.e. out of the crowd) (cf. Mark 3.22: οἱ γραμματεῖς οἱ ἄπο ἱεροσολύμων καταβάντες); (ii) 20.9 has ὁ λαὸς, even though οἱ ἄρχοντες καὶ οἱ γραμματεῖς καὶ οἱ πρεσβύτεροι (20.19) are present (cf. Mark 12.2: αὐτοῖς, referring to οἱ ἄρχοντες καὶ οἱ γραμματεῖς καὶ οἱ πρεσβύτεροι (11.27), even though a crowd is present (11.32)); (iii) 21.5 has τίς (cf. Mark 13.3: Πέτρος καὶ Ἰάκωβος καὶ Ἰωάννης καὶ Ἀνδρέας). Thus the Lukan parables function throughout Jesus’ ministry as an invitation to the crowds (and Jesus’ opponents), to inquire and seek out the meaning of the parables, as an initial step toward following Jesus. These patterns within Luke cohere with Mark 4.33-4; Matt 13.34 and suggest an ongoing public dimension to the parables in the ministry of the historical Jesus (which Matt/Mark point to, but without describing in detail).}{92}

While rhetorical questions feature elsewhere in the Synoptics, their exceptional frequency in relation to parabolic material is suggestive that parables and parabolic sayings in the ministry of the historical Jesus took on the form of, or included, or were accompanied by, rhetorical questions, demanding audience engagement with the issue at hand.\footnote{I have provided references above for questions in proximity to parabolic material from Mark, Q, L and M. The same phenomena is found in John, where questions are placed alongside parables or parabolic sayings: (i) by others beforehand: 2.18; 4.11-12; 8.33; 10.24; 11.8; (ii) by others afterward: 2.20; 3.4; 3.9; 6.52; 10.20; 14.5; (iii) by Jesus beforehand: 4.35; 11.9a; (iv) by Jesus afterward: 3.10.12. Thus we have multiple and recurrent attestation of this phenomena. On the rhetorical function (for Nicodemus and the reader) of the questions in 3.10-12, see the discussion in Estes, Questions, 94-7; 133-6.}{93} The Synoptic form and Gospel arrangement of the parables retains these striking rhetorical features, creating a similar opportunity (and making a similar demand) for participation by the reader.\footnote{A small number of imperatives associated with the parables have a similar function, in that they address both the narrative audience and the reader, calling for careful listening to, and seeking out understanding of, the parables. Jesus’ dramatic Ὅς ἔχει ἤτα ὄντα ἀκούειν ἄκουεται (Mark 4.9; also 4.23), calls all readers, in every age, and with ears to hear, to urgent, careful and responsive engagement with the parables. See also e.g. Mark 4.3: ἀκούετε ; 4.24: ὑπετήτε τῇ ἀκούετε; Matt 13.18: ὃ ἔχεις οὖν ἀκούστε σὲ τὴν παραβολήν...; Matt 15.10: ἀκούετε καὶ; Luke 8.18: ὑπετήτε ὁ οὐν πιός ἀκούετε; Luke 11.35: σκότητε οὖν...; Luke 18.6-8: ἀκούστε...; Luke 14.35: ὃ ἔχων ἦτα ἀκούειν ἄκουετω (second person pronouns and verbs underlined).}{94} In this way also, I propose, the Synoptic Gospels retain for the reader a crucial feature of the rhetorical experience and didactic potential of the parables in the ministry of the historical Jesus.

**Conclusion**

In summary, I am proposing that understanding the historical Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God required a process of reception characterised by high levels of audience engagement and active inquiry (of Jesus). The parables’ importance within the historical Jesus’ teaching and proclamation is (at least in part) a function of their enigmatic form, which created opportunity for the earliest disciples to learn and practice a form of active inquiry and responsive engagement with Jesus that is essential to understanding and entering the kingdom of God. In providing opportunity for Jesus’ followers to develop their capacity for this form of “listening”, the parables made an essential contribution to their formation and discipleship. I am then proposing that the Synoptic
Gospels evidence an economical approach to the literary arrangement of the parables, and in doing so create a textual opportunity for readers to learn the same kind of active, responsive and inquiring engagement that the historical Jesus called for in relation to the parables, and by which the kingdom of God is to be understood and entered into. To the extent that these proposals are credible, I have identified both a textual strategy behind the Synoptic arrangement of the parables, and the origins of this strategy in the role of the parables in the discipleship of the earliest followers of the historical Jesus.

That an engagement with these ancient texts - on their own enigmatic and demanding terms - has potential for Christian formation gives a heightened significance to the literary arrangement of the parables, and exposes a further limitation to interpretive approaches that adapt the parables to theological or historical hypotheses, negating in the process the need to fully engage with textual indeterminacy on terms set by the text.
Conclusion

The parables of Jesus are often interpreted by "adapting" them to a hypothesis. This hypothesis may be theological, ideological, historical or existential, or may concern the nature and function of the parables. Such hypotheses, by nature established and defined, tend to dominate the interpretive process, providing the interpretive signals that determine the shape of interpretive outcomes. The parables, by nature malleable and open, take their interpretive cue from the hypothesis; they are an obliging literary form. Interpreted this way the parables tend to function primary to illustrate or reinforce what is already known, independent of them (the content of the hypothesis). In this thesis I have argued that the parables of the Synoptic Jesus were designed to make a more substantive, first order contribution to his ministry and proclamation than is possible when they are interpreted by being adapted to a hypothesis.

My proposal is that the NT Gospels, in arranging the parables situationally, and by supplying parable-specific interpretive signals, anticipate an alternative approach to their interpretation. Rather than being linked directly and in isolation to a hypothesis, the parables (in their NT Gospel presentation) are typically associated with particular circumstances (narrative and anticipated) and accompanied by direct speech introductions, sayings, pronouncements, questions, dialogue and discourse. The literary juxtaposition of this contextual data and the parables, and the integration of the two into structured literary units, suggests an interpretive relationship was intended. This contextual data may inform an approach to interpreting the parables that is quite different from adapting them to a hypothesis. Hypotheses - as Irenaeus defined them - tend to be well defined and established (even fixed) in nature, and often general so as to assimilate large amounts of data. Hence their tendency to dominate an open literary form (the parables) as the two come into direct interpretive relationship. In contrast, the data the NT Gospels place in literary proximity to the parables is parable-specific, varied and situational, and thus of a different literary order from a hypothesis. This data is also partial and provisional in nature, being - like the parables themselves - only one of the many pieces of data that combine to form the literary whole. Associated direct speech elements are also often partially open and enigmatic, or in some way dependent on a parable for their full significance. Accordingly, both the parables and their contextual data, when situated together within a literary unit, share a literary dependency, and may mutually inform to establish their own literary significance and the significance and coherence of the literary unit as a whole. Thus rather than the parables being adapted to a hypothesis, I have argued that interpretation may occur through a dialogical collaboration between individual parables and the data placed in literary proximity to them.

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1 Or specific to a small group of parables presented as a collation.
My thesis argues for the importance of this situational and dialogical approach to reading the NT parables of Jesus. I have demonstrated this approach using six NT parables, showing how interpretation may occur in the form of a dialogue between each parable and the data placed in literary proximity to it. I have argued that each parable and the direct speech elements associated with it are dependent upon each other for their full literary significance, and for the Synoptic Jesus’ situational communicative intent to be established. Each parable and its associated direct speech elements were seen to be able to mutually inform and collaborate (without either dominating the other) so as to provide a new perspective on the circumstances to which they speak. This collaboration was generative of meaning, informed by both parable and contextual data, but ultimately transcending what is explicit in either. In this collaborative, dialogical process of interpretation each parable’s natural openness was resolved, so that it assumed a situational meaning and was able to function as a more concrete and (contextually defined) literary component. Interpreted this way these parables were shown to disclose something new, making their own (even if contextually dependent) contribution to the Synoptic Jesus’ proclamation and enactment of the kingdom of God.

This contextual approach to reading these parables resulted in interpretive outcomes that are more specific in nature and are more varied in subject than when parables are adapted to a general hypothesis. Further, my readings emphasise particular contextual concerns and theological insights overlooked in other scholarship where these parables have been read (primarily) in interpretive dialogue with general Gospel/NT theology, historical Jesus portraits, or non-contextual elements of the Gospels. I have also shown how these parables, when first interpreted contextually, were then able to make an important contribution to developing the narrative and theology of their Gospels, even while gaining additional depth and significance as their Gospel narratives further unfold. While I have provided a preliminary argument that my methodology has application to all NT parabolic material, analysis of a wider range of parables will be necessary to confirm or modify this conclusion, work that I hope to undertake in the near future.

Reading the parables situationally, in relation to narrative circumstances that precede - and often precipitate - their telling, creates new possibilities for inquiry into the rhetorical function and rhetorical strategies of individual parables. Rhetorical analysis is by nature situational and parable-specific, requiring attention to speaker and audience, the relationship between the two, and to occasion and precipitating circumstances. This data, as it relates to individual parables, is only available to us from the NT Gospels. I have argued that the NT Gospels typically arrange the parables with their audience and the circumstances of their telling described in sufficient detail to allow their rhetorical significance to be determined. To inform a rhetorical analysis of the parables I proposed a model that describes the communicative dynamics that give parables their persuasive
force in relation to a particular circumstance and audience. This model is a new contribution to parable scholarship. The model recognises how the parables draw an audience away from the circumstances at hand, into the world of the parabolic narrative where there is relative freedom to consider viewpoints unacceptable if presented directly. The parabolic narrative confronts an audience with characters, plot elements, and imagery that are familiar and known (of themselves and as ways of representing the situation at hand), that engage and orient an audience and commend the parable as a valid representation of the situation to which the parable speaks. However, the narrative also introduces other elements that are unexpected, ambiguous and strange (in themselves and in relation to the situation at hand). The combining of these narrative elements, and their juxtaposition with associated circumstances, creates an interpretive tension within which the parable (in constant dialogue with associated direct speech elements) seeks to reframe the situation at hand so that it is perceived by the audience in new ways.

This model of the “Parabolic Process” contributes to my readings of the six NT parables and generates new proposals concerning their rhetorical contribution within the ministry of the Synoptic Jesus. In general, the parables are seen to be skilful rhetorical pieces designed to alter audience perceptions of the situation at hand (as the audience understand and participate in that situation), so as to liberate and empower the audience to participate in the kingdom of God in new ways. The parables subtly expose behaviour, values, attitudes and paradigms that prevent participation in the kingdom of God, seeking to liberate their audience from their power. The parables also reveal the “newness” of the nature and way of life of the kingdom of God, authorising and empowering an audience to participate in that newness in previously unimaginable ways. My readings also provide new insights concerning the rhetorical strategies of individual parables, the communicative dynamics that allow them to carry a persuasive force for their (Gospel) narrative audience that goes beyond what might be achieved by direct speech forms. My analysis of these parables’ rhetorical function and rhetorical strategies may complement parable scholarship having a primary concern with the theology and ethics of the parables. It is my hope that my analysis will encourage further scholarly inquiry into the rhetoric of the parables, leading to refinement and improvement of the techniques that have informed my readings.

I have discussed possible objections to my proposed methodology. Firstly, while parables are polyvalent by nature (as is often argued), I have shown that this does not prevent a parable being used with a particular purpose in a given situation, a purpose that may also be recognisable in that parable’s reception. I have argued that the polyvalent paradigm, as it is typically understood, is not compatible with the NT Gospels’ literary presentation of the parables of Jesus. Secondly, I have argued that the particularity of the parables of Jesus, as arranged within the NT Gospels, need not deny them contemporary significance (as some have claimed). The circumstances to which the
Synoptic parables speak are often as contemporary as they are ancient, either directly or analogously, and thus have the potential to act as points of transference, enabling a parable to speak to the (similar or analogous) circumstances of a contemporary audience. Attention to associated direct speech elements in the contemporary reception of a parable will help ensure a consistency to that parable’s meaning and function, so that the theology and ethics associated with its contemporary reception have a meaningful link to the Jesus with whom the parables’ origins lie.

Thirdly, I have suggested it may now be important to re-evaluate the historicity of the relationship between the parables and their Gospel frames, in light of the developments in Gospel origins scholarship over the past three decades and considering my arguments concerning the nature of the genre. Fourthly, I have proposed a new way of understanding the relationship between the NT Gospels’ arrangement of the parables of Jesus and their function in the ministry of the historical Jesus. I have argued that, within the ministry of the historical Jesus, the parables (especially those addressed to the disciples and the crowds) were not always initially understood. Further inquiry and engagement with Jesus, in regard to the parables, was required in order for understanding to occur. In this way the parables created an opportunity for disciples (and would-be disciples) of Jesus to develop a capacity for an active, inquiring and responsive form of “hearing” that was necessary to receive the mystery of the kingdom of God. I have suggested, as a new proposal, that the NT Gospels' arrangement of the parables, characterised by high levels of economy and associated literary indeterminacy, creates the opportunity (textually) for a reader to develop this same capacity. For a reader to resolve the parables’ literary indeterminacy a process of engagement with the text is required, a process having its own capacity to contribute to the formation and discipleship of contemporary followers of Jesus. The still somewhat enigmatic Gospel presentation of the parables forces the modern reader to slow down and recognise something before them that they do not immediately understand, and that cannot be received “on the run”. Through patient textual engagement concerning the parables, a contemporary reader may develop the capacity for an active, inquiring and responsive form of “hearing”, by which he or she may come to understand and embrace the strange and unsettling message of the kingdom of God.

My analysis of the NT parables of Jesus in this thesis is an exercise in literary criticism (as informed by socio-historical research), having a particular concern with the interpretive significance of the literary location and arrangement of these parables within the NT Gospels. My interpretive outcomes have a particular importance for readers interested in the Jesus of the NT Gospels and in the function of the parables within the ministry of Jesus as described in these Gospels. I recognise that this is not the only way to read the parables of Jesus. However, my thesis gives rise
to observations and questions about other approaches that would benefit from further attention in future parable scholarship:

Firstly, the concepts of parabolic autonomy and auto-interpretation are poorly supported, both in theory and in the realities of interpretive practice, and in my view need to be set aside. The parables are a dependent literary form, and it is incumbent on every interpreter to be transparent in regard to the points of reference external to the parables on which their readings depend.

Secondly, while general Gospel/NT/Biblical theology must contribute to defining the overall context in which we read the parables, I have shown that where parables are brought into *direct* interpretive dialogue with this theology (so that it supplies the crucial interpretive signals), the particular narrative or theological concerns of a Gospel at the precise point the parable is located may easily be overlooked, and their implications for reading the parables left unexplored. Reading the parables contextually avoids this problem and in my view has considerable potential (more than I have had space to explore in this thesis) to allow the parables to contribute in their own way to enriching the theology of their Gospels.

Thirdly, while the theology and teaching content of the parables is of great importance, I have shown that it is only part of the parables’ significance within the ministry of the Synoptic Jesus. The parables’ rhetorical function and strategies are also important to how we read the Gospel narratives, and to understanding the significance of the parables for a contemporary audience.

Fourthly, historical reconstructions of the life and ministry of Jesus will continue to find the parables obliging evidence in support of what is otherwise known about Jesus from less ambiguous data. But such historical inquiry has thus far shown only a limited capacity to establish specific historical contexts for individual parables. Amongst other things, this constrains inquiry into the parables’ rhetorical function. Following recent developments in Gospel origins scholarship, I suggest it is time to reassess the potential of the NT Gospels’ parable frames to contribute to portraits of the historical Jesus, and thus to more detailed knowledge of the historical origins of the parables.

Fifthly, audience-directed readings of the parables, without reference to their historical and literary origins, will likely remain popular in a society where individual autonomy is highly valued. However, the tendency for such readings to merely affirm, and even legitimise, the existing values, worldview and lifestyle of the reader, must be acknowledged. Further, the precise status of interpretive outcomes arising from audience-directed approaches needs to be clarified, especially given the potential for this approach to lead to readings having no meaningful connection to the historical or Synoptic Jesus.
Sixthly there is, in my view, unexplored potential for the parables to be brought into constructive dialogue with contemporary ideology, religion, philosophy and culture. My thesis helps identify the necessary conditions for such a dialogue. The parables, in isolation from their historical and literary contexts, are not able to function as a true partner in dialogue, given their natural tendency to be interpreted rather than to interpret, so that they readily become illustrations commending contemporary thought. That is not dialogue. The NT Gospels’ arrangement of the parables facilitates dialogue by informing a necessary initial interpretive step in which the parables are given particular meaning and definition. A genuine dialogue with contemporary culture and thought is then possible, in which the parables’ contemporary value is actually at stake, and in which there is also potential for them to enrich, critique and refine contemporary ideology, religion, philosophy and culture.
Appendix 1:
THE PLASTICITY OF THE PARABLE GENRE

I argued in Chapter IV that parables are characterised by Plasticity. That is to say that the parables are inherently versatile and malleable and when situated within a particular literary or rhetorical context will take on a particular meaning and function that is heavily shaped by that context. The parables' Plasticity is what allows them to function effectively in a range of different contexts. As a way of exploring this characteristic of the genre further, I examine several parabolic sayings and stories that feature in two or more literary contexts. In doing so I seek to identify features of the genre that underpin its Plasticity, and to further understand the actual process of adaptation and environmental shaping.

Parabolic Sayings
The Sea Captains contains imagery of sailors and a ship, tossed about in a terrifying storm. Drawing on well known events in the ancient world, this imagery is widely used in ancient literature. Some examples: (i) By Seneca, warning that to surrender control of one's life to others or to be overly occupied with pleasures, is to live only a little of life despite a great deal of busyness;\(^1\) (ii) By Philo, illustrating the instability and vulnerability of a person's life without wisdom;\(^2\) (iii) In Qumran texts, portraying cosmic turmoil and judgment on the wicked in the day a leader is born,\(^3\) and elsewhere to depict the suffering and inner turmoil of a righteous man amidst the wickedness and apostasy of others around him.\(^4\) The imagery/narrative functions comparatively in all these examples, rather than as a contrast in The Sea Captains. The relationship between the two main motifs (sailors/ship and stormy seas) consistently contains an element of vulnerability and/or loss of control. Different metaphorical referents are in each case supplied by the surrounding discourse. Wisdom 14.1-4 uses similar imagery (in a fictitious scenario) in a non-metaphorical way to develop and strengthen a longer argument exposing the folly of idolatry (13.1-14.4). The varied use of this simple imagery/narrative is a function of its relatively open nature, so that each literary context may supply its own metaphorical referent, and accompanying Plain Speech define the nature of the relationship between the two.

\(^1\) Seneca, *De Brevitate Vitae*, 7.10; he adds the motif of a circular voyage, going nowhere.

\(^2\) Philo, *De Cherubim*, 1.13, focusing particularly here on the mind departing from necessary imagination of God, leading to disturbance of the soul. See also Philo's use of similar imagery in *De Posteritate Caini*, 22; *De Agricultura* 1.89; *De Migracione Abrahami*, 1.148 (to portray the indecisive nature of some people). Gelijn and Runia, *Cultivation*, 182 suggest the voyages of Odysseus inspired Philo, though given the prevalence of such imagery in ancient literature and that such experiences were an established part of ancient life, identifying a specific literary source is probably unnecessary.

\(^3\) 1QHxi.13-15.

\(^4\) 1QHxiv.22-4.
The parabolic saying “The axe is already at the root of the tree” (Matt 3.10a/Luke 3.9a), also features in Gospel of Philip 83.11-21. In the mouth of John the Baptist, the saying is designed to alter how the Jerusalem elite (Matt)/Israel (Luke) perceive themselves and their situation. They are offside with Israel's God, facing imminent judgment, and thus must repent. This metaphorical sense is given by prior reference to τῆς μελλούσης ὀργῆς (Matt 3.7/Luke 3.7) and the way the saying is developed using imagery symbolising eschatological judgment (Matt 3.10b/Luke 3.9b).

In Gospel of Philip, prior discourse establishes a “metaphorical connection between the tree and evil” (83.3-10). The saying is used to develop an exhortation/argument for dealing with the root of evil in individual hearts (83.11-21). The saying in both cases works comparatively, and there is consistency in the relationship between its motifs (cutting/exposing the root means destruction of the whole). The shift in meaning/function occurs because accompanying Plain Speech: (i) supplies the central motif with different metaphorical referents (tree-Israel becomes tree-evil); (ii) replaces the (implied but unstated) divine hand (Matt/Luke) with human labour as the source of action (Philip); and (iii) shifts the primary focus from the axe motif (Matt/Luke) to the root motif (Philip).

In Baasland’s exhaustive study of the parabolic material in the Sermon on the Mount, he argues the associated imagery is “basically open”, and so recognises the importance of contextual signals to establish the imagery’s specific function within the Sermon. Baasland determines the “point of view” of the particular (contextual) use of metaphorical imagery with reference to the

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5 Coptic saying: χεματ ταεινη ο μοντ ατνογνε ραανέ (83.11-12). Translated in Lundhaug, Images, 304: “Already the axe is laid at the root of the trees”.

6 On fire as symbolising (eschatological) judgment in Jewish thought, see Roth, Parables, 65-6; Davies and Allison, Matthew 1-7, 310.

7 Lundhaug, Images, 304. The point has been made earlier in the discourse that living things, including trees thrive because their insides/root is hidden, and die if these are exposed, and so it is with evil (82.30-83.2). On the flow of thought in 82.30-83.30 see Lundhaug, Images, 303-5.

8 The imagery is then developed to warn that evil will flourish unless we become aware of its presence and expose it (83.21-30).

9 On God as the one wielding the axe, see Roth, Parables, 61 (and 61n21).

10 See similarly the use of the parabolic saying a Tree and its Fruit in Matt 7.15-23; 12.25-34; Luke 6.43-45; Sirach 27.6. There is a stable relationship between central motifs (type/quality of tree and type/quality of fruit correspond), which are consistently applied to the inward/outward aspects of people’s lives. However, fruit may symbolise deeds (Matt 7.15-23) or words (Matt 12.25-34; Luke 6.43-5; Sir 27.6); the surrounding discourse signals which. While the tree speaks of the heart in Matt 12.34 and Luke 6.43-5, in Sir 27.6 the referent is a “disciplined, trained and upright mind” (Skehan and Di Lella, Wisdom, 356). Matt 12.34 provides the crucial interpretive signal that the saying (12.33) here relates to the Pharisees not Jesus (cf. Luz, Matthew 8-20, 210 n122 on how the church fathers were split on whether the parabolic saying served to justify Jesus or vilify the Pharisees). For the versatility of the basic tree-fruit imagery imagery, see Baasland, Parables, 532: it “has four aspects” in the NT - announcing judgment… announcing expected results… ascertaining affiliation/identity… or equivalent results”.

11 Baasland, Parables, 608.

12 In my view, Baasland generally models considerable constraint in interpreting parabolic imagery and narrative, avoiding interpretive moves where there is no signal in the text to license them. This is to prevent “certain words or metaphors from being over-interpreted or allegorised” (Baasland, Parables, 609).
narratives/sayings themselves ("one has to follow the point of view in the imagery itself") and by bringing the sayings and their Gospel frames (with their interpretive "signals") into interpretive dialogue. The "salt" saying (Matt 5.13a), for example, "is open to many possible interpretations", given the "diverse connotations" of its imagery in the ancient world. Its Matthean significance is determined with reference to how the image is developed in 5.13b and in dialogue with the Plain Speech preceding (5.1-12) and following (5.17) the saying.

**Short Narrative Parables**

Plasticity is not only a feature of metaphorical sayings, with limited plot development and simple (but highly flexible) imagery, but is also seen in parables with more complex and developed plots:

1. Menenius Agrippa, sent by the Roman Senate to prevent revolt by the peasant armies, tells a parable in which various parts of the body rebel against the stomach, whom they considered to be lazy and pampered by their efforts, but only to be starved, nearly to death. Menenius explains the parable as an analogy (comparando hinc quam... similis esset...), with the actions of the body parts corresponding reasonably obviously to the peasants' rebellion. By continuing his narrative beyond the scenes which correspond to the peasants' existing actions (to narrate the consequences of the rebellion of the body parts), Menenius opens a new perspective on the peasants' rebellion (it will ultimately be detrimental to them). The audience understands and accepts this, so that Menenius succeeds in his mission. The parable has been used widely and variously applied from ancient to modern times. In very similar form, and retaining a consistent relationship between its motifs, the parable has been used to justify the role of military generals, political rulers, church leaders, and the study of philosophy, the literary context in each case determining the metaphorical referent of its main motifs. With minor plot variations and alteration in the particular emphasis given to particular motifs (body

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13 Baasland's definition of parable is very wide, so that his idea of following the point of view in the imagery/narrative includes having regard to material that is classified as Plain Speech in this thesis - discourse that develops the imagery or narrative beyond itself.

14 Baasland, *Parables*, 608: "sometimes the frame or an application gives the point of view"; similarly, "The frame influences the interpretation of the parables heavily" (607).


16 See Baasland, *Parables*, 87-100.

17 Livy, *History of Rome*, 2.32.5-12.


19 See Hale, "Intestine" on the varied use of the Story in classical times (377-79; also Nestle, *Griechische*, 502-4) and from medieval to modern times (379-86).

20 Hale, "Intestine", 378-81.
parts) and the relationship between them, the parable has been used to “urge friendship or Christian love, general political obedience or specific ecclesiastical change”.21

2. Williams traces the long literary history of an ancient Story about a fox and a viper/vixen,22 finding it to have been used: (i) to exhort faithfulness and honour in friendship,23 and (ii) to encourages the elite to show concern for the poor.24 It is able to function in these two different ways because the respective epimythia (i) stipulate different metaphorical referents for the main characters (eagle-friend; fox-friend becomes eagle-rich; fox-poor); (ii) emphasise different motifs of the story (breaking of relationship; refusal to hear cry for mercy); and (iii) introduce a new element (divine retribution) into one of the stories. The story generally provides a negative example with a didactic purpose, though it may initially have had an aetiological purpose.25

Similar Plasticity can be observed in how the fables feature in ancient literature. Van Dijk’s study of Hellenistic fables located in literature predating the major anthologies examines fables that feature in more than one context,26 finding that: (i) the “metaphorical relationship” between these fables and their varying contexts is sometimes different, sometimes partially the same, and sometimes completely the same; and (ii) the same fable may be “used to different ends”, a fact that testifies to the genre’s flexibility…[and] demonstrates the invalidity of any generalisations of one (e.g. sociological, or a moral) function”.27 The Plain Speech accompanying a fable often plays the decisive role in determining the fable’s function.28

21 Hale, “Intestine”, 386. In Shakespeare’s use of the fable (Coriolanus I.1.92-170), the story’s motifs and plot are taken up by a citizen and used with considerable wit to subvert Menenius’ application of the Story, (the “cormorant belly…the sink o’ the body” is relegated among the members of the body). Menenius replies by calling the man the “great toe of the assembly”! In Milton’s use, the stomach is displaced with a tumour; so that it corrupts rather than supports the wider body, and the wider body rightly rejects it (cited in Hale, “Intestine”, 384). 1 Cor 12 contains a more egalitarian version, seeking to protect the more vulnerable in the (church) community, and in critique of those having more social power because of their obvious spiritual abilities.

22 Williams, “History”, 70-77, involving a period of three thousand years, eight languages and three continents.

23 Williams, “History”, 74, the sixth century Aesop version and the similar but not identical Armenian story (76).

24 Williams, “History”, 77 regarding the twelfth century French version; a similar lesson is drawn from the story in Phaedrus’ version (Perry, Babrius, 223-4).

25 Williams, “History”, 71. Williams also suggests that its use by Marie de France may be designed (in part) to inspire emulation of the foxes’ behaviour by the poor (77).

26 van Dijk, Fables, 367; or are alluded to in more than one context.

27 van Dijk, Fables, 379. Aetiological fables for example, may be used to “persuade… mock… or silence… the addressee” (380).

28 Similarly Schlecht, exploring the use of ancient fables (or allusions to them) in medieval and early modern literature and art, observes how their “prinzipiellen Offenheit”, leads to “sich ein breites Spektrum an Deutungs- und Verwendungsmöglichkeiten” (Schlecht, Fabula, 121-148; quotation 121), because “die Einbringung des gleichen Stoffes in unterschiedliche Texte evoziert je eigene, durch den jeweiligen Textzusammenhang bedingte Vermittlungsprozesse mit verschiedenen Interpretationsmöglichkeiten” (Schlecht, Fabula, 125; citing as one example, the various ways the fable of the Mice and the Cat features in a range of literature and art, including the Bayeux Tapestry (124-5)).
Plasticity can also be observed with some Rabbinic parables. For example, in Sifre on Deuteronomy a Story about a teacher leading his student on a tour of his inheritance and being wearied in the experience, is a midrash on Deut 1.20-1, emphasising the urgency of Moses’ command to Israel to take possession of the land. Later in the same work, the same Story is used as a midrash on Deut 33.24-29, to portray the joy of Israel anticipating the goodness of God in the age to come. The change in function occurs because accompanying Plain Speech signals different metaphorical referents (orchard-Canaan becomes orchard-age to come), and an additional motif in the second story introduces the element of joy.

The parable of a sheep who deserts its ninety-nine companions, only to be found and returned by its shepherd, features in similar form in four Gospels. In Matt and Luke the Story functions comparatively, portraying the redemption of (i) those once sinners but now included among the people of God (Luke); and (ii) those once included among the people of God but now having sinned (Matt). While contextual elements signal different metaphorical referents for the central motif (the stray sheep), the parable in both cases seems designed to alter audience perceptions of “sinners”, by portraying them as sheep disconnected from their true place of belonging (rather than those having no place among the people of God), and loved and pursued by a God who rejoices in their return. The Stories are developed (in the dialogue that follows them) in conceptually similar ways, even if ultimately to different didactic ends. In Gospel of Truth, the preceding discourse signals that the Shepherd symbolises Jesus and his work in saving those who have gone astray. The way the Story is subsequently explored is enigmatic, perhaps emphasising completion of the

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29 See Harvey and Johnston, Parables, 160-164 who cite examples of Rabbinic writers using parables from other ancient sources (differently), and of parallel versions of the same Rabbinic parable being used with different applications; similarly Notley and Safrai, Parables, 65-6. Cf. Neusner, Rabbinic, 1-6; Neusner, “Parable”, 1-21 on the contextual integration and dependence of parables in a range of Rabbinic writings. Neusner argues that “documents make distinctive choices, and one may readily distinguish the Mashal as utilised in one from the same as utilised in another” (Neusner, “Parable”, 12). Thus the “parables are subordinate in form and other indicative traits of narrative to the documentary program of the compilations that preserve and use them” (21). Neusner finds no support for the idea that “the parable’ dictates its own traits and program, adaptable here and there but everywhere free of contextual influence” (Neusner, Rabbinic, 221), arguing instead that the “Mashal on its own, outside of particular documentary settings, bears no fixed, universal traits of substance, only of form: the signal stands for itself, the context - the task defined by the composition of which the Mashal forms a principal part - defines all else, and the documents determine the context for most of their various compositions” (222).

30 See Neusner, Sifre I, 56.

31 See Neusner, Sifre II, 451. Stern, Midrash, 7 gives another example of a “universal tale-type found throughout the world” that features in Rabbinic writings in a particular way, so that its “meaning is almost entirely context-specific… the immediate context would have given [the audience] all the information they needed, as the frame narrative suggests”.

32 Matt 18.12-13; Luke 15.4-6; Thomas 107; Gospel of Truth, 31.30-32.15. On similarities and differences between the stories, see Hultgren, Parables, 49-52; Snodgrass, Stories, 99-100. A basic underlying story is common to all (see Zimmermann, “Matthew”, 173 re the Matthean and Lukan versions), and it is not the minor differences in the Story that account for the variation in its function.

33 The Lukan Story is a claim by Jesus to divine legitimation for his table fellowship with sinners, urging his opponents to cease their criticism and join the party; the Matthean story is exhortation to the disciples to imitate God in their care for the least important or apostate members of their community.

flock as a whole,\textsuperscript{35} with exhortative intent. In these readings, the parable's Stock Imagery\textsuperscript{36} contributes to consistency in the symbolism of its central motifs (shepherd, sheep) and the relationship between them. Despite this, when brought into interpretive relationship with varied contextual data the parable may readily function toward different didactic ends. In \textit{Thomas} the Story has no narrative context or accompanying Plain Speech, inviting interpretation but without signalling its direction.\textsuperscript{37}

\textbf{A Longer Narrative Parable}

Similar Plasticity can be seen in the Great Banquet (Luke 14.15-24), the Royal Wedding Banquet (Matt 22.1-14), and the Dinner Party (\textit{Thomas} 64), which all share the same basic plot and structure.\textsuperscript{38} All three function as a warning of potential exclusion from the kingdom of God, a warning portrayed in the Story and reinforced in accompanying Plain Speech.\textsuperscript{39} In Matt and Luke, the Story is addressed to the Jewish religious elite,\textsuperscript{40} while in \textit{Thomas} there is no narrative audience. The Matthean version, with its allegorical elements, appears focused on Israel and particularly the Jerusalem elite, anticipating their city's destruction. Its final scene, unique to Matthew, adds a warning for those who attend the banquet. The Lukan version is less allegorical and thus has more general application; with its double emphasis on the marginal joining the banquet it corresponds to - and thus concerns - analogous events narrated in the wider Lukan narrative. \textit{Thomas}, by including (and adding) multiple motifs with a commercial emphasis,\textsuperscript{41} and

\textsuperscript{35} So Hultgren, \textit{Parables}, 51; Williams, \textit{Biblical}, 23: the conversion of the defiled (31.34-36) completes “what is lacking for the perfection of all”. This emphasis fits with the focus on the 100 in 32.8-17 (see Grobel, \textit{Truth}, 129-33 for the mechanics and symbolic significance of moving from 99 to 100 when counting on fingers in the ancient world).

\textsuperscript{36} See e.g. Zimmermann, \textit{Puzzling}, 224-8; Hultgren, \textit{Parables}, 52-3 on the “shepherd metaphor” in the OT.

\textsuperscript{37} Readings are subsequently diverse, with scholars choosing different motifs to emphasise, and evoking diverse literature to inform the Story’s imagery. Examples of various interpretations: (i) it emphasises the love of the shepherd for the sheep (Fitzmyer, \textit{Luke X-XXIV}, 1074); (ii) it symbolises how the “gnostic Christian… is valued more highly than ordinary Christians” (Hultgren, \textit{Parables}, 51); (iii) it portrays the “total concern of the disciple with the salvation provided by Jesus and the complete indifference to all else” (Gathercole, \textit{Thomas}, 586-7); (iv) it speaks of the eschatological restoration of Israel (Petersen, “Lost Sheep”); (v) it is a “picture of the kingdom in which the love of the Father is \textit{not unconditional}” (Liebenberg, \textit{Language}, 429; italics original). Liebenberg rightly sees “proof of how difficult it is to make sense of any parable performance outside of a narrative context” (429) (despite his exploration of the parable’s metaphorical mapping).

\textsuperscript{38} All three “versions” share a basic plot structure of a feast prepared, to which invited guests, on being summoned, refuse to come, so that others are invited in their place, while the original invitees are excluded. For comparison of the stories see Hultgren, \textit{Parables}, 333-6; Snodgrass, \textit{Stories}, 304-6; also Meier, \textit{Marginal V}, 254-8, who identifies a common structure to the versions in Matt and Luke, and concludes we are “dealing with a single parable preserved in two different versions” (258).

\textsuperscript{39} The theme of participation in the kingdom (or not) is signalled (i) in the question immediately preceding the parable (Luke 14.15, concerning feasting in the kingdom of God); (ii) in the explicit threat of exclusion from the kingdom of God preceding the parable (Matt 21.43) and the saying that follows it (22.14); and (iii) by reference to "the places of my Father" (\textit{Thomas} 64.12), most likely a reference to the frequent “kingdom of the father” elsewhere in \textit{Thomas}.

\textsuperscript{40} Note (i) οἱ ἄρχιερεῖς καὶ οἱ Φαρισαῖοι (Matt 21.25) and ἄποκριθείς ὁ Ἰησοῦς πάλιν εἶπεν ἐν παραβολαῖς ἀυτοῖς (22.1); and (ii) τούς νομικοὺς καὶ Φαρισαίους (Luke 14.3) - these are at least part of the audience in the Pharisee’s house where the events of 14.1-24 take place (note 14.15, introducing the parable, makes it part of the same scene described in 14.1).

\textsuperscript{41} See Gathercole, \textit{Thomas}, 455 on the potential commercial dimension to 64.7.
making businessmen the sole subjects of its final (Plain Speech) warning, highlights the capacity of wealth and business to prevent participation in the kingdom of God.

Here, even a longer and more complex parable is seen to function variously, as determined by the way its motifs correspond to aspects of its context, the use of minor plot variations, and the emphasis given in accompanying Plain Speech.\(^\text{42}\)

**Conclusion**

The way the above parables function variously in different literary contexts illustrates the Plasticity of the genre. The parables' literary and rhetorical versatility reflects their sensitivity and even receptivity to any environment in which they are placed, their “chameleonic flexibility to fit [their] context”.\(^\text{43}\) The above examples give insight into features of the genre, and into the process of environmental adaptation, that underpin the parables' Plasticity. To summarise. A parabolic Story (in itself) does not specify the matter of which it ultimately speaks, thus leaving open the potential for that subject to be determined contextually.\(^\text{44}\) Whether a Story is simple or complex, its plot and imagery typically have the flexibility to form a meaningful interpretive relationship with a wide variety of contextual data. This flexibility is partly a function of the versatility and adaptability of language, and of the multi-faceted nature of narrative. It is also partly a function of the varied forms the interpretive relationship between Story and context may take i.e. it may involve (one or more of) allegory, comparison, contrast, arguments from the lesser to the greater, creative juxtaposition of imagery and ideas, or a Story's motifs being taken up and developed in subsequent argument.

The above examples also show how further variety in the contextual use of a parable may arise because most parables have multiple motifs, and individual motifs can - in different contexts - be given different levels of emphasis and importance (or largely ignored), and the relationship between different motifs may be variously understood. Further, minor motifs may be added to a Story without significant plot alteration, facilitating further variations on how the Story may function.

Thus as observed by Irenaeus, the parables - in themselves - are an open, indeterminate, ambiguous literary form. This ambiguity may be “resolved” situationally as a parable’s plot, characters and motifs enter into an interpretive relationship with particular contextual data, and thus may be resolved in different ways in different contexts. The grounds of this Plasticity are partly

\(^\text{42}\) In Thomas, the concluding Plain Speech warning also generalises the Story's main external referent, while in Matt and Luke it is given specific definition by the parable’s narrative context.

\(^\text{43}\) van Dijk, *Fables*, 372. Cf. the similar language in Moore, *Literary*, 140 who observes how “Jesus’ parables adapt chameleon-like…”

\(^\text{44}\) While some imagery, having established symbolic meaning, may be suggestive of the subject to which a parable speaks, there always remains potential for that imagery to be used in new or derivative ways. Further, some widely used imagery has more than one symbolic usage.
features of the genre: the subject to which a parable speaks not being specified within the parable, the versatility of language and the multi-faceted nature of narrative, the frequent absence of clearly defined symbolism, and the narrative’s capacity to accommodate minor alterations while retaining a basic plot structure. Plasticity also reflects the creative possibilities of the interpretive relationship between parable and context, a relationship that may take various forms, that may combine a variety of images and ideas in various (and often unexpected) ways, and that may involve the Story’s entire plot or only selected motifs (and with varying emphasis and significance being given to different motifs).

The above examples also illustrate that when determining the contextual significance of a parable, the interpretive relationship between Story and Plain Speech plays an essential role, sometimes signalling the Underlying Circumstance to which a parable speaks, often signalling the nature of the relationship between the two, sometimes supplying additional ideas and images that combine with the parable to create new meaning. This relationship often plays the decisive role in determining a parable’s contextual significance.
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