A CRITIQUE OF TWO RECENT INTERPRETATIONS OF THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

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ABSTRACT

After surveying more generally the interpretation of the parable of the Talents, William R. Herzog II and N. T. Wright’s interpretations are identified as requiring a more specific examination. The immediate context of the parable is the Mount of Olives discourse. This discourse has two focal points: the imminent fall of Jerusalem and the temporally distinct coming of the Son of Man at the end of the age. The parable of the Talents comes in the context of the latter and teaches something about the nature of preparedness for the coming of the Son of Man at an unknown time. Just as a rapacious master wants a return on his investment so the Son of Man wants a return from ‘the secrets of the kingdom of heaven’ that have been entrusted to his disciples and will reward those who make increase and punish those who fail to make increase for the sake of the kingdom.

William R. Herzog II attempts to get behind Matthew’s interpretation to Jesus’ interpretation. He does this by comparing Jesus with Paulo Freire and an appeal to social-science reconstructions of the peasant environment of Jesus’ day. Yet his non-allegorical conclusion, that Jesus spoke the parable to challenge peasants as to their attitudes towards potential whistle-blowers, is not at all convincing. Herzog clearly demonstrates the kind of interpretive extreme that is possible if one abandons the context in which one finds the parables.

N. T. Wright, on the other hand, wants to examine the parable within the Gospel context. However, he has significantly re-interpreted that context. Wright argues that the Mount of Olives discourse has only one focal point: the fall of Jerusalem. Instead of forming a focal point in its own right the material concerning the coming of the Son of Man is a metaphorical way of speaking of the fall of Jerusalem. However, Wright’s arguments are not convincing. As such, there are not sufficient reasons to abandon Matthew’s understanding in favour of Wright’s reconstructed Jesus’ understanding.

Both Herzog and Wright, therefore, can be legitimately criticised for arguing for an interpretation of the parable not intended by Matthew. We would require rather incontrovertible evidence to abandon the earliest understanding of the parable that we have and neither Herzog nor Wright provide this evidence.
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CHAPTER 1

THE HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION OF THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the history of interpretation of the parable of the Talents (Matt. 25:14-31). To accomplish this aim a representative sample of the possible interpretations has been taken from the various stages of the church’s history, with more attention paid to the current state of research.

EARLY CHURCH FATHERS:

Augustine

Augustine was greatly influenced by the Alexandrian school of biblical interpretation. These exegetes sought to discern the spiritual or mystical sense of Scripture. Consequently, allegorization became the natural and reasonable method of biblical exegesis, so much so that the results often bordered on incredulity.¹

Augustine was quite ‘up-front’ about his preference for this method, noting that sermons that explicated the allegory point-by-point were usually very well received.

In Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament Augustine gives a brief sermon on the Talents². First, he equates the talent with salvation: “the wickedness of that servant who was reprobate and severely condemned, was that he would not put out his money to use. He kept the entire sum he had received; but the Lord looked for profit from it. God is covetous with regard to our salvation.”³ Then, he goes directly to exhortation, first applying it to himself (and his fellow bishops) whereby a minister’s preaching is the

² Augustine, Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 405-406. Apparently, Augustine was unwell on this particular day: “Be pleased, however, to hear from me, fatigued though I be and having difficulty in speaking, a few words only.” (Ibid., 405.)
³ Ibid., 405.
‘putting out’ and the congregation’s response of living well is the ‘profit’. He also applies it to the congregation in that each person has certain responsibilities:

Wherever Christ is attacked, defend Him; answer murmurers, rebuke blasphemers, from their fellowship keep yourselves apart. In so doing, you put out to use, if you make gain of any.\textsuperscript{4}

Finally, he applies it to men as the head of their households. They have a responsibility to “look after the salvation of all your household with all vigilance. This if you do this, you put out to use; you will not be slothful servants, you will not have to fear so horrible a condemnation.”\textsuperscript{5}

\textbf{Chrysostom}

The method of biblical interpretation centred on Antioch, in contrast to that used by the Alexandrians, is best exemplified by Chrysostom. In general, these exegetes minimized allegory and reflected a far more sober method of biblical exposition. Unlike the Alexandrians, the Antiochenes did not look for hidden meanings in the biblical text but sought to set forth the literal sense intended by the author. Their concern was more with the historical and grammatical than with the spiritual and mystical.\textsuperscript{6}

Having said that, when it comes to the parables Chrysostom could not avoid allegory altogether.

Chrysostom groups the Ten Virgins and the Talents together\textsuperscript{7} with the two parables at the end of Matt. 24 (the faithful servant – v45-47, and the unfaithful servant – v48-51) as having a common theme: these parables are about “diligence in almsgiving, and about helping our neighbor by all means at our disposal, since it is not possible to be saved in another way.”\textsuperscript{8}

Chrysostom’s sermon on the Talents is therefore addressed “to them that neither in money, nor in word, nor in protection, nor in any other things whatever, are willing to assist their neighbors, but withhold all.”\textsuperscript{9} Since Jesus uses servants in this parable, Chrysostom

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 406.
\item \textsuperscript{5} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{6} Kissinger, 27.
\item \textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 470.
\item \textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 471.
\end{itemize}
sees it as applying to all. The first and second servant are passed over quickly, Chrysostom interpreting goodness as looking out for one’s neighbour; much more time is devoted to the third servant. The king’s response to the third servant is actually described as “gentle” in that to expect a return with interest is entirely natural. This ‘increase’ is interpreted as “the showing forth of the works.”

It is not until he discusses the enigmatic saying of verse 29 that Chrysostom clarifies the allegorical meaning of ‘talent’:

He that has a gift of word and teaching to profit thereby, and uses it not, will lose the gift also; but he that gives diligence, will gain to himself the gift in more abundance; even as the other loses what he had received.

He then launches into an extended exhortatory section that is intended to follow from both the Ten Virgins and the Talents:

Knowing, then, these things, let us contribute alike wealth, and diligence, and protection, and all things for our neighbor’s advantage. For the talents here are each person’s ability, whether in the way of protection, or in money, or in teaching, or whatever. Let no man say, I have but one talent, and can do nothing; for you can even with one talent approve yourself.

THE REFORMATION:

John Calvin

Calvin is critical of those who undertake “minute investigations” of the text, referring to the allegorisation of earlier commentators. Instead he attempts to ascertain “the plain and natural meaning of the whole”. However, he still succumbs to allegorising tendencies.

Since Calvin has written a commentary on a harmony of the Gospels he deals with the Matthean and Lucan accounts together. However, he prefers Luke’s placement of this parable to that of Matthew’s. As such, much of the commentary reflects Luke’s context,
that is, that Jesus spoke this parable because the disciples thought he was on his way to Jerusalem to bring in the Kingdom:

Thus by taking away the expectation of an immediate kingdom, he exhorts them to hope and patience; for he tells them that they must long and steadily endure many toils, before they enjoy that glory for which they pant too earnestly.\(^3\)

Calvin certainly sees the nobleman as referring to Christ, and the long journey as reflecting "his long absence, which would extend from the time of his death to his last coming."\(^4\) He notes that Matthew has "included a more extensive doctrine"\(^5\) in that the money is apportioned according to ability.\(^6\)

But whatever gifts the Lord has bestowed upon us, let us know that it is committed to us as so much money, that it may yield some gain; for nothing could be more unreasonable than that we should allow to remain buried, or should apply to no use, God’s favours, the value of which consists in yielding fruit.\(^7\)

This ‘gain’ Calvin understands to be general usefulness, which in a footnote is further developed as “the profit or advancement of the whole company of believers in common.”\(^8\)

The removal of the one talent from the third servant is seen to be the removal of all the gifts of the Spirit,\(^9\) which could imply that Calvin interpreted the original distribution of talents to mean the gifts of the Spirit. This is confirmed by his earlier quoting of Eph. 4:7 and 1 Cor. 12:11.\(^10\)

Calvin, when it pleases him, can distinguish between the substance of the parable (the main points) and mere details within the parable. As such, the master’s harshness and the depositing of the money with a banker that it might gain interest are not intended to be allegorised. Calvin concludes:

Christ only means, that there will be no excuse for the indolence of those who both conceal the gifts of God, and waste their time in idleness. Hence also we infer that no manner of

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\(^4\) Ibid.  
\(^5\) Ibid., 441.  
\(^6\) This was clearly an issue for Calvin in that he condemns those who used this verse to mean that God apportions gifts according to the measure that a person deserves. Rather, God bestows gifts in the way that he deems them to be suitable (Ibid., 442).  
\(^7\) Ibid., 441-2.  
\(^8\) Ibid., 443n.  
\(^9\) Ibid., 444.  
\(^10\) Ibid., 441.
life is more praiseworthy in the sight of God, than that which yields some advantage to human society.\textsuperscript{11}

John Maldonatus

Maldonatus, after discussing the differences between the Matthean and Lucan versions of the parable, concludes that Jesus spoke the parable once, and the evangelists have used it in different contexts.\textsuperscript{12} Furthermore, he claims that the Lucan context is to be preferred, but the Matthean version is the more original.\textsuperscript{13}

The main point of the parable is similar to those that preceded it: “that the grace and faith given by God are to be cultivated and increased by diligence and good works.”\textsuperscript{14} Maldonatus then deals with the specifics of the text. The man who departs for a far country is Christ who has ascended to heaven and will not return for a long time.\textsuperscript{15} The servants are all Christians, not as some had said, the Doctors of the church. They are given talents, meaning all the gifts given by God to Christians, among which grace is the first and foremost.\textsuperscript{16} Maldonatus sees no mystical or mysterious meaning in the differing amounts, simply that God does not give gifts equally to all.\textsuperscript{17} The fact that the first two servants increase their talents means, that the good use of grace received, merits additions of the same. This the Catholic Church teaches, and it agrees well with this text, where Christ tells us that they who use their talents with diligence are worthy of receiving more, as in verse 28, 29.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 444.
\textsuperscript{12} Maldonatus states: “the Evangelists appear to differ in the details of time and place: whilst they take account of the thing done, not of the order and time of the events described by them.” (John Maldonatus, A Commentary on the Holy Gospels: S. Matthew’s Gospel, Chapters 15 to the End (London: John Hodges, 1888), 306).
\textsuperscript{13} “S. Matthew probably retained the words of Christ rather than S. Luke; both because he was present, and because he appears to relate the whole parable more distinctly.” (Ibid.)
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Maldonatus notes that many prior exegetes had seen the reference to a ‘far country’ as indicating that heaven is distant from the earth (Origen, Augustine, Jerome, Bede). However, “the distance of place has nothing to do with the question; the length of time has much.” (Ibid., 307). Thus Maldonatus agrees with Chrysostom.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 309.
\textsuperscript{17} He notes that it is pushing the parable too far to conclude that God gives his grace to people according to their virtue (Ibid., 310-11).
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 311.
The third servant, in burying his talent, signifies receiving the grace of God in vain, referring to 1 Cor. 6:1.\(^{19}\) The return of the master refers to the return of Christ followed by the judgment. The first two servants are rewarded, meaning that Christ will give his good servants rewards greater than their merits. This does not mean the reward is not earned; rather, that God is generous.\(^{20}\)

Finally, the third servant’s speech is not to be interpreted: “it is probable that the slothful servant would so answer his master when requiring an account of his truth, and when he was rebutting the charge of negligence from himself, and excusing his own slothfulness by the severity of his master.”\(^{21}\) Similarly, the master’s response concerning bankers:

> the words are no essential part of the parable, and that their meaning is, as before, that we should seek to increase the grace given to us, by every means in our power, Christ giving us an example from things in most ordinary use, and which are known to all.\(^{22}\)

The removal of the talent seems to indicate that the gifts of God are often taken away from those who do not use them well. The giving of the talent to the first servant doesn’t fit the allegory (“for the grace that is taken from one is not given to another”\(^{23}\) ), so it is simply parabolic detail.

Maldonatus concludes with a discussion of the general application found in verse 29:

> to everyone who has more grace than he received, because he increased it by his diligence, still more is given; and from everyone who has not increased the grace he received, but keeps it unprofitable and useless, even that which he has, because he has shown himself unworthy of it, is taken away.\(^{24}\)

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\(^{19}\) Ibid., 312.
\(^{20}\) Ibid., 313.
\(^{21}\) Ibid., 314.
\(^{22}\) Ibid., 315.
\(^{23}\) Ibid., 316.
\(^{24}\) Ibid., 317.
MODERN CRITICAL SCHOLARSHIP:
Adolf Jülicher

Jülicher’s extremely important book was instrumental in bringing about a complete rejection of all allegorising interpretations of the parables.¹ Instead, the end point of Jülicher’s interpretive method is a one-point generalisation, usually of a moral nature. Brad H Young describes Jülicher’s approach: “The aim of a parable is to prove a single point and therefore it cannot contain any allegorization or more than one point of comparison between the Bildhälfte and the Sachhälfte.”² C. H. Dodd quotes Jülicher’s conclusion regarding the Talents:

> It is a story of a man whom overcaution or cowardice led into breach of trust. Such conduct is contemptible and befits no honourable man… What then is the application? ‘We must vote for the broadest possible application,’ says Jülicher; ‘fidelity in all that God has entrusted to us.’³

Unfortunately for Jülicher, this has more than one point of comparison: God is the master, we are the servants, and the talents are what he has entrusted to us. In other words, this is still essentially an allegorical interpretation.

C. H. Dodd

C. H. Dodd’s approach to the parables reflects his interest in the problem of eschatology: he examines their interpretation in the light of the eschatological content of Jesus’ message. He thus uses a form-critical method to try and uncover the pre-literary stages of the Christian tradition and then to determine the original setting of each parable in the actual circumstances of Jesus’ ministry.

The Talents and the Pounds, despite following substantially the same source, are thought by Dodd to have had separate histories of tradition before reaching the evangelists. The context of the parable in Matthew is following the apocalyptic discourse which “focused upon the point of the advent of the Son of Man in glory at a time which is left

² Brad H. Young, *Jesus and His Jewish Parables: Rediscovering the Roots of Jesus’ Teaching* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 23. The Bildhälfte and the Sachhälfte refer to the image and the object being depicted respectively.
indefinite, but is conceived as relatively remote in the future, though it will fall within the
lifetime of the existing generation.”

The parable of the Talents

in this context is clearly intended to refer to the second advent, and to serve as a warning to
the followers of Christ that at His coming He will take account of the way in which they
have borne their special responsibilities.⁵

The fact that a moral (verse 29) had been appended to the parable at some point in its pre-
Matthean form⁶ indicates that the point of the parable was previously understood to lie not
in the reference to the second advent and its delay, but in the way the servants are treated;
thus, the parable was used “to illustrate the maxim that a man who possesses spiritual
capacity will enlarge that capacity by experience, while a man who has none will decline
into a worse condition as time goes on.”⁷ However, this may not have been Jesus’ original
intention. Dodd therefore attempts to postulate a still earlier form of the parable that
expressed no moral or application:

Let us therefore take the story by itself and try to bring it into relation with the actual
situation in the life of Jesus. For our purpose we shall do well to construct the story so far
as possible and of those elements which are common to Matthew and Luke, neglecting the
elaborations which are peculiar to one or other of the evangelists.⁸

Dodd then proceeds to render the substance of this original parable. He concludes that the
central interest of the story is found in the scene of the reckoning, particularly with the
over-cautious and unenterprising servant “whose hopeful complacency receives so rude a
rebuff.”⁹ Why? Because his over-caution amounted to a breach of trust: he is an
unprofitable servant and is to be condemned for it. The various details of the story only
serve to dramatise this climax.¹⁰ To whom, then, was the parable directed? At this point
despite vigorously denying the presence of allegory in Jesus’ parables, Dodd retreats to

⁴ Dodd, 108-9.
⁵ Ibid., 109.
⁶ The moral is also found in the Lucan version (Luke 19:26), and also as a detached saying in Mk. 4:25.
⁷ Ibid., 110.
⁸ Ibid., 111.
⁹ Ibid.
¹⁰ For example, the master’s journey has no intrinsic interest in itself other than to provide an interval during
which the servants can prove their worth.
allegory: he equates the master with God, and then seeks to identify who is represented in the third servant:

I would suggest that he is the type of pious Jew who comes in for so much criticism in the Gospels. He seeks personal security in a meticulous observance of the Law... The parable, I suggest, was intended to lead such persons to see their conduct in its true light. They are not giving God His own; they are defrauding Him.

In contrast, the early Christians took a risk by abandoning the scrupulous discipline of Pharisaism, but “without the risk of investment the capital remains barren.” Dodd follows this conclusion with a brief statement of the history of this story in the Christian tradition: the early church took this parable of Jesus and used it to illustrate the maxim ‘to him that has will be given more’; Matthew enlarged upon this by grading the amounts distributed to illustrate the varieties of human endowment; Luke, on the other hand, takes the parable and allegorises it (by supplementing the details) to fit the second advent of the Son of Man emphasising the delay (indicated by the Lucan introduction).

Joachim Jeremias

Joachim Jeremias follows very similar lines to Dodd, yet he sees Jesus’ eschatology as having a greater future dimension than Dodd allowed. Like the Ten Virgins, Matthew has interpreted the Talents as a Parousia parable (seen in its placement), one that reinforces the immediately preceding exhortation to watchfulness. However, Jeremias discerns some editorial activity here especially in the other-worldly nature of the rewards and punishment which don’t fit the situation of an earthly merchant, but rather the Christ of the Parousia. After giving a brief précis of his reconstruction of the original

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11 Referring to Dodd’s interpretation of the Wicked Tenants, Matthew Black notes: “While thus showing allegory firmly to the door, one cannot but wonder if Dr. Dodd has not surreptitiously smuggled it in again by the window... [He] manages to get the benefit of allegory while denying that it is allegory – to run with the allegorical hare, as it were, and still hunt with the Jülicher hounds.” (Matthew Black “Parables as Allegory” Bulletin of the John Rylands Library 42 (1960), 283.) John W. Sider is generous in supplying a reason for this: “Why did interpreters such as Dodd and Jeremias unintentionally allegorize the parables, in spite of their commitment to the one-point theory? They were responding to the real meaning of the parables, and their tacit instincts and reflexes as interpreters were more reliable than their avowed theory – though the theory often hampered their observations of a parable’s way of meaning.” (John W. Sider, Interpreting the Parables: A Hermeneutical Guide to Their Meaning (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 13-14).
12 Ibid., 112.
13 Ibid., 113.
14 He prefers the earthly punishments found in the Lucan parallel as being more original.
parable, Jeremias asks after what Jesus’ audience would have thought of the servant who buried his talent:

Jesus’ hearers would have thought, in the first place, of their religious leaders, especially of the scribes. Since Jesus in Luke 11.52 had reproached them for withholding from their fellow men a due share in God’s gift, we may assume that Jesus originally addressed the parable of the Talents to the scribes. Much had been entrusted to them: the Word of God; but like the servant in the parable, they would shortly have to render account of how they had used it in accordance with the will of God, or whether, like the third servant, they had frustrated the operation of the divine word by self-seeking and careless neglect of God’s gift.\textsuperscript{15}

Jeremias thus classifies the parable as one concerned with the imminence of catastrophe, directed at the leaders of the people, particularly the scribes:

God has entrusted them with much: the spiritual leadership of the nation, the knowledge of his will, the key of the Kingdom of God. Now the judgement of God is about to be revealed; now it will be decided whether the theologians have justified or abused God’s great trust; whether they have made good use of God’s gift, or have turned it to their own advantage and to the imposition of burdens upon their fellow men…\textsuperscript{16}

The early church, however, changed the emphasis of the parable: they inserted verse 29 essentially as a commentary on verse 28, thereby shifting the focus from the actions of the third servant requiring punishment to the peculiar justice of God in meting out that punishment. Matthew, furthermore, then (wrongly\textsuperscript{17}) used the parable as an allegory of Christ’s ascension and delayed return ushering in the Messianic banquet.\textsuperscript{18}

Lane C. McGaughy

Lane C. McGaughy’s starting point is the fact that the Matthean and Lucan accounts of the parable of the Talents agree nowhere more strongly than in the third servant’s reply, suggesting that these verses are the central point of the parable.\textsuperscript{19} He thus proposes a history of tradition that works backwards to these verses. First, in Matthew the parable is

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 166.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 80.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 63.
understood to be an apocalyptic warning about the conduct of Christians during the delay of the parousia. This he deduces from the eschatological context that Matthew has given the parable, the conjunctural link to the call for watchfulness in v13, and certain additions that develop the allegory.\textsuperscript{20} Second, he notes that the proverbial application found in both Matthew (v29) and Luke (19:26) is also a free-floating saying (Matt. 13:12; Mark 4:25; Luke 8:18). This indicates that the early church saw the parable as focussing on the treatment of the worthy and unworthy servants.\textsuperscript{21} The saying was thus added to the parable by the early church, and the Talents became an exposition of the nature of divine retribution.

Third, “Having pruned the later accretions of the tradition, we are now able to delineate the contours of the original parable”\textsuperscript{22} McGaughy asserts that the judgment on the third servant would have been viewed as the climax of the parable. He interprets the servant’s actions against the background of rabbinic thought:

that Israel’s calling was to guard the sacred tradition delivered by Yahweh to Moses and the prophets, and to preserve it intact until Yahweh would re-establish his chosen people on Zion. To those hearers dwelling in this world, servant C must have stood out as a sympathetic figure: he, like Israel guarding the deposit of Torah, had buried ‘his’ talent and returned it intact.\textsuperscript{23}

McGaughy goes even further, however, by suggesting that Jesus constructed the parable around the formulaic apology of the third servant which existed prior in the form of a maxim. The servant’s designation of the master as a ‘hard man’ would have reminded Jesus’ audience of the many bitter characterisations of Yahweh that arose out of the exilic crisis.\textsuperscript{24} But he concludes that since the third servant is punished harshly for his inactivity, Jesus spoke the parable against those who thought that Israel’s mission was merely to protect the traditions of the fathers.\textsuperscript{25}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 237.  \\
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 239.  \\
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 241.  \\
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 243.  \\
\textsuperscript{24} Lane quotes Psalm 119:120; Job 4:14; 10:16; 23:13-17.  \\
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 245.  
\end{flushright}
Dan Otto Via, Jr.

In contrast with Dodd and Jeremias, Dan Otto Via, Jr. emphasises the artistic and literary nature of the parables. Because of this, “they are not just illustrations of ideas and cannot have the immediate connection with Jesus’ historical situation which is customarily attributed to them.” He has his reasons. First, that it is usually very difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain the exact situation in which the parable was uttered. Second, such an approach ignores their wider applicability: “They say something to and about man as man and not just to and about man in a particular historical situation.” Third, this can leave the parables in the past, saying nothing to us in the present. Via is critical of Dodd in this respect. Finally, the severely historical approach “ignores the aesthetic nature of the parables and annuls their aesthetic function.” In other words, a parable must be examined on its own terms as a literary unit. The various important elements within a parable relate first of all to each other within the parable, and the structure of connections of these elements is not determined by events or ideas outside of the parable but by the author’s creative composition.

He therefore downplays the importance of the parables as teaching or as speaking to a specific historical context, preferring to bring out an existential interpretation.

Via, using an Aristotelian literary approach, classifies the Talents as low mimetic, realistic tragedy where there is “realistic imagery and ordinary people in dramatic encounters and conflicts moving downward toward catastrophe.” He first deals with some textual issues: the Lucan amounts may be more original; verse 30 is a favourite Matthean saying – “which turns the master of the parable into the eschatological judge” – and is not even a saying of Jesus at all; the ‘enter into the joy of your Lord’ are also allegorical additions with both christological and eschatological overtones; verse 29 was a free-floating saying that is not original in this context, but was inserted because of verse 28. The context demonstrates that Matthew interpreted the parable in the light of the Parousia.

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27 Ibid., 21.
28 Ibid., 22.
29 Ibid., 24.
30 Ibid., 25.
31 Ibid., 99.
32 Ibid., 114.
He follows Dodd and Jeremias in seeing the parable directed at the scribes who were not good stewards of their covenant heritage. He then proceeds to give his existential analysis:

In the fear of the one-talent man we see the anxiety of one who will not step into the unknown. He will not risk trying to fulfill his own possibilities; therefore, his existence is circumscribed in the narrowest kind of way. Action is paralyzed by anxiety, and the self of our protagonist is only a shadow of what it potentially is.

In fact, the one-talent man tries to blame the master for his own failure. The end result is punishment: the loss of the talent is a loss of responsibility, “of opportunity, of possibility, of a place to exist meaningfully in the world.” Via concludes with a discussion on the delay inherent in the original parable. The fact of a future reckoning gives the present its character: “the present is a time for risky action.” The parable thus teaches us that “the man who so understands himself that he seeks to avoid risky action rather than trusting God for the well-being of his existence, though he may live long chronologically, will have no present. His time will be evacuated of content.”

THE JESUS SEMINAR:

John Dominic Crossan

Following Via, John Dominic Crossan also wants to remove the parables from their historical setting and to treat them as timeless pieces of poetry. Part of his reasoning for doing so is his insistence that Jesus’ parables were not pedagogical or didactic tools used to get across information. If this were so, then the parables are expendable; once the message is correctly received the parable itself is no longer needed. Rather, quoting Günther Bornkamm, “the parables are the preaching itself”. They are poetic metaphors not subservient to any teaching situation; rather, they are subservient “only to the experienced

33 Ibid., 115.
34 Ibid., 118-9.
35 Ibid., 120.
36 Ibid., 121.
37 Ibid., 122.
revelation which seeks to articulate its presence in, by, and through them.” Therefore, Crossan holds that the parables announced “the Kingdom’s advent as demanding decision and response, life and action”³. However, “they leave that life and that action as absolute in its call as it is unspecified in its detail.”⁴

Crossan deals with the parable of the Talents at some length. Firstly, he classifies the parable as a Servant parable⁵, a special subset of the parables of action. Secondly, he clusters together four of these Servant parables: the Doorkeeper (Mark 13:33-37; Luke 12:35-38), the Overseer (Matt. 24:45-51; Luke 12:42-26), the Talents, and the Throne Claimant (Luke 19:12b, 14-15a, 27). He then attempts to establish the general content (rather than the exact words) of the original parables as spoken by the historical Jesus. With regard to the Talents, Crossan discerns a common narrative behind the separate versions of Matthew and Luke. This follows from the exact parallelism in the structure of the story and striking similarities of sequence, concepts and even vocabulary in the incident of the third servant. However, there are differences. There is no Lucan parallel to Matt. 25:16-18, yet because of its dramatic value, these verses were probably original.

On the other hand, Matt. 25:30 is rejected as the original ending because of its “allegorical character, explicit eschatological application, and Matthean vocabulary.”⁷ In addition, Matt. 25:29 is not the original conclusion, being an independent, free-floating saying of Jesus that doesn’t really fit the present story since, firstly, only the first servant, and not the second, is rewarded with increase, and secondly, the third servant does have something that

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² Crossan, 20.
³ Ibid., 78.
⁴ Ibid., 82.
⁵ These are parables concerned with a Master-Servant relationship and a time of critical reckoning (Crossan, 94.)
⁶ Ibid., 99.
⁷ Ibid.
can be taken from him. Crossan concludes his specific look at the Talents:

The main story is quite clear as is its use of the standard folkloric threesome. Two servants are rewarded for their work and a third is punished for his prudent if useless inactivity.

The cluster of four Servant parables is then re-addressed. They are seen to have a certain “normalcy” about them:

Whatever the meaning and intention of these parables, they all seem to move in a quite expected and normal manner. It makes little difference to this normalcy whether the point is that the servant should recognize his situation and act accordingly or the point is the promise and threat of reward and punishment. In either case we move within a horizon of expected order and orderly expectation. The servant can only know how to act on the presumptive correlation of good with reward and bad with punishment.

This is then contrasted with a second cluster of Servant parables where this expected normalcy is not apparent. Rather, there is a disconcerting reversal of expectation where the servant is rewarded for bad behaviour or punished for good behaviour. Crossan’s final conclusion regarding the teaching behind the Servant parables is that “unfortunately, the eschatological advent of God will always be precisely that for which wise and prudent readiness is impossible because it shatters also our wisdom and our prudence.”

Bernard Brandon Scott

Bernard Brandon Scott’s methodology is to try to uncover an underlying ‘originating structure’ for each of the parables he discusses. Instead of concentrating on the actual words of Jesus, as reconstructed by the exegete, he prefers to look at the structure

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8 Crossan seems to ignore the fact that Jesus’ saying is intentionally ambiguous, saying “Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.”
9 Ibid., 100.
10 Ibid., 101.
12 Ibid., 117. This deconstruction of Jesus’ parables remains rather unconvincing, glossing as it does over the intricacies of the various texts. His insistence that Jesus spoke parables as literary events and not teaching events does not sit well with almost all current reconstructions of Jesus’ life and ministry, and is even contradicted by his own conclusion regarding – albeit paradoxical – teaching that arises out of the Servant parables. Furthermore, when it comes to the parable of the Talents, his total abandoning of the Gospel context results in a somewhat trite or even bland understanding; he has not really progressed beyond Jülicher’s moral generalisation.
and the characters of the parable as that which was passed down through the Christian
tradition, allowing those who wrote the parables down some creativity as to the actual
words:

Those who preserved Jesus’ parables were not passing on memorized texts but were
themselves performing the originating structure, tailoring the performance to fit the
situation.\textsuperscript{13}

However, he only discusses in depth those parables that he considers to have originated
with Jesus. Scott uses a criterion that compares the ‘distinctive voice’ of Jesus’ parables
with the ‘common wisdom’ of the time: those that go against the audience’s expectations,
that is the common wisdom, are original to Jesus.\textsuperscript{14} Furthermore, those parables which
reflect exclusively the concerns of the early church, especially community maintenance, are
to be excluded.\textsuperscript{15}

According to Scott, the Talents is original to Jesus. The two different
‘performances’, despite their differences, still agree extensively so that confident
conclusions about their underlying structure can be made.\textsuperscript{16} Scott then deals with how the
two Gospel writers used this originating structure, before concluding with a discussion of
the original parable. Matthew has used the parable with clear intent:

The parable stands as the middle panel of the triptych of Jesus’ eschatological sermon or
discourse and underscores the discourse’s theme of exhortation to vigilance until the end.\textsuperscript{17}

The three main sections of this discourse are 24:4-35 dealing with the phases of the future,
24:36-25:30 concerning an exhortation to vigilance, and 25:31-46 presenting the last-
judgement scene. Furthermore, he discerns a chiasm pair in the middle section based on
the stories’ conclusions:

A  Concerning that day, no one knows the hour, neither the angels of heaven nor the son, except the
father alone (24:36)

\textsuperscript{13} Bernard Brandon Scott, \textit{Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus} (Minneapolis:
Fortress Press, 1989), 64.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 67.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 68. The Ten Virgins (Matt. 25:1-13) is rejected by this criterion.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 218.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 219.
Parable of two men and two women (v40-41)

B Watch for you do not know on what day your lord will come (v42)

Parable of the householder and the thief (v43)

A Therefore even you must be ready, for you do not expect the hour when the Son of Man will come (v44)

Parable of the faithful and wise servant / the evil servant (v45-50)

C There men will weep and gnash their teeth (v51)

Parable of five wise and five foolish virgins (25:1-12)

B Watch, therefore, because you do not know the day or the hour (v13)

The story of the two good and faithful servants and the third evil and slothful servant (v14-29)

C There men will weep and gnash their teeth (v30)


Seen in this way, the stories “promote a stark either-or situation that prepares for the sermon’s concluding judgment scene with its final either-or. In context, A Man Entrusts Property drives home not only the necessity to watch for an unknown hour but also the stringent demand on faith to produce an increase or to face a tragic judgment.” Because of this context, Matthew is clearly using the parable as an allegory of the Parousia. However, “This interpretation has led Matthew to make adaptations in the parable’s performance.” He then briefly lists these adaptations: the punishment of the third servant (important for the chiasm), the rewards for the first two servants, and the reference to “a long time” reflecting the delay of the Parousia.

The original parable, however, is then dealt with in detail. Some of his comments are worth repeating. First, what the third servant did in burying the money would have been seen as “prudent and trustworthy” by the original hearers. In guarding money, the only safe place was underground. Second, the third servant’s speech to the returned master

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18 Ibid., 219-220.
19 This is Scott’s title for The Talents.
20 Ibid., 220.
21 On page 224, Scott notes that the parable had already received such a tendency in the oral tradition that Matthew inherited.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 227.
is the story’s most important element; it establishes sympathy for the third servant by
drawing the audience to his side:

The third servant describes the master as hard or severe, invokes two aphorisms, reports
what he has done, and attempts to return the money. The additional features [compared
with the speeches of the first two servants] present to a hearer an image of the master as a
‘rapacious man, heedlessly intent on his own profit.’ This image appeals to an audience’s
conventional, fixed image of an absentee landlord who bleeds the land dry.

The servant’s actions have been blameless, and by returning the money he has fulfilled his
obligations. Third, the master’s response creates a dilemma for the hearer:

The servant, and the audience, argue implicitly that the master has coming only what is his
and that the servant has taken every legal precaution to make sure that the master will on his
return receive what is his. The master argues that the servant’s characterization does not
account for his action. If he were such a rapacious man, should the servant not at least have
ensured some gain?

It seems that the original parable manipulates the hearers into identifying with the third
servant, leading to an experience of unjust action.

However, Scott’s most interesting addition to the history of interpretation is his
development of McGaughy’s proposal, that the third servant’s speech echoes post-exilic
complaints against Yahweh’s hardness. Scott responds that Jesus’ listeners would see in
the third servant’s speech a caricature, not a realistic description, for “The yoke of the
commandments is a cause for rejoicing.” Instead he contends that the master is described
in two competing images:

the explicit image put forward in aphorism by the third servant, and the image implied in
the actions of the first two servants. Is the master the hardhearted man of the third servant’s
attack, or is he gracious and generous, as he was toward the first two servants?

The actions of the servants determine which image is revealed. Mere preservation of the
gift is not sufficient, especially if out of fear; such a response forfeits any future. Rather,
one must act freely and boldly with respect to the gift. However, how Jesus intended this
freedom to be applied to the Torah is not developed at all by Scott, simply that it indicates
that the traditional ‘rules’ regarding one’s response to the Law have been changed, ushering

24 Ibid., 229-30.
25 Ibid., 231-2.
26 Ibid., 233.
27 Ibid.
in unpredictability. This avoidance of closure is something Scott considers integral to Jesus’ parables: “The parable does not seek closure, regardless of how often during its transmission various interpreters have sought closure. For precisely this reason the parabolic narrative is always primary and can never be replaced by its supposed meaning.”

The Five Gospels

The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say? is the book that records the opinions of the Jesus Seminar regarding which sayings in the gospels (including the Gospel of Thomas) go back to Jesus and which were a product of the early church. The Talents is given a pink rating, meaning Jesus probably said something like this. There is exaggeration (the amounts given in trust); there is a surprising, even shocking, ending in that the punishing of the third servant is a reversal of the listener’s expectations: after all, this servant had hid the money to protect it from theft. However, there are also “Christianizing tendencies”: the theme of the departing and returning master was dear to the early church.

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28 Ibid., 234. In this interpretation, it can be seen that Scott does not totally eschew allegorisation. In an earlier chapter, Scott discusses the place of allegory: “the parable as genre is neither by necessity allegorical nor by necessity metaphorical. The importance of this conclusion needs to be insisted upon: Jülicher’s categorical rejection of the possibility of allegory in Jesus’ parables is unwarranted. The genre parable can be allegorical, metaphorical, or mixed.” (Scott, 44) Scott therefore allows that a parable can have a referent in reality; the important issue is the direction of transference. Crossan held that if a parable is being used didactically then the referent controls the parable, and thus the parable is superfluous. Scott, however, sees the primary direction of transference as being from parable to referent. This is because the parable, as a fictional redescription of reality, exposes something new about that reality (Scott, 48). The only problem with Jesus’ parables is that the referent is in many cases left unspecified, or is in some vague way, the kingdom of God. It is this vagueness that has created problems in the history of interpretation. Many interpreters bypass the literal level (the parable) for the secondary level (the referent) and then let their understanding of the referent determine what the parable is about. If this is so, then the parable “is stripped of its cognitive value and becomes a mere ornament, an illustration of an already-known-about referent.” (Scott, 49). This is essentially what Crossan was railing against. Scott, however, prefers to let the parable speak for itself, the characters, themes and plots (often taken from Israel’s religious and linguistic repertoire) providing important clues as to how to move to the second-reference level. Scott still avoids the term allegory, but he also avoids metaphor, preferring instead ‘metaphorical network’ which “structures the experience, behavior, and understanding of that other reality it stands for” (Scott, 50). Similarities between the metaphorical network and its referent will help to strengthen the connection; dissimilarities will redefine and subvert a hearer’s vision of the referent so as to redescribe reality.

29 Ibid., 419.


31 Ibid., 256.
since it is analogous to Jesus’ departure and expected return. This is seen in Matthew’s use of the repeated phrase “come celebrate with your master” and the concluding verse 30.\footnote{These elements are rated black: Jesus did not say this. The quasi-legal maxim of verse 29 is rated grey because of the apocalyptic context.}

**CONTEMPORARY CATHOLIC SCHOLARS:**

*John R. Donahue S.J.*


Donahue first notes that the added doublet of verse 29 seems to capture the surface meaning of the parable, but “does not exhaust the parable’s meaning either as a text or in the context of Matthew’s theology.”\footnote{Ibid., 105.} The parable is a dramatic one in which the dialogue and the interaction of the characters is important. The main character is the man going on a journey; the distribution of property signals to the reader that the issue will be faithful maintenance of a trust (such as in 24:45ff); the dealings of the first two servants proceeds quickly.

The shock to our sensibilities is the apparent harsh treatment of the third servant… The rapidity with which the master’s reaction and actions are described suggests the shattering of the world of the third servant – it falls apart immediately.\footnote{Ibid., 106-7.}

This would have caused shock and surprise in the original hearers who would have most probably identified with the timid prudence of the third servant. However, the servant’s characterisation of the master as a hard man is accepted by the master. “In a legal context (25:14) this serves almost as the charge on which the third servant is convicted, since, knowing this, he should have invested the money.”\footnote{Ibid., 107.} This allows the hearers to see things from the master’s side. After all, there is nothing in the parable to justify the servant’s
characterisation: “it was timidity that spelled his downfall, which was not warranted by anything known directly about the master.”

Donahue then discusses Matthew’s use of the parable. He suggests that Matthew sees the first two servants as symbols of faithful discipleship even when confronted with a demanding master, in contrast with the paralysing fear of the third servant. He concludes:

Matthew places this parable as the conclusion of a triad of parables that affirm both the delay of the parousia and its certainty and that describe proper action in the interim period. This parable is closest to the first, since both servants are severely punished and both act in ways that are seen as evil. But like the maidens, the third servant is punished for presumptuous inactivity. The time before the return of Jesus is, for Matthew, a time that must be used responsibly.

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**Jan Lambrecht S.J.**

The context of the Talents is, for Jan Lambrecht, the second part of the Parousia discourse. Where the first part (24:4b-35) concerned “The Phases Of The Future”, the second part (24:36-25:30) is entitled “Exhortation To Vigilance”.

Lambrecht discerns four sections within this second part, which are linked thematically in an ABAB pattern: (A) 24:36-44 and 25:1-13 both deal with the unknown, unexpected time of the return; both end in an exhortation to watch; both deal with the themes of vigilance and readiness. (B) 24:45-51 and 25:14-30 are both parables in which servants are given a task by a departing master; there are rewards and punishments upon his return; reward consists of promotion to a more responsible position; punishment involves banishment to a dark place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. In addition, B further defines A:

They indicate what vigilance consists of. ‘Watching’ is the metaphorical term for ‘readiness’ and this implies active, diligent and responsible service… Matthew obviously intends, through the figures of the disciples whom Jesus addresses, to exhort the Christians of his own time to vigilance and readiness which… implies an active and faithful service, a conscientious stewardship of the goods or talents with which one has been entrusted.

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5 Ibid., 108.
6 Ibid., 109.
8 Ibid., 190.
9 Ibid., 190-1.
Lambrecht’s approach to the Talents is to compare the Matthean and Lucan texts with a view to reconstructing an original text. He considers Matthew’s three servants to be original, as are Luke’s ‘pounds’. However, Matthew’s *amounts* seem more appropriate, especially since Luke’s ‘he already has ten’ is in fact incorrect (the servant has 11) suggesting Matthew’s five-plus-five is original. The ‘delay’ of the master would also be found in the original parable, since “the narrative itself requires that there is enough time to put the money to work.” What would not be in the original parable would be the secondary reward (‘Enter into the joy of your master’) and the secondary punishment (being cast into ‘the outer darkness’) since these acquire “unmistakable eschatological significance… which disrupts the figurative character of the narrative”.

The reconstructed text is then examined to see whether a “pre- and a postpaschal” version can be discerned. To this end, verse 29 is seen as an addition at an early stage by Christians “to explain why the first servant is given a share of the third as well”. In its position at the end of the passage, what is essentially a wisdom saying takes on eschatological significance. “The giving or taking away occurs at the last judgment.”

At this point Lambrecht can discuss Jesus’ intentions regarding the original parable. Firstly, the parable seems to be an allegory that provides an insight regarding what God (the master) is offering mankind (the servants) through Jesus:

> Jesus emphasizes that God indeed bestows his dominion as an undeserved gift but that, nevertheless, it also involves a human task. One has to make the most of the gift given, make it bear fruit.

Secondly, since the end of the narrative has the greatest importance, the stress is to be placed on the necessity of giving an account. The first two servants provide nothing more than “the bright background against which the dark figure of the third servant stands out all

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10 Ibid., 225. Lambrecht’s argumentation, however, falls foul of Scott’s criticism: that Matthew’s ‘talents’ are more suitable for Luke’s king, and Luke’s ‘pounds’ are more suitable for Matthew’s ‘faithful over a little’ (Scott, 225).
11 Lambrecht, 226.
12 Ibid., 226-7.
13 Ibid., 218.
14 Ibid., 231.
15 “The rich get richer and the poor get poorer.” (Scott, 225)
16 Lambrecht, 231.
17 Ibid., 233.
the more sharply.”18 Thus it is the third servant’s excuse and Jesus’ answer to him that captures the attention:

The master condemns the servant’s behavior because it does not correspond to what the servant ought to have done according to his conception of his master.19

Jesus therefore has more in mind than simply people who do not recognise God’s gift as a task. Rather, he is directing the parable towards a specific group of people. Lambrecht sees in view “the scribes and Pharisees who opposed Jesus’ view of God and thereby the way in which God, through Jesus, brings his salvation to the world.” The parable therefore functions as Jesus’ self-defense:

When God addresses men and women, Jesus says, they may not take refuge behind a prefabricated concept of justice or a legalistic, sterile image of God. They must abandon their complacent security, must be careful not to seek some theological alibi or take cover behind a mercantile contract mentality.20

Thirdly, the parable is a challenge; it forces people to make a choice regarding their response to the breaking in of God’s dominion. “With this sort of parable, [Jesus] wants to win people over and convert them. This includes his opponents.”21

In Matthew’s hands, in the context of the Parousia discourse, the parable’s allegory is altered. The master is no longer God, but Jesus, who after a long time will return to judge Christians. The emphasis falls on the certainty and unexpectedness of the return, and the consequent necessity for watchfulness, defined in terms of readiness and service.22

Matthew has also stressed the rewards and punishment.

Originally the reward consisted in being ‘set over much (money).’ In his additions Matthew seems to think rather of the joy of the eschatological banquet and he therefore goes beyond the figurative part, the imaginary story. For him, reward and punishment already belong to the application, the part concerning reality. They are heaven and hell.23

18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 234.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., 236.
22 Ibid., 242.
23 Ibid.
John Paul Heil

John Paul Heil, as the title of his book suggests, approaches the parables of Jesus with an eye to the overall literary context in which they have been placed. He attempts to trace linguistic threads through the text in an endeavour to allow the text to interpret the text.

In terms of the immediate context, Heil sees the Talents as closely connected to the exhortation to watchfulness at the end of the Ten Virgins by means of the ‘for’. In this parable, “The man represents Jesus, his journey represents the absence of Jesus after his resurrection and before his final coming (cf. 24:3), and his servants represent the disciples.” The first two servants ‘worked’ with their talents, recalling for the audience the theme of disciples as ‘workers’ (9:37, cf. 9:38; 10:10; 20:1-2, 8) who are to gather the ‘harvest’ of people (9:37, cf. 4:19) with the healing and preaching authority given to them by Jesus (10:1, 7-8). The fact that they doubled their money “resonates with how the disciples, as ‘sowers’ who are to ‘sow’ the word of the gospel, can expect to yield a remarkably abundant harvest of people for the reign of the heavens (13:8, 23).” In a footnote, Heil remarks that the ‘talents’

seem to be a rather general and open-ended symbol of all that Jesus has entrusted to his disciples for promoting the reign of the heavens during the time between his resurrection and final coming. The monetary talents of the parable, then, can even symbolically embrace what is currently understood by the word ‘talent’, namely, God-given abilities.

Heil does not push the delay of the master as indicating a delayed parousia. Rather, it simply represents how Jesus comes as Lord and Son of Man at an unknown day and unexpected hour.

In discussing the rewards of the first two servants, Heil draws out the linguistic parallels with 24:45-47 (the words ‘faithful’ and ‘appoint’) and with 25:1-13 (the word ‘enter’). He notes that the talents, despite their high monetary value, are designated ‘little’

25 Ibid., 196.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 197.
28 Ibid., 197n.
in comparison with the ‘much’ of the heavenly reward for the faithful stewardship of earthly gifts.\textsuperscript{29} In addition, the first two servants are treated exactly the same:

Important is not the amount with which one is entrusted but whether one is a productive steward in accord with one’s ability (v15) of whatever amount has been entrusted.\textsuperscript{30}

The third servant, on the other hand, was paralysed with fear, and hid the talent thus safely preserving it. “But it also underscores his failure to be a faithful, risk-taking, and productive steward”\textsuperscript{31}. The master thus brands this servant “wicked and lazy”.

To Heil, the servant’s characterisation of the master as one who “reaps where he does not sow and gathers where he does not scatter”, and the master’s tacit acceptance of this characterisation, further underline his symbolic interpretation of the talents as embracing “the preaching and healing ministry entrusted to the disciples as stewards to risk a productive increase of people entering the Kingdom.”\textsuperscript{32} The parable of the Sower is in view here: the disciples ‘scatter’ and ‘sow’ the seed (the word of the gospel) and Jesus ‘reaps’ a harvest.\textsuperscript{33}

The taking away of the talent recalls 13:11-12, the fact that the disciples, and not the crowds, have been given inside knowledge by means of parables. This is developed further here. “The one talent has been taken away from the servant because he did not risk working productively with it to know and experience the mystery of the reign of the heavens”\textsuperscript{34}. The additional punishment recalls the fate of the foolish maidens, and the wicked servant who mistreated his fellow servants. His punishment serves as a dramatic warning for the disciples to be watchful for the unknown day and hour of Jesus’ coming, by taking the risk to be productive stewards with whatever talents they have been entrusted.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 197-8.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 198.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 199.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 200.
OTHER CONTEMPORARY SCHOLARS:

Craig L. Blomberg

Craig L. Blomberg’s interpretation of the Talents is based upon his insistence that allegory can legitimately be recognised in Jesus’ parables.¹ His two hypotheses are (1) that the main characters of a parable will probably be the most common candidates for allegorical interpretation and the main points of the parable will most likely be associated with these characters; and (2) that the triadic structure of most of Jesus’ narrative parables suggests that most parables may make three points. This follows from the fact that many of the parables have three main characters: an authority figure, and two subordinates who exhibit contrasting behaviour. The Talents comes under ‘Complex Three-Point Parables’ ostensibly because there are more than three main characters. However, in this case, this is simply because the role of the good subordinate is illustrated by two examples. Therefore, the structure remains triadic.²

Blomberg deals with the opening scenes quickly. The exact amounts given to the servants and the investment returns of the first two are not relevant. “The point is that they both invested and received a return. The decreasing quantities simply serve to build a climax. Surely the one given the least should have had the easiest time of all in being a good steward of his trust.”³

The allegorical meaning of the parable comes to the fore in the final reckoning scene: “as in the other servant parables, [it] refers to the final judgment that all people will undergo as they give account to God for what they have done with their lives.”⁴ The fact that there are extra details given about the actions and fate of the third servant indicates that this is a tragic parable, and that the lesson to be derived from his role is the dominant one. Nevertheless, Blomberg discerns three points: (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

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¹ See Craig L Blomberg, Interpreting the Parables (Leicester: Apollos, 1990), 165-7 for a summary of his conclusions.
² Ibid., 214.
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid. This makes it much less likely that the parable is about ‘spiritual atrophy’ where abilities not used and cultivated in this life will be lost or deteriorate (Ibid., 215)
the gifts God has given them for his service will be punished by separation from God.\textsuperscript{5} Again, he bases his identification of an allegorical level on the fact that the activities of the master and the third servant, while not being implausible, are still somewhat unusual. Burying money was recognised as the safest way of guarding against theft but was not an appropriate way of dealing with finances intended for investment. The master’s strong response also seems slightly inappropriate. In addition, the casting of the third servant into a place of eternal punishment “breaks the bounds of the parable’s imagery”\textsuperscript{6}.

Blomberg also deals with the claim that verses 28 and 29 are inauthentic. 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”\textsuperscript{7}. 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. However, Blomberg sees both verses as fitting naturally into the original parable. His approach is to see verse 29 as referring to ‘everyone who has’ or ‘has not’ earned something during their period of stewardship. In this way the third servant qualifies as someone who ‘has not’. Then verse 28 need only be saying that “all possessions are God’s and he is free to distribute and redistribute them as he chooses.”\textsuperscript{8}

\textbf{William R. Herzog II}

William R. Herzog interprets the parables of Jesus using a social-scientific analysis such that he sees the parables as speaking not about theology and ethics as is widely and traditionally thought but about politics and economics.\textsuperscript{9} He believes Jesus had a ‘social-conscience’ and understood his role to be an educator of the oppressed class. The parables are thus subversive, attacking the power and privilege of the governing class:

The focus of the parables was not on a vision of the glory of the reign of God, but on the gory details of how oppression served the interests of a ruling class. Instead of reiterating

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 214. “This final point seems appropriate both for those who are overtly hostile to God and his revelation as well as those who profess commitment to him but whose lives show no evidence of the reality of their profession.” (Ibid., 215)
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 216.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 217.
the promise of God’s intervention in human affairs, they explored how human beings could respond to break the spiral of violence and cycle of poverty created by exploitation and oppression. The parable was a form of social analysis every bit as much as it was a form of theological reflection.  

This, he claims, goes some way to explaining why Jesus was crucified.  

Herzog recognises three stages in the tradition history of the parable. Working backwards, firstly Matthew interpreted the parable eschatologically as a warning. This can be adduced from the various alleged additions and modifications that can be discerned, such as the introductory formula which ties the parable to the preceding one, the ‘after a long time’ in verse 19 referring to a delayed parousia, the master’s blessing of the first two servants reflecting the messianic banquet, and verse 30 itself, which transforms the parable into an allegory. Second, the early church had taken a parable of Jesus and generalised its message, specifically by adding verse 29. Third, we have the original parable as told by Jesus to a specific audience.

The central problem of the interpretation of this parable, as Herzog sees it, is that the master has always been seen as referencing God. However, this renders the third servant’s characterisation of the master problematic. The most common solutions are to denigrate the servant’s words, or to say that Jesus is presenting two opposing views which the hearer has to choose between. However, many scholars note that the master of the parable (taken simply as a story without reference to any allegory) still seems somewhat rapacious, and that therefore he cannot possibly represent God. This is enough to justify Herzog’s abandoning of an allegorical interpretation in favour of a sociological one. He

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10 Ibid., 3.
11 In contrast with other interpreters. For example, Jeremias saw Jesus as a cross between a rabbi and a Christian theologian; Crossan, a poet with a mastery of metaphor; Via, a purveyor of existential philosophy through comic and tragic stories (Ibid., 14). However: “If Jesus was a teacher of heavenly truths dispensed through literary gems called parables, it is difficult to understand how he could have been executed as a political subversive and crucified between two social bandits.” (Ibid., 9)
12 Ibid., 151.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 154.
15 For example, this is what Via (repressed guilt projected onto the master) and Donahue (fearful misreading of the master’s magnanimity) do.
16 For example, this is what Scott (different ways to claim the future) and McGaughy (different ways of viewing God) do.
thus interprets the parable within its 1st century AD Palestinian setting, specifically that of the household of an urban elite.\textsuperscript{17}

Herzog divides the parable into three scenes. The opening scene depicts a wealthy aristocrat assigning to three retainers proportions of his assets according to their status in the household hierarchy.\textsuperscript{18} However, these retainers are his most trusted inner-circle, since even one talent was “no mean amount of money to place in another’s hands”\textsuperscript{19}. Furthermore, it is not likely to be a test of some kind.\textsuperscript{20} It does, however, provide an opportunity for the retainers to consolidate or even enhance their standing.

The second scene concerns the business venture. Herzog reports earlier studies regarding the implied investment returns: the master would have expected a profit of 100\%.\textsuperscript{21} However, once the retainer had ‘doubled his money’ and thus secured the master’s investment, any \textit{further} profit could be surreptitiously considered his own.

They are always walking a tightrope, keeping the master’s gain high enough to appease his greed and not incur his wrath while keeping their own accumulations of wealth small enough not to arouse suspicion yet lucrative enough to insure their future. The master knows the system too, and as long as the retainers keep watch of his interests and maintain a proper yield, he does not begrudge their gains.\textsuperscript{22}

Herzog then spends some time detailing how retainers went about making a profit. Essentially, they exploited the lower classes, either by charging interest on loans for crops using the land as collateral (and foreclosing if the crops didn’t cover the incurred indebtedness), or by extracting raw goods from the peasants controlled by the household and trading. Either way, the first two servants “both use the same exploitive economy to increase the plunder that constitutes the master’s wealth.”\textsuperscript{23}

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\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 155. The man in the parable is clearly very wealthy: he is going on a long journey; he has a staff of retainers; he also has a lot of talents.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 158. Herzog notes that in the phrase ‘each according to his ability’, δύναµις can literally be translated as ‘power’, this could mean rank or status, indicating his capacity to manage the wealth for which he was responsible. He further notes that “a retainer who turned out to be \textit{adynatos}, that is, incapable or incompetent, would soon lose his place in the bureaucracy.” (Ibid.)
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 158-9.
\textsuperscript{20} These retainers would already have passed many tests to reach their current level. Besides, a test is best carried out when the master is present: “Too much is riding on his continued accumulation of wealth to risk a talent for the purpose of testing a retainer.” (Ibid., 159.)
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 160.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 161.
The final scene is the reckoning. The first two servants are rewarded as expected: “They have both calculated correctly; the 100 percent profit is pleasing to the master. He responds accordingly by promising them bigger and better responsibilities in the future.”\textsuperscript{24} However, this masks the ugly realities hidden within the profit margin: the two servants are ‘good’ “because they have proven to be effective exploiters of the peasants”\textsuperscript{25}. The master’s response (‘You have been faithful in a few things’) may have involved conspicuous down-play in an attempt to impress the retainers, but the ruling classes did control the vast majority of the wealth such that talents were ‘a few things’. Further, the ‘Enter into the joy of your master’ implies that he knows about their extra monetary dealings, suggesting that he is “inviting his clients into a celebration of their plenty in the midst of others’ deprivation and want.”\textsuperscript{26}

The third retainer, however, is the focus – and the hero\textsuperscript{27} – of the parable. His prior action was the best available precaution against theft and liability, and establishes him as prudent and sober, but it doesn’t prepare the hearers for what follows. His speech to the master would have astonished them for its brutal honesty:

The third retainer cuts through the mystifying rhetoric that has dominated the exchange between the elite and his first two retainers, and he identifies the aristocrat for what he is, strict, cruel, harsh, and merciless… In effect, he shames his master through his unexpected attack.\textsuperscript{28}

He is quite explicit that the master is an exploiter, living off the productive labour of others. The master does not deny this. However, the retainer’s words “expose the sham of what has transpired and place it under the unobstructed light of clear analysis and prophetic judgment.”\textsuperscript{29} He has become a ‘whistle-blower’.\textsuperscript{30} Punishment is immediate. “Having spoken the truth, the servant must be vilified, shamed, and humiliated so that his words will carry no weight.”\textsuperscript{31} The retainer is expelled from the household to become a day-labourer. Herzog concludes that the parable’s codification creates empathy for the third retainer in Jesus’ peasant audience. However, how the parable applies to them is barely touched on:

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 163.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 167.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 164.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 165.
\textsuperscript{30} Herzog’s title for the chapter dealing with this parable is ‘The Vulnerability of the Whistle-blower’.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
“To the hearers, the codification also posed critical issues. How would you react to a whistle-blower? Would a former retainer find a welcome in a peasant village? Or would the former hostilities suffocate even the possibility of a latter-day coalition?”

**Ivor Harold Jones**

Much of I. H. Jones material is, as the title of his book suggests, in the form of a commentary. As such, he provides more detail than is necessary for the purposes of this essay. However, his conclusions are worth discussing, with reference to the more detailed comments where appropriate.

Jones finds five major points of interest in the Talents:

1. The gifts are distributed according to the servants’ skill and resourcefulness. The decreasing amounts have a similar function to the decreasing yield in the Sower: “The fear, the disappointment and the poor motivation of those less well endowed are registered in the parable as early signals of failure.” This may suggest that gifts of ‘hearing’ and ‘understanding’ are implied, which suits the Matthean warnings about failure, and implies that all should heed them, not just leaders. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the third servant’s attitudes toward the master are wrong.

2. The phrase ‘Enter into the joy of your lord’ is not necessarily redactional. No other parable has a master speaking in terms which identify him as the κύριος; and χαρά has a wide range of reference, from ‘Enter your master’s good life’ to ‘Enter the joy of heaven’. Thus, the phrase must be heard alongside the entry of the wise young women into the wedding feast. It is allegorical only because the context overlays the text with new levels of meaning.

3. The phrase ‘After a long time’ is required in order for the commercial operations to be completed. “In the Matthean context, within the eschatological discourse built upon

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32 Ibid., 167.
34 Ibid., 470.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 471.
37 Ibid., 472. The usual argument is that they are redactional because they are allegorical.
38 Ibid., 473-4.
Mark, the phrase denotes the extensive period during which stewardship has to be exercised.\(^{39}\)

(4) The punishment, ‘into outer darkness’, is given in terms used in 22:13 and 8:12.

(5) The third servant’s dialogue with his master is the climax of Matthew’s parable. The ‘gathering’ and ‘sowing’ could be seen as a Jewish response to the Gentile mission, or even as securing the place of the Gentiles in the divine purpose: God is the one who deals with those whom he has no right to trouble himself with; God gathers into his kingdom proselytes and Gentiles whom he has never scattered to the four winds of the Diaspora.\(^{40}\)

However, Jones concludes that the centre of the original parable used by Matthew would have been the reflection on the harshness of God. McGaughy’s proposal is rejected, since few people in Jesus’ time would have identified themselves with the third servant. Instead, the original parable “explored the dangers of reacting to the God of Jesus as a hard God. He must be seen as just, but also as one whose Kingdom offered new hope.”\(^{41}\)

Similarly during Matthew’s time: the difficulty remained how to understand God as both benefactor and judge. As such, “whatever endowment a Christian may have received, and whatever responsibility that implies, the inner attitudes of fear must be expelled by the inner resources of the Kingdom.”\(^{42}\)

**Brad H Young**

The underlying theme of the parable of the Talents is, for Brad H. Young, stewardship:

Everything that a person has, whether it be goods or abilities, is given from above. In Jewish thought, God’s creation of the world makes every person a caretaker of what really belongs to God… One’s concept of God, moreover, is viewed as the primary determining factor in faithful stewardship. In contrast to the fear of the one-talent servant, the good servants trust in the goodness of the master and as a result of their faith are willing to take risks in order to achieve a maximum result for their master’s money.\(^{43}\)

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 474.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 476.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 478.

\(^{42}\) Ibid.

Young first examines Christian interpretations of the parable. In Matthew, it is placed in the midst of eschatological teachings, thus emphasises the imminent judgment. However, the discipleship theme of preparation is probably the original concern of the parable. Incorporating the two themes, "the story warns against apathetic inactivity in the face of the coming of the Son of Man".44

Next, Young sheds light on the setting in life of the parable, by quoting a number of rabbinic parables where similar themes, or even plots, can be found.45 As such, Young can say:

The Gospels use stock characters, from wealthy aristocrats to common servants, as well as money and banking practices, to communicate effectively the message of faithful stewardship.46

There is also another element of story-telling present: the dynamic reversal that surprises the hearers when an unnecessary precaution produces the opposite of the intended result.47 The irony of the parable is seen in the good intentions of the servant.

The traditional interpretation that sees the master as representing God is justified, in Young’s mind, since the theological foundation of Jesus’ parable is the Jewish understanding that God as creator implies humans as stewards. Young quotes two parables that involve the concept of stewardship as applied to mankind’s use of God’s creation.48 But God is so much more gracious than any human landowner.49 Young sees this as relevant to the Talents: the justification supplied by the third servant “was based on his view of the master… The failure was based upon a misunderstanding of the divine nature.”50 Fear of the master brought about the servant’s downfall.

By contrast, faithful stewardship will be rewarded. This is accepted as a given in Jewish theology. A major source of this understanding is the examples of Moses and David who were both shepherds before being given the leadership of Israel. Young quotes from a Jewish text: “Here you have two leaders whom God proved first by a little thing,

44 Ibid., 84.
45 Ibid., 89-92. These parables are briefly described in Chapter 3 of this thesis.
46 Ibid., 91.
47 Young quotes a parallel example: Aesop’s fable of the Miser.
48 Ibid., 94-5.
49 One of these parables involves a landowner who gives his field to tenants, who then have to supply the seed and labour, yet the owner expects 50% of any produce. God, on the other hand, gives the land and the seed, the sun and the rain, yet only asks for 10% as a tithe plus 2% as terumah.
50 Ibid., 95. This does seem to confuse the story-level with the allegory-level, however.
found faithful, and then promoted them to greatness.”  

Jesus’ parable, then, is “firmly rooted in ancient Jewish thought and Bible interpretation.”  

Young concludes:

Although the eschatological force of the master’s return to give reward or punishment to his servants on the basis of their performance pervades the rich imagery of the plot of the parable, its primary message is on stewardship of God’s graciously bestowed resources in the present. God is good, and the stewards of his divinely given abilities and assets must use them creatively and faithfully to achieve a maximum return on their master’s investment. In the business of life, the parable gives a sound financial forecast for the productive use of God’s resources.

N. T. Wright

Before dealing specifically with the parable of the Talents, Wright first discusses the subset of Jesus’ parables in which he locates this particular one: stories of YHWH’s return to Zion. He rejects the usual interpretation that the returning master or king in these parables referred to Jesus and his ‘second coming’. Instead, he makes a two-fold proposition: (1) that when Jesus spoke of ‘the coming of the son of man’ he meant it quite strictly in its Danielic sense in which ‘coming’ refers to the son of man ‘coming’ to the Ancient of Days, that is from earth to heaven, not the other way around; and (2) that when Jesus spoke of a ‘coming’ figure in the sense of ‘one who comes to Israel’ the coming figure was YHWH himself, an event bound up with Jesus’ own career and its forthcoming climax. His evidence for this second point is Jesus’ announcement of the kingdom which to a 1st century Jewish listener would evoke such passages as Isaiah 40 and 52. The major theme of these passages (and of second-Temple Jewish eschatology) is YHWH’s return to Zion, but in the 1st century AD this was understood to have not yet taken place. True, the exiles had returned, but YHWH had not returned to Zion in glory, bringing vindication for the faithful people of Israel. When Jesus announced the imminence of the kingdom he is claiming that the long-awaited return of YHWH is about to take place.

51 Ibid., 97.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
55 By doing this, he invalidates the grounds for scholars’ claims that such references were a creation of the early church.
56 Ibid., 632.
The fact that there are two different versions of the parable is not a problem for Wright; he considers it highly likely that Jesus used such stories as this on numerous occasions. He then discusses the differences between Matthew’s and Luke’s versions. Firstly, most of the differences in details are quite trivial: Luke’s servants are given ‘pounds’ not ‘talents’; there are ten servants (though only three are then singled out for special attention) and each is given one pound. More significantly, Luke’s central character is a nobleman who goes away to be installed as king, most likely echoing Archelaus. This does not necessarily indicate two independent stories conflated into one at a later date: “Jesus was just as capable as Luke, or anyone else, of telling stories with two or more points, and of saying things with strong political resonances.”

As indicated above, Wright rejects the interpretation that sees the master as representing Jesus, and the servants as his disciples who are judged on their performance during Jesus’ absence. His arguments for this are extensive. First, he notes that in most parables with an authority figure with subjects “the king or master stands for Israel’s god and the subjects or servants for Israel and/or her leaders or prophets.” Second, the idea of a king who returns after a long absence fits exactly into the context of the return of YHWH to Zion, which is a major theme in second-Temple Jewish eschatology. Third, the primary reference of the master/servant parables is to the events predicted in Matthew 24, that is, “the fate of Jesus and of Jerusalem seen in terms of the ‘coming [i.e. the vindication] of the son of man’; and that this is closely correlated in turn with the ‘arrival’ and enthronement of the ‘Ancient of Days’.” As such, they should be examined in their Synoptic context of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem. Fourth, the idea of Jesus’ ‘second coming’ does not seem to be a feature of his teaching.

Even granted that Jesus’ hearers did not always grasp what he said, it strains probability a long way to think of him attempting to explain, to people who had not grasped the fact of his imminent death, that there would follow an indeterminate period after which he would ‘return’ in some spectacular fashion, for which nothing in their tradition had prepared them.

57 Ibid., 633.
58 Ibid., 634.
59 Ibid., 635.
60 Ibid.
Fifth, when the second coming is mentioned in early Christian literature, there is no suggestion of the condemnation of some within the church.\(^61\)

Wright then deals with the two forms of the parable. The usual interpretation of the Lucan version simply does not make much sense: it makes Luke out to be teaching the rather obvious point that the kingdom (in the sense of Jesus’ return) did not come when Jesus got to Jerusalem. When Luke says Jesus “went on to tell them a parable, because he was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once”, his point does not concern *timing*, but *effects*.\(^62\) The people thought that the imminent kingdom was a good thing, but Jesus wants to correct their thinking: the imminent coming of the kingdom means judgment, not blessing, for Israel.

This [parable] is not a denial of the imminence of the Kingdom. It is a warning about what that imminent kingdom will entail. The parable functions, like so many, as a devastating redefinition of the kingdom of God. Yes, the kingdom does mean the return of YHWH to Zion. Yes, this kingdom is even now about to appear. But no, this will not be a cause of celebration for nationalist Israel.\(^63\)

The Matthean version of the Talents also cannot be seen to support the regular interpretation of Jesus’ second coming. The parables in Matthew 25 focus instead “on the great judgment which is coming very soon upon Jerusalem and her current leaders, and which signals the vindication of Jesus and his people as the true Israel.”\(^64\) The time-lag indicated is, as in Matthew 24, the time between the ministry of Jesus and the destruction of Jerusalem.

Therefore, the coming of the master in judgment upon the faithless servant is best read as referring to YHWH’s return to Zion, and the devastating results that this will bring.\(^65\) As such, firstly, the parable serves as a warning that YHWH would come as judge for those in Israel who had not been faithful to his commission:

> Israel’s hopes of national victory would be set aside; the only people vindicated when their god returned, to act in fulfilment of his promise, would be those who responded to the divine summons now being issued in Jesus’ kingdom-announcement.\(^66\)

\(^{61}\) Wright notes a possible exception (1 Cor. 3:12-17), but even here, the people in question are still saved.

\(^{62}\) Ibid.

\(^{63}\) Ibid., 636.

\(^{64}\) Ibid.

\(^{65}\) The hope expressed in passages like Isaiah 40-55 must therefore be tempered with the warning of judgment in Malachi 3 and Amos 5.

\(^{66}\) Ibid., 637.
Second, it further warned that this coming of YHWH to Zion was indeed imminent. “Ironically, the parable which has most regularly been appealed to as referring to a delay in the coming of the kingdom was originally meant as a warning of imminence.”

It all depends upon where the hearer is supposed to be located. Traditionally, the story was told from the perspective of the beginning of the process, with the master going away. However, “it is far more likely, in view of the emphasis of the parable, that the ‘ideal hearer’ is located near the end of the story, when the master is about to return.” This fits with the overall emphasis of Jesus’ teaching: the moment that counts is even now upon us.

Wright notes, thirdly, that this interpretation fits well with other parables involving some form of judgment: in the parable of the Sower much is made of the unfruitfulness of some seeds; the dishonest steward of Luke 16 and the wicked tenants of Mark 12 will be ejected from their positions of trust. Finally, the parable also coheres completely with Jesus’ actions, especially his dramatic and symbolic acting out of YHWH’s judgment on the Temple hierarchy: “He saw the present regime in dual focus: in terms of a servant who had buried the master’s money, and in terms of rebel subjects refusing their rightful king. The only appropriate response was judgment.” The parable, thus, provided a theological explanation for Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem, as the symbol and embodiment of YHWH’s return to Zion.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Without doubt, this chapter has demonstrated the diversity of interpretations of the parable of the Talents. This diversity can best be analysed using two dimensions. The first dimension is allegory. Most early Christian interpreters readily approached the parables in an allegorical fashion. Many almost certainly went too far – Augustine is a good example of this – and Jülicher’s rejection of their overly-allegorical interpretations was indeed warranted. However, as can be seen repeatedly throughout the entire history of parable interpretation, even those who try to avoid allegory end up bringing in an allegorical interpretation through the backdoor: the interpretations of Chrysostom, Calvin and indeed Jülicher himself demonstrate this quite clearly. The presence of allegory is an unavoidable

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67 Ibid.
68 Ibid., 637-8.
69 Ibid., 639.
consequence of the nature of the parables themselves: unless one is willing to interpret the parables as literal moral tales that only apply to the exact situation represented in the parable – and with the Talents only Herzog is willing to go that far – one must be prepared to identify the real-world entities to which the various participants in the parable refer. That is, one must recognise the legitimate presence of allegory in Jesus’ parables.

The second dimension is context. One can either deal with the parables as we have them and interpret them from within the contexts given by the writers of the Gospels, or we can remove them from their gospel context and attempt to reconstruct their significance in Jesus’ life and ministry – however we understand it – by trying to identify an original audience and therefore Jesus’ original application of his parable to that audience. However, given that those interpreters who follow this latter path treat the parables as discrete literary units with nothing anchoring them to the contexts given by the Gospel writers, and given that there are many differing opinions regarding the nature of ‘the historical Jesus’, it is not surprising that there are such widely divergent interpretations of the parable of the Talents. One only needs to compare the conclusions of Via, Crossan, McGaughy, Scott and Herzog to be convinced of this.

Since there is no way of verifying such ‘extra-contextual’ interpretations, one must first attempt to understand the parable in the context of Matthew’s gospel, and only go beyond that to historical reconstructions with caution and due regard for differences of opinion. Even the approaches of Dodd, Lambrecht, and Jones, essentially redactional in nature, still minimise the importance of the biblical context for deriving the correct interpretation of the parables. There are two levels to this context. Firstly, the parable of the Talents is found in the Gospel of Matthew. As a result, Chapter 2 will seek to clarify those issues pertaining to authorship, provenance, date, and so on. Secondly, Matthew has located the parable of the Talents in the Mount of Olives discourse, a decidedly eschatological context. In contrast to the other interpreters Jeremias, Blomberg, Donahue, Heil and Wright approach the parable with due regard to this eschatological context. However, this still leaves a lot of room for divergence of opinion, as a comparison of Blomberg and Wright quickly reveals. As a result, Chapter 3 will seek to analyse the parable of the Talents within the context of the Mount of Olives discourse.
Once this foundational work has been concluded we will be in a position to examine and critique two recent interpretations of the parable of the Talents. Firstly, Herzog’s social-scientific analysis has become quite popular in certain scholarly circles and as such requires a more detailed evaluation. It is also an excellent example of those interpretations that divorce themselves from the context in which the parable is found. Secondly, Wright’s redefined eschatological interpretation, whilst perhaps not garnering as much wider support, has at least been very cogently argued for thus requiring a reasoned response. Given that Wright does what Herzog does not, that is, that he is mindful of the context in which the parable is found, we need to explain why his interpretation still departs markedly from the traditional interpretation. Chapter 4 will seek to critique the interpretation of these two scholars. Chapter 5 will then conclude the thesis by presenting the conclusions reached.
CHAPTER 2

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

INTRODUCTION

In attempting to examine the parable of the Talents one must deal with the context in which one finds it. This will involve a careful discussion of the immediate context, that is, of Jesus’ Mount of Olives discourse. But it also involves looking at the background of the gospel of Matthew as a whole, as this may impact the interpretation of the parable in some way. This chapter will therefore examine the issue of sources, before turning to authorship, provenance, identification of the recipients, date of writing, and purpose. The chapter concludes with the structure of the gospel as a whole.

SOURCEs

When one considers the issue of the sources of Matthew’s gospel it is necessary to exercise some caution. Eta Linnemann’s recent book on the synoptic problem calls into question both the methodology and the apparently established results of source criticism. The essential problem, she notes, is that literary dependence is assumed from the outset as the only possible explanation for the similarities that exist between the three synoptic gospels. This can be traced back to the originator of the critical study of the gospels, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. His essay entitled ‘New Hypotheses concerning the Evangelists regarded as merely human Historians’ conjectured that Matthew, Mark and Luke were mere translations of an original Aramaic gospel of the Nazarenes. Given the differences between the three synoptic gospels this original gospel cannot be reconstructed; in addition, what we have is not reliable tradition since it cannot be regarded as independently valid. Most importantly, however, the relationship between the gospels is literary; that is, literary dependence is assumed. Lessing’s motive for this essay is revealed in a letter written to a Jewish friend:

You are the only one who may and can write and speak freely in this matter. You are thereby infinitely happier than all the other honest persons who can do nothing more to

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2 Ibid., 26-7.
hasten the overthrow of this hateful edifice of nonsense than to hide behind the pretense of furnishing new bases for it.\(^3\)

Unfortunately, this highly critical spirit forms the foundation of source criticism as it applies to the gospels.

From an examination of more recent studies, one finds that literary independence is acknowledged to be a possible hypothesis which, in the end, simply does not explain the similarities in wording and order that exists. For example, in a recent book on \(Q\)^4, Arland D. Jacobson decides against literary independence by arguing that (1) Palestine in Jesus’ day was not an oral culture but was remarkably literate with a strong orientation towards texts. However, he concedes that oral traditions must have flourished as well.\(^5\) (2) Despite the oral habits contained within the gospels they are still literary compositions. (3) Much of the evidence supposedly indicating oral composition can also be found in literary composition; he refers to variations in wording and sequence as well as the use of formulaic expressions. (4) “The remarkable agreements among the synoptic gospels in order as well as wording point toward literary activity.”\(^6\) In response to this, (1) seems to concede more than it gains\(^7\), and (2) and (3) are entirely neutral with respect to the problem at hand, merely indicating a blurring of the boundary between oral tradition and literary documents. One finds the argument resting solely on the similarities in order and wording.

This is exactly what Graham N. Stanton argues from when he argues against literary independence:

Most scholars have concluded that the agreements between Matthew and Mark in both content and order are so striking that there must have been some form of literary dependence. In pericope after pericope the two gospels are broadly similar in content; the differences form a consistent pattern. Literary dependence is almost inescapable…\(^8\)

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\(^5\) Ibid., 10.

\(^6\) Ibid., 11.

\(^7\) One feels that Jacobson has overstated the ‘literary’ nature of Palestine especially given the recent work of Kenneth E. Bailey (see below). Certainly, there is much evidence of literary activity during this time – the documents themselves testify as much – but, by definition there will be no lasting evidence of any \textit{oral} activity, except in literary form. Thus, the evidence is misleadingly weighted in favour of a literary culture.

However, he also notes that the differences in order do not clearly point to literary dependence: in Matt. 4:12-13:58 there are considerable divergences of order that must be plausibly explained. Stanton cites F. Neirynck’s work in this regard, asserting that “the evangelist’s changes to Mark’s order are not arbitrary but consistent and coherent.”

Similarly, John Riches points out that the similarities between the Synoptics must be accounted for by some form of dependence, whether it be oral or literary. He concludes:

> Perhaps the sources of the Synoptic Gospels were in a measure oral sources, oral traditions which had been circulating in a relatively stable form for some time and which were recorded in their own way (with, that is, minor variations) by the Evangelists. This is a by no means impossible but, in view of the close verbal agreements, still less likely explanation than that what we have in the Synoptic Gospels is the result of some kind of literary dependence.

However, Riches questions the literary existence of Q: the more one becomes aware of the differences in the material common to Matthew and Luke “the more one might feel inclined to see Q as a relatively coherent body of oral tradition, rather than as a series of documents.”

Are the similarities in order and wording such that literary dependence is inevitable? Linnemann certainly doesn’t think so. She attempts to examine whether literary dependence exists between the Synoptics by using as scientific and objective a method as possible, by comparing the respective narrative orderings as well as examining the gospels at the word level. The central portion of her book is statistically heavy, but her conclusions are somewhat sobering. With respect to the narrative order, she notes that while there are similarities (especially in the passion narrative) they are not as extensive as commonly supposed. Furthermore,

> Anyone who lays claim to the phenomena of identical content and similarity in narrative order as ‘proofs’ of literary dependence among the three Synoptics denies at the outset the possibility that the gospels – in keeping with what they claim for themselves –

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11 Ibid., 23.
12 Ibid., 28.
13 It is interesting to note that those in favour of literary dependence start by emphasising the similarities then they have to explain the differences; those against, such as Linnemann, start by emphasising the differences, then they have to explain the similarities.
transmit what Jesus said and did. Such a claim, however, would replace scientific rigor with prejudice.\footnote{Ibid., 95.}

With respect to the comparison at word-level the most interesting statistic, for the two source theory at least, is that 21\% of Mark (counting the words of the entire pericopes that are unique to Mark as well as “additional minor details” of three or more words in length in pericopes that are also found in Matthew or Luke) is not paralleled in either Matthew or Luke. “This is the heavy burden that every theory of literary dependence must bear.”\footnote{Ibid., 101.}

When this is added to the fact that both Matthew and Luke have their own unique material (with respect to Mark), Linnemann concludes:

Investigation of the extent of parallelism between Matthew, Mark, and Luke shows clearly that the data in the gospels yields no evidence for the acceptance of literary dependence among the three Synoptics. Such dependence would rather lead to absurd conclusions.\footnote{Linnemann, 106, original italics removed.}

If Linnemann is correct then the hypothesis of literary dependence is disproved\footnote{However, she asserts the self-evidence of this fact in much the same way as other scholars have asserted the self-evidence of literary dependence: “The lack of evidence for literary dependence among the three Synoptic Gospels is overwhelming and speaks for itself.” (Ibid., 155).}, and the various competing theories as to who was dependent on whom are meaningless.\footnote{Ibid., 150.}

It is probable that Linnemann has over-stated her case. Certainly, her ‘objective’ statistical approach is not entirely free of subjectivity, and her conclusions based on the evidence are not as self-evident as she makes out. However, as was said at the beginning of this chapter, her efforts must engender caution with respect to too quickly assuming literary dependence. Furthermore, her book is not wholly negative; she does put forward her own proposal: that the gospels arose independently:

What historical-critical exegesis rejects as ‘historicizing’ – taking what is reported in the Gospels as historical – is, therefore, a legitimate approach to the Gospels: Behind what...
The Gospels report stand the words and deeds of Jesus. That is the source of similarities in content and sequence of the pericopes. The Gospels all had the same foundation: What Jesus said, did, and suffered; that led inevitably to similarities in content.\textsuperscript{19}

She distinguishes between two different types of communication: (1) words, such as Jesus’ teaching, are fixed linguistic symbols that can be transmitted directly; (2) deeds, on the other hand, must be first fixed linguistically before they can be transmitted, resulting in indirect communication. As such,

\textit{Variants} in the account of events by various eyewitnesses are, therefore, normal... Yet there should be substantial agreement among witnesses. If the same event is reported, there \textit{must} be agreement of some kind. Such agreement is, of course, considerably greater in the case of a direct linguistic record, since the linguistically fixed form does not first have to be found. Similar agreement can, however, be readily recognized in the case of an indirect linguistic record as it transmits the course, framework, and connections of an event.\textsuperscript{20}

This would, she claims, account for similarities of content and order.\textsuperscript{21}

Linnemann is not alone in seeking to examine the possible mechanisms involved in the transmission of the oral traditions concerning Jesus. In order to help clarify New Testament scholarship’s understanding of the oral tradition behind the gospels, Kenneth E. Bailey has identified a number of different oral tradition models based on his own experience garnered from many years teaching in a Middle-Eastern context. First, there is the Bultmannian view: informal uncontrolled oral tradition.\textsuperscript{22} “The community, he feels, was not interested in either preserving or controlling the tradition. Furthermore, the tradition is always open to new community creations that are rapidly attributed to the community’s founder.”\textsuperscript{23} Second, and contrasting, is the Scandinavian school’s formal

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 159, italics original.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 161, italics original.
\textsuperscript{21} Linnemann states that “The greatest problem that can be advanced to dispute a rejection of literary dependence is the unilinear structure that the three Synoptics have in common: in the beginning Galilee, in the middle the Transfiguration, at the end Jerusalem.” (Ibid., 175, italics original). She argues that certain events were so significant that one does not have to resort to a literary exemplar to account for their inclusion: Jesus’ baptism was regarded as the beginning of Jesus’ ministry (and so John the Baptist should also be mentioned); “Peter’s confession, Jesus’ first passion prediction, and the transfiguration were far too significant to be passed over in silence.” (Ibid.); the final Jerusalem visit (of perhaps nine that were required to fulfill the requirements of the law over the course of three years) had to be mentioned without exception, being the passion narrative. “Apart from such central facts, shared by all the Synoptics, there is much that is not strictly uniform.” (Ibid.)
\textsuperscript{22} Kenneth E. Bailey, “Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels” \textit{Themelios} Vol. 20, No. 2 (Jan 1995), 4.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 5.
controlled oral tradition. In this view, Jesus passed his material on to the disciples in a highly controlled manner using mnemonic techniques, condensations, written notes, and repetition. “It is formal in the sense that there is a clearly identified teacher, a clearly identified student, and a clearly identified block of traditional material that is being passed on from one to the other. It is controlled in the sense that the material is memorized (and/or written), identified as ‘tradition’ and thus preserved intact.”

Both W. D. Davies and C. H. Dodd have set out median positions without stating a mechanism for how this could be achieved. The aim of Bailey’s article is to propose just such a mechanism. He first notes that both informal uncontrolled oral tradition (the transmission of rumours) and formal controlled oral tradition (the memorisation of the Qur’an) exist in current Middle-Eastern society. However, there is also a third form, which Bailey calls informal controlled oral tradition.

The setting is informal: the gathering of villagers in the evening for the telling of stories and the reciting of poetry. There is no set teacher, and no specifically identified students. The type of materials preserved ranges: short pithy proverbs, with up to 6000 in current usage; story riddles, in which in the story the hero is presented with an unsolvable puzzle and comes up with a wise answer (as examples, Bailey cites 1 Kings 3:16-28 and John 8:1-11); poetry; parables or stories; and finally, well-told accounts of the important figures in the history of the village or community.

However, there is also control. “Essentially, the controls are exercised by the community itself… The material is passed on in public… The seated community exercises control over the recitation of the tradition.” But there is flexibility depending on the type of material involved. There is no flexibility with poems and proverbs: “If the reciter makes a mistake, he subjects himself to public correction, and thereby to public humiliation.” There is some flexibility allowed with parables and recollections of

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29 Ibid., 7.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
historical people and events thus making allowance for some individual interpretation of the tradition. “Here there is flexibility and control. The central threads of the story cannot be changed, but flexibility in detail is allowed.” Bailey alludes to C. S. Lewis’ introduction to George MacDonald’s stories:

When the community is reciting stories and parables using informal controlled oral tradition it is indeed passing on, in Lewis’s words, ‘a particular pattern of events’ in a community-controlled, yet informal, setting. The overall pattern of events is fixed, as are some of the words used in expressing that pattern – but not all the words. The individual story-teller is allowed freedom within limits.

Finally, there is a third level of control: total flexibility. This applies to jokes, reporting of casual news of the day, and the recounting of tragedies in nearby villages. “Within this classification there is no control. Flux and gross exaggeration are possible. The material is irrelevant to the identity of the community and is not judged wise or valuable. It floats and dies in a state of total instability. It does not enter the tradition and is soon forgotten or reshaped beyond recognition.”

Bailey ends with some preliminary conclusions with respect to the Gospels:

[W]e have observed a classical methodology for the preservation, control and transmission of tradition that provides, on the one hand, assurances of authenticity and, on the other hand, freedom within limits for various forms of that tradition. Furthermore, the types of material that appear in the Synoptic Gospels include primarily the same forms that we have found preserved by informal controlled oral tradition such as proverbs, parables, poems, dialogues, conflict stories and historical narratives… In the light of the reality described above the assumption that the early Christians were not interested in history becomes untenable. To remember the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth was to affirm their own unique identity. The stories had to be told and controlled or everything that made them who they were was lost.

Conclusions

Bailey has put forward a very convincing presentation. His analysis of informal controlled oral tradition provides a highly satisfactory mechanism to account for both the

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32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 8.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
similarities and the differences between the gospels without recourse to literary dependence. It will be interesting to see whether the wider scholarly world will subscribe to his model of oral tradition and whether this will effect a change in source criticism as a whole. Similarly, while Linnemann’s statistical critique may not win the day, it shows that one can no longer safely assume literary dependence.

Source criticism holds that there is literary dependence between the gospels. The most widely held view, known as the two document hypothesis, is that Mark’s gospel was written first and that the gospels of Matthew and Luke were written using Mark and another document, usually referred to as Q. Some forms of the hypothesis also posit two other documents: M, from which the author of Matthew got his special material, and L, from which the author of Luke got his special material.\(^{36}\) Personally, I would go no further than to posit a ‘soft’ form of the two document hypothesis, in which the author of Matthew was aware of Mark (but did not copy him slavishly) and that ‘Q’, ‘M’ and ‘L’ are simply ciphers for an amorphous oral tradition current at the time when the gospels of Matthew and Luke were written. In this way, the structure of Matthew’s gospel, that is the general ordering of events, comes from Mark, but the wording of each pericope owes more to Bailey’s informal controlled oral tradition than it does to Mark. This view follows the general understanding of the use of documentary sources as outlined in John Wenham’s *Redating Matthew, Mark & Luke*. Wenham rejects complete independence on the following grounds: (1) To account for a similar order a long list of pericopes was memorised, but, because of the differences, was not regarded as sacrosanct\(^{37}\); (2) It requires that the three gospels be ‘published’ almost simultaneously; (3) It seems contrary to church tradition.\(^{38}\) Instead he argues for verbal independence with a measure of structural dependence. However, he argues for an Augustinian ordering: that the gospel of Matthew was written first, followed by Mark written with an awareness of Matthew, and then Luke was written with an awareness of both. His arguments for this particular ordering are not exactly strong and have certainly not persuaded the majority of scholars.

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\(^{37}\) This is not strictly necessary, however: all that is needed is the remembering of a sequence of certain important events, as well as small groups of chronologically-linked pericopes.

\(^{38}\) Wenham, 1.
The consequences of this ‘nuanced’ model of literary dependence are as follows. Similarities between the gospels can be best explained as originating in the oral tradition, which, as Bailey has shown, is certainly capable of retaining verbal fixedness in the midst of a certain fluidity, instead of, as is more commonly argued, the result of plagiarism. The differences are due to variance typical of different eyewitness accounts, or different rehearsals of the oral tradition, as well as resulting from differing authorial intentions. As such, the conclusions of redaction criticism must necessarily be rather tentative. Certainly, one can draw reasonably definite conclusions from an author’s selection of material; but if there is no ‘slavish copying’ then not much should be said about detailed and specific ‘alterations’ of one’s sources.

AUTHOR

The main issue of authorship is whether the gospel was written by the apostle Matthew, as is claimed by early church tradition, or not, as is argued by many recent scholars. However, as Blomberg notes: “Neither inspiration nor apostolic authority depends on apostolic authorship (cf. Mark and Luke), and the church was capable of preserving accurate information outside of apostolic circles (Luke 1:1-4).”

Robert H. Gundry provides a well-argued case for the traditional view. He firstly deals with the Papias evidence at length, noting that: (1) The date of Papias’ writing should be earlier than is usually stated: AD 110 instead of AD 135. (2) Papias is only one step removed from the apostles. (3) Gundry translates Papias as saying “the words of the elders, i.e., what Andrew or Peter… had said.” (4) Eusebius interprets otherwise (H. E. 3.39.16), but elsewhere shows that Gundry’s understanding is correct (H. E. 3.39.7). (5) In other words, the ‘elder John’ is the ‘apostle John’, and Eusebius makes a distinction only because he wants to show that the book of Revelation (which he didn’t like) is unapostolic. Concerning Papias’ testimony, Gundry concludes:

3 Ibid., 610-1.
4 That is, Papias provides the following order: i) the apostles, ii) those who heard the apostles, iii) himself (Ibid., 611.)
5 Ibid., 612.
6 Ibid.
So the elder – i.e., the Apostle John – is saying that Matthew wrote his gospel for the precise purpose of bringing order out of the chaos in Mark. Thus we have astonishingly early external evidence that Mark wrote first and that Matthew knew Mark’s gospel and wrote his own in view of it.\(^7\)

After much further discussion, Gundry examines the likelihood of the apostle Matthew being the author of the first gospel. (1) The fact that the book is ascribed to a disciple of low prominence is suggestive – the shift from ‘Levi’ to ‘Matthew’ in 9:9-13 not being sufficient reason – especially since Christian apocryphal works tended to gain the names of more prominent apostles.\(^8\) (2) The special interest in money in the unique passages (17:24-27; 18:23-35; 20:1-16; 27:3-10; 28:11-15) lends some internal support.\(^9\) (3) The combination of Jewish and Hellenistic features of the gospel supports authorship by someone used to dealing with Gentiles as well as Jews. (4) The substitution of Gadara for Gerasa (8:28) may show familiarity with the region around Galilee.

However, why would Matthew, an apostle, use the gospel of a nonapostle? In response, the book of Mark was considered to be essentially apostolic deriving directly from Peter’s teaching. Is it too hard to think that one apostle took material that came from a fellow apostle? Of course not – especially since the apostle borrowed from was none else than the foremost among the twelve. Furthermore, Matthew did not merely copy the Petrine tradition set forth by Mark. He used it in ways we are just now coming to appreciate for their originality. Most important of all, doubt that he would have used the Gospel of Mark rests on modern antipathy toward literary borrowing… Ancients did not share this antipathy. On the contrary, they strongly believed in literary borrowing as a way of preserving tradition.\(^10\)

W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison. Jr. provide a fairly typical critical response to the early church traditions. They list the following difficulties with Matthean authorship. (1) Canonical Matthew is in Greek (and no Semitic Matthew exists) and is not likely to

\(^7\) Ibid., 614.  
\(^8\) Ibid., 620.  
\(^9\) Ibid.  
\(^10\) Ibid., 621. Similarly, Blomberg notes: “If Matthew recognized Mark’s Gospel as in some sense reflecting Peter’s ‘memoirs,’ he would have had many reasons to consult and follow it: Peter was one of the inner core of three disciples who experienced certain things Matthew did not (cf. e.g., Matt 17:1; 26:37), by the 60s Peter was probably the most prominent apostle in Christian circles, and it is always helpful and interesting to see how others have already tackled a project one wishes to undertake.” (Blomberg, Matthew, 43-4).
be the work of a translator. (2) It is inconceivable that a Semitic document would incorporate a Greek document (Mark) almost in its entirety. (3) It is even more inconceivable that an apostle would have allowed Mark to determine the ordering of his material.\textsuperscript{11} As such, the issue they deal with at length is whether the author of Matthew was a Jew or a Gentile since he wrote in Greek and used Greek sources.\textsuperscript{12} After much detailed argument not appropriate to describe here, they come to the conclusion that the author was Jewish.\textsuperscript{13} This result seems to be correct, and is not negated if the author was indeed the apostle Matthew.

Fortunately, the present thesis does not rest on the precise identification of the author of Matthew. It is interesting to note that the gospel does not claim apostolic authorship for itself; as such, it is perhaps unnecessary for scholars to debate this one way or the other. That he is Jewish, however, may turn out to be of more importance for this thesis, especially since certain aspects of the Jewish genre of apocalyptic are utilised in the Mount of Olives discourse. However, for the purpose of ease of reference, the author of the gospel of Matthew will be referred to as Matthew in this essay.

**PROVENANCE / RECIPIENTS**

The related issues of the provenance and the intended recipients of Matthew’s gospel have become highly contentious in recent years. Consequently, the ascertaining of these points is not easy. As Davies and Allison say with respect to provenance: “Given the nature of the available evidence, it is quite impossible to be fully persuaded on the issue at hand. We shall never know beyond a reasonable doubt where the autograph of Matthew was completed.”\textsuperscript{1} As such, they hold that the most widely held view that the gospel of Matthew originated in Antioch of Syria, while being quite an attractive option, is no more than an educated guess.\textsuperscript{2}

\textsuperscript{11} Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, 1:9. Harrington makes similar points: “Why is the same tax collector named Levi, son of Alphaeus, in Mark 2:14? Where did a tax collector on the margin of Jewish religious life get such an extensive education to produce this very ‘Jewish’ Gospel? Why did an apostle and companion of Jesus not put forward any claim to have been personally involved in the events of Jesus’ life? Why did he rely on Mark and Q as his written sources rather than personal memory?” (*Matthew*, 8.)


\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 58.

\textsuperscript{1} Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, 1:139.

\textsuperscript{2} Ibid., 147.
More recently, however, the issue of the intended recipients of the gospels has come under close examination. Richard Bauckham has noted that the consensus position has never properly been argued for: it is always assumed that the church in which the gospel writer wrote was the church for which the gospel writer wrote. In other words, the assumption that is made is “that the question about the context in which a Gospel was written and the question about the audience for which a Gospel was written are the same question.”

In contrast to the majority position, Bauckham claims “that someone writing a Gospel in the late first century would have envisaged the kind of general Christian audience which the Gospels in fact very soon achieved through circulation around the churches.” He first contrasts the gospels with the Pauline epistles. He does this because “scholars have sought to see the audience and therefore also the message of the Gospels in just as local and particularized terms as those of the major Pauline letters, which certainly are addressed to specific Christian communities and envisage the specific needs and problems of those communities.” The contrast is firstly one of genre (letter vs. Greco-Roman bios). The second is the purpose for writing it down. In the case of Paul, it was because he was separated by distance from his audience; if he’d been present then orality would have sufficed.

So the more Gospels scholarship envisages the Gospels in terms approximating to a Pauline letter, addressing the specific situation of one community, the more odd it seems that the evangelist is supposed to be writing for the community in which he lives. It becomes quickly clear: “The obvious function of writing was its capacity to communicate widely with readers unable to be present at its author’s oral teaching.”

The second stage of Bauckham’s argument rests on a crucial feature of early Christianity:

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4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 27.
6 Ibid., 28-9, italics original.
7 Ibid., 29. In a footnote at this point, Bauckham adds: “The evidence suggests that in early Christianity this function of writing (communication across space) was more important than the ability of writing to give permanence (communication across time). Few early Christian teachers seem to have felt the need to give their teaching permanence by writing it.” (Ibid., n. 32).
The early Christian movement was not a scattering of isolated, self-sufficient communities with little or no communication between them, but quite the opposite: a network of communities with constant, close communication among themselves. In other words, the social character of early Christianity was such that the idea of writing a Gospel purely for one’s own community is unlikely to have occurred to anyone.\(^8\)

This rests on a number of pieces of evidence. (1) Mobility and communication in the first-century Roman world were exceptionally high. (2) The evidence of early Christian literature (including the gospels) is that the early Christian movement had a strong sense of itself as a world-wide movement (similar to the communities of the Jewish diaspora). (3) Most of the Christian leaders of whom we know in the NT period moved around. (4) There is a continuous practice from the time of Paul to the mid-second century of the sending of letters from one church to another: “Letters establish more than literary connections between churches. Letters imply messengers.”\(^9\) (5) There is concrete evidence for close contacts between churches in the period around or soon after the writing of the Gospels.\(^10\) (6) The existence of conflict and diversity in early Christianity: “Churches take an intense interest in conflicts happening elsewhere. Leaders and teachers actively promote their versions of the Gospel anywhere and everywhere in the Christian world. These are not the introverted communities and teachers who would produce written Gospels purely for home consumption.”\(^11\)

Bauckham concludes with an important hermeneutical consequence of this understanding of gospel audiences:

If the Gospels do not address those communities in particular, those communities have no hermeneutical relevance… Certainly it may be argued that the community in which a Gospel was written is likely to have influenced the writing of the Gospel even though it is not addressed by the Gospel. But it does not follow that we have any chance of reconstructing that community.\(^12\)

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\(^8\) Ibid., 30.
\(^9\) Ibid., 38.
\(^10\) Bauckham notes the interesting sentence in the *Shepherd of Hermas*: one copy was to be made for Clement who ‘will send it to the cities abroad, because this is his job’ (2:4:3) “So Hermas provides us with concrete information, from the very period in which Matthew, Luke, and John were being written, about the way newly written Christian literature was widely and very deliberately circulated around the churches.” (Ibid., 43.)
\(^11\) Ibid.
\(^12\) Ibid., 44.
Instead, “Whatever the influences on an evangelist’s work may have been, its implied readership is not a specific audience, large or small, but an indefinite readership: any or every church of the late first century to which his Gospel might circulate.”\(^{13}\)

Bauckham’s thesis is compelling. Consequently, the term ‘Matthean community’ must be used with caution and the too narrowly specifying of Matthew’s intended audience based on the contents of the gospel should be avoided. It is enough to envision Matthew writing a gospel that records what he considered to be important about the life and ministry of Jesus, important, that is, for the wider Christian church, not merely his own community.

**DATE**

The issue of the date of the gospel of Matthew is another hotly debated one, due to, most probably, the scarcity of good evidence. For example, Blomberg follows D. A. Carson by claiming a date for Matthew somewhere between AD 40 and 100, with “perhaps a very slight preponderance of weight” favouring a date ca. 58-69.\(^ {1}\) “But we dare not be dogmatic; the evidence is simply too slim to come to any sure conclusion.”\(^ {2}\)

The dating of Matthew may have some bearing on the interpretation of the Mount of Olives discourse. As such, it is necessary to at least discuss whether the gospel was written before or after AD 70, the year in which Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed by the Romans.

Of those scholars who support a post-AD 70 date many point out that, given the veracity of the two-document hypothesis (even in a ‘soft’ form), the dating of Matthew rests on the dating of Mark. As John Riches states:

> I think that it is wholly unlikely that Matthew was written before 70. Mark’s Gospel cannot be any earlier than the later part of the 60s and if as is highly probable, Matthew used Mark, then this simply would not allow enough time for the dissemination of Mark’s work and for Matthew’s redaction of it.\(^ {3}\)

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\(^{13}\) Ibid., 45.


\(^2\) Blomberg, *Matthew*, 42.

\(^3\) Riches, *Matthew*, 57.
Similarly, Harrington notes that the few references to the destruction of Jerusalem (22:7; 21:41; 27:25) “along with Matthew’s use of Mark (composed around A.D. 70) as a source suggest a date of composition for Matthew around A.D. 85 or 90.”

But there are other arguments. Amidst a fairly balanced discussion, Davies and Allison place some weight on Matt. 28:19: “It involves a step towards later Trinitarian thought not taken in any other NT writing. We are, therefore, disinclined to place the document to which Mt 28.19 belongs too many years before the beginning of the second century A.D.” Furthermore, the author appears to have been familiar with rabbinic discussions which presumably took place in the last quarter of the first century AD. In other words,

he appears to have had knowledge of rabbinic Judaism as it sought to emerge like a phoenix from the ashes of 70, that is, knowledge of the critical period of Jewish reconstruction and reconsolidation which, in the rabbinic texts, is pre-eminently associated with the so-called council of Jamnia.

In particular, (1) Matt. 5-7 divides into three sections – Torah (5:17-48), Christian cult (6:1-18), social attitudes and obligations (6:19-7:12) – which closely parallels Simeon the Just’s declaration: ‘Upon three things the world standeth: upon Torah, upon temple service, and upon acts of piety’ (m. `Abot 1.2) although the second has been reinterpreted after the destruction of Jerusalem. (2) Hos. 6:6 is quoted twice in Matthew (9:13 and 12:7) but nowhere else in the NT. This was an important watchword of Johannan ben Zakkai in the period following the destruction of the temple. (3) The title ‘rabbi’ in Matt 23:5-10 seems to imply more than just ‘sir’. Rather, “at Jamnia… it became a title for ordained scholars authorized to teach…” They conclude: “Matthew was almost certainly written between A.D. 70 and A.D. 100, in all probability between A.D. 80 and 95.”

But not all scholars would agree with this. Gundry, for example, supports a pre-AD 70 date. He first lists the following arguments for a post-AD 70 date before

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6 Ibid., 133-4.
7 Ibid., 134.
8 Ibid., 135.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 138.
presenting his refutation of them: (1) 22:7 refers to a king destroying Jerusalem; (2) the rejection of the Jewish nation as evidenced by 21:43; (3) the references to ‘their synagogues’; (4) references to the ‘church’ in 16:18 and 18:17, and the ‘other nation’ in 21:43; (5) the special interest in the life of the church (ch. 18); (6) a high Christology, including the distinctive trinitarian formula of 28:19; (7) the use of ‘rabbi’ in its late sense of ‘teacher’ not its early sense ‘sir’; (8) the supposedly legendary character of various incidents including parts of the nativity story, Peter’s walking on the water, Pilate’s wife’s dream, the resurrection of the saints, and the guards at the tomb; (9) Matthew’s use of Mark.11

His responses to these arguments are as follows. (1) The burning of the city derives from Is. 5:24-5; and many other details that could have been used by Matthew had he been writing post-AD 70 are not mentioned. (2) The rejection of Israel can be seen in the Pauline literature (Rom. 9-11). (3) The Jewish persecution of Christians as evidenced in Acts and the Pauline epistles began almost immediately; as such, “At the very least, anti-Pharisaism in Matthew easily fits into the pre-Jamnian period.”12 He counters (3), (4) & (5) together: “By the time Jerusalem was destroyed, the church had long since become a counterpart to the synagogue… The use of ἐκκλησία had started early in the Christian movement (again see the undisputed Pauline epistles).”13 (6) “We find trinitarian references in NT books certainly dating from a time before A.D. 70 (see 1 Cor 12:4-6; 2 Cor 13:14), to say nothing in detail about a generally high Christology during that period.”14 (7) “The paucity of rabbinic materials from that same period deflates the argument that rabbi did not mean ‘Teacher’ till shortly after A.D. 70.”15 (8) “And whatever the character or origin of Matthew’s distinctive materials, nothing forestalls our dating them before A.D. 70.”16 (9) “By general consent, we have less evidence for dating Mark than we have for Matthew. From the standpoint of method, therefore, dating Matthew should help determine the date of Mark more than vice versa.”17

11 Gundry, Matthew, 599-600.
12 Ibid., 601.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
Then, Gundry puts forward evidence in favour of a pre-AD 70 date. (1) Matthew’s gospel contains frequent references to the Sadducees who lost influence after AD 70. (2) Matthew has a preoccupation with Jerusalem as the centre of the Jewish leaders antagonistic towards Jesus and his disciples. (3) The insertion of the Sabbath alongside winter as an undesirable time to flee Jerusalem “lacks purpose if the destruction of Jerusalem and previous flight of the Christians to Pella had already taken place. And if he wrote after A.D. 70, we should have expected him to conform the time of the flight from Jerusalem to the historical reality of the flight to Pella before the Romans defiled the sanctuary… rather than retain a command to flee only after the abomination of desolation…” (4) Matthew inserts ‘immediately’ to show that the end of the age will follow the disciples’ flight from Jerusalem with no gap. “After the destruction of Jerusalem, Matthew would have needed to create a gap in accord with the Son of man’s delay instead of eliminate even the possibility of a gap and thus aggravate the problem of delay.”

In 24:3, then, Matthew does not concentrate on the signs of the parousia and the consummation of the age and de-emphasize the destruction of the Temple because that destruction has come and gone without the expected return of Jesus. To the contrary, by omitting the story of the widow’s mite and juxtaposing the abandonment of Jerusalem’s ‘house’ (23:38-39) and Jesus’ prediction that not one stone of the Temple will remain on another (24:1-2), he has just emphasized the coming destruction of the Temple. This emphasis frees him in 24:3 to tailor the disciples’ request to the contents of Jesus’ reply and thus portray the disciples as having understanding, a leading theme in his gospel.

(5) In 21:14-16, Matthew turns the tumbled-down stones of Jerusalem (Luke 19:39-40) into the crying out of the children in praise of Jesus; but post-AD 70 they would have offered dramatic proof of God’s displeasure. (6) 5:23-24 and 23:16-22 contain material that could only make a sharp point pre-AD 70. (7) 17:24-27 “specifically favors a date of writing before A.D. 70; for after the destruction of the God’s Temple in Jerusalem the Romans shifted the tax to the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome…”

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18 Ibid., 603.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid. We may find reasons to question this particular understanding of Matt 24.
21 Ibid., 604.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 606.
In a fairly evenly balanced debate lacking definitive evidence, it seems that, following Gundry, a pre-AD 70 date is to be preferred. The material in Matthew 24, then, is still prophecy proper rather than historicised predictions altered with the benefit of hindsight.

**PURPOSE**

Given the earlier identification of Matthew’s audience as indefinite, one should avoid any purposes that are community-specific. Stanton is probably close when he says:

> The evangelist does not have one over-riding concern which provides the key to his gospel. The more narrowly his purposes are defined, the less compelling are the explanations offered. Matthew writes with broad catechetical and pastoral concerns: he sets out the story and significance of Jesus in order to assist Christians to come to terms with their identity as communities distinct from Judaism.

**STRUCTURE**

Craig L. Blomberg provides an excellent discussion with respect to the structuring of Matthew’s gospel. He first notes that “a careful analysis of Matthew’s juxtaposition of passages regularly suggests that they are grouped as they are for specific reasons.” As such, Blomberg looks for thematic or topical groupings, rather than necessarily chronological reasons for Matthew’s particular ordering of his material. He first follows J. D. Kingsbury’s major subdivisions: 1:1-4:16 (introduction – events prior to Jesus’ public ministry), 4:17-16:20 (development – representative samplings of his major teachings and miracles) and 16:21-28:20 (climax – the road to the cross). These divisions

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24 Is it possible to be more precise than this? Gundry deduces from the end of Acts occurring in AD 61 that Luke-Acts must be dated ca. AD 63. And since (according to Gundry), Luke had access to Matthew, that Matthew must have been written before this, and Mark even earlier still. (Ibid., 608-9.) However, for the purposes of this thesis, any further precision is unwarranted, and perhaps wanting in good evidence.

1 For example, Harrington: “If (as seems likely) Matthew wrote his Gospel after A.D. 70 and in or near Palestine, his work must be viewed as an attempt to respond to the crisis posed by the Jerusalem Temple’s destruction.” (Harrington, Matthew, 10). More specifically, he sees Matthew as attempting to preserve and continue the traditions of Judaism in this new context (Ibid., 16).

2 Stanton, New People, 3.

1 Blomberg, Matthew, 23.

2 Ibid., 12.

are suggested by the twice-used formula ‘From that time on Jesus began to’ in 4:17 and 16:21.4

However, Blomberg also wants to signal the importance of the five discourses. As such, he follows B. W. Bacon5 in identifying various sub-divisions from 4:17 through to 25:46 that form pairs of discourse and narrative in which the members of each pair address similar themes.

Blomberg’s outline is as follows6:

1. Introduction (1:1-4:16)
   - Infancy narratives (1:1-2:23)
   - Preparation for ministry (3:1-4:16)
2. Development (4:17-16:20)
   - Jesus’ authority
     - Introduction (4:17-25)
     - Preaching (5:1-7:29)
     - Healing (8:1-9:35)
   - Rising opposition
     - Predicted (9:36-10:42)
     - Experienced (11:1-12:50)
   - Polarisation of response
     - Explained (13:1-52)
     - Enacted (13:53-16:20)
3. Climax (16:21-28:20)
   - Focus on coming death and resurrection
     - Implications for discipleship (16:21-17:27)
     - Implications for the church (18:1-35)
   - Road to Jerusalem

4 Blomberg, Matthew, 23.
- True discipleship vs. condemnation for the Jewish leaders (19:1-22:46)
- Judgment on the Temple but also on the nations (23:1-25:46)
- Ultimate destiny
  - Passion and death (26:1-27:66)
  - Resurrection (28:1-20)

This outline should be modified slightly, however. Blomberg has located ch. 23 as part of the fifth discourse; other scholars consider it a sixth discourse. But as Davies and Allison point out,

Mt 23, which is clearly separate from the eschatological discourse in 24-5 (note the new beginning in 24.1), does not constitute a sixth discourse. It lacks the fixed formula found at the end of 5-7, 10, 13, 18, and 24-5. In addition, the chapter which, despite 23.1, is less teaching material for the disciples than a complaint directly addressed to the Jewish leaders, is very like the debate material in certain narratives (cf. e.g. 12.25-37, 39-42). 23 is, accordingly, to be considered the extension and conclusion of the polemical narrative in 21-2.7

Therefore, the structure of this sub-section of Matthew’s gospel should be:

- Road to Jerusalem
  - True discipleship vs. Condemnation for the Jewish leaders (19:1-23:39)
  - Judgment on the Temple but also on the nations (24:1-25:46)

Consequently, Jesus’ Mount of Olives discourse is an intentional unit, and the parable of the Talents is very much a part of it.

7 Davies & Allison, Matthew, 1:61, n. 31.
CHAPTER 3

AN ANALYSIS OF THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

INTRODUCTION

In endeavouring to reach conclusions regarding the correct interpretation of the parable of the Talents we can really only examine with any degree of certainty how Matthew interpreted the parable. The starting point of interpretation is therefore the fact that Matthew places the parable in the Mount of Olives discourse. Consequently, before we can examine the parable more specifically, we need to examine the Mount of Olives discourse. This in itself requires an excursus on apocalyptic eschatology.

APOCALYPTIC ESCHATOLOGY

There have been a number of attempts over the years to define what is meant by ‘apocalyptic’. The earliest scholarly research concentrated mainly on apocalyptic as a genre identified by means of a list of characteristics. Friedrich Lücke (1832), basing his generalisations mostly on the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation, identified the following characteristics: a universal perspective as the scope of revelation, a particular reckoning of time, pseudonymity, an artistic presentation, a combination of visions and images, and the interpretive mediation of angels. He was also interested in what he called the conceptual basis of apocalyptic (that is, the theology of apocalyptic), but this was treated in such a way that it did not greatly influence his discussion of the characteristics.

Lücke’s presentation was to prove formative for subsequent scholarship: character (genre) and concept (theology) were usually treated separately. For example, P. Vielhauer states: “By means of the word ‘Apocalyptic’ we designate first of all the

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2 For example, Lücke’s conceptual basis for Daniel is “that God alone has, knows, and reveals the secrets of God.” (Ibid., 19.) But the link between revelation and apocalyptic does not enter into the discussion of the characteristics of apocalyptic.
literary genre of the Apocalypses, i.e. revelatory writings which disclose the secrets of the beyond and especially of the end of time, and then secondly, the realm of ideas from which this literature originates.”

He then goes on to list the following characteristics: pseudonymity, the recounting of a vision, surveys of history in future-form, and combinations of various other forms (such as prayers, farewell discourses, and exhortation). In terms of the ‘realm of ideas’ he lists the doctrine of the two ages, pessimism with regard to the present and hope for the future, concern for the fate of the individual within a universal scope, determinism, and imminent expectation. On this last point, Vielhauer says:

> Since everything has its time precisely determined, the end of this Age can be calculated, either by reckoning its entire duration from the creation… or by reckoning from a point within history (in which case information is provided by the apocalyptic writers from Daniel on in complex and obscure tricks with numbers…), or by observing the signs of the times. But these calculations are always determined by the conviction that the End is very near at hand.4

Similarly, James D. G. Dunn lists the literary characteristics of apocalyptic (pseudonymity, visions and symbolism, survey of history from a past perspective, esotericism, ethical exhortation), and then the theological characteristics (the two ages, pessimism in the present and hope in the future, eschatological climax, imminent end, supernatural / cosmic dimensions, divine sovereignty and control).5

P. D. Hanson takes the definition of apocalyptic one step further by identifying three distinct levels. First, ‘apocalypse’ is “a literary genre which is one of the favored media used by apocalyptic writers to communicate their messages.”6 Second, ‘apocalyptic eschatology’ is “a religious perspective, a way of viewing divine plans in relation to mundane realities”7. The content of this perspective can be summarised as follows:

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4 Ibid., 590-1 (italics original).
7 Ibid.
God’s final saving acts came to be conceived of not as the fulfillment of promises within political structures and historical events, but as deliverance out of the present order into a new transformed order…

Third, ‘apocalypticism’ which is “the symbolic universe in which an apocalyptic movement codifies its identity and interpretation of reality. This symbolic universe crystallizes around the perspective of apocalyptic eschatology which the movement adopts.” He also notes that apocalyptic movements share two characteristics: (1) a particular type of social setting, namely, alienation. “This is the disintegration of the life-sustaining socioreligious structures and their supporting myths.” And (2) a related group response:

If the life of a community is to be sustained, a new symbolic universe must replace that which was dominant in the social system responsible for the experience of alienation… Apocalyptic eschatology allows a community to maintain a sense of identity and a vision of its ultimate vindication in the face of social structures and historical events which deny both that identity and the plausibility of the vision.

This three-level definition of ‘apocalyptic’ appears to have been well received by the scholarly community as a helpful way forward. However, David C. Sim has noted that this classification assumes that the phenomena are all quite strictly related to one another: that apocalypticism always involved the adoption of apocalyptic eschatology and its expression via the apocalyptic genre; and that the apocalyptic genre always involved apocalyptic eschatology and was always the result of apocalypticism. Sim questions the correctness of this assumption. He claims that the only necessary relationship exists between ‘apocalypticism’ and ‘apocalyptic eschatology’ (essentially by definition), and that “[w]e must accept that there is apocalyptic eschatology and apocalypticism outside the apocalyptic genre, apocalypses which have little or no apocalyptic eschatology [e.g.,

8 Ibid., 30.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 24-5.
3 Baruch and 2 Enoch], and apocalyptic groups which did not produce apocalypses [e.g., Qumran].”

The reason for this clarification quickly becomes clear when we examine the gospels:

If apocalyptic eschatology and apocalypticism are viewed as enjoying a necessary relationship with the apocalyptic literature, then it becomes difficult to relate them to the gospel of Matthew which obviously belongs to a completely different genre. On the other hand, if it is accepted that these phenomena can be found both within and without the apocalyptic genre, then there is no impediment to examining the gospel of Matthew in terms of this eschatological scheme and its associated social movement. In other words, despite the fact that the gospels are not ‘apocalypses’, it is true that ‘apocalyptic eschatology’ can be found in them. Many of the points listed above by Koch can be found, at least in a modified form, in the gospels. Of central importance, for example, is Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God, which has a present aspect able to be experienced by those who respond to Jesus’ teaching, but which also has a future aspect involving the resurrection of the dead (Matt. 22:23-32), the final judgment (especially for those who reject Jesus in the present – Matt. 11:20-24; see also Matt. 25:31-46), and the messianic banquet (Matt. 26:29). There is thus a contrast between the present evil age (perhaps softened somewhat by the presence of the kingdom) and the blessed age to come: in other words, the apocalypticists’ dualism of epochs. The future aspect is, however, complicated by the fact that perhaps more than one judgment is in view: the preaching of John the Baptist is full of apocalyptic images of imminent judgment; Jesus also refers to imminent judgment, most notably in his Mount of Olives discourse. Given the proliferation of apocalyptic eschatology in the gospels the characteristics that define the genre of ‘apocalypse’ become much less relevant to their interpretation; but the understanding of the theology of apocalyptic arguably becomes the interpretive crux from which the rest of Jesus’ teaching hangs.

It may have been noticed throughout the above presentation that those defining apocalyptic did not on the whole question the assumption that what apocalyptic eschatology has in view is the end of the world. It may have been phrased in different

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14 Ibid., 26.
15 Ibid., 31, italics original.
ways, such as ‘the end of the present order’ or ‘the remaking of the natural world’, but it still means essentially the end of the space-time universe as we know it expressed by means of the language of cosmic chaos, which in this context is usually interpreted literally. Furthermore, this end is usually expected imminently.\(^\text{16}\) The whole concept, it is said, has its inception with the Old Testament prophets and their warnings about ‘the Day of Lord’, which was understood to refer to the end of world (similarly deduced from the images of cosmic chaos that they prophesied would occur at that time), when God would come in judgment upon the world. The later apocalypticists, presumably, picked this idea up and attempted to encourage their readers who were undergoing intense persecution even to the point of martyrdom by claiming that the end of the world, signaled again by the accompanying comic chaos, would be imminent.\(^\text{17}\)

It would certainly be unwise to question the imminence of apocalyptic eschatology. In view of the social setting that gives rise to apocalypticism, imminence is a necessary characteristic: those suffering persecution and even death for their faith in the present evil age can only be encouraged to endure if they are reassured by the fact that the end of that age, and thus the end of their sufferings, is coming very soon.\(^\text{18}\) Imminence, then, is intrinsic to apocalyptic eschatology.

However, some biblical scholars have questioned the referent of apocalyptic eschatology. Put simply, they argue that the end in view is not the end of the space-time universe but simply the end of the current historical period of suffering. This ‘end’ will involve the destruction of one’s enemies and will be followed by another historical period of celebration, which will (usually) include world domination on the part of the faithful.

\(^\text{16}\) How this is applied to Jesus’ teaching in Mark 13 in particular can be seen clearly in the following extended quotation from Marcus J. Borg: “This association of the coming of the son of man with cosmic catastrophe, presumably in that generation, is the basis for affirming that Jesus expected the imminent end of history as we know it, all accomplished by an unmediated act of God. Though the basis is very narrow, it becomes very broad by a series of extensions. First, the theme of cosmic catastrophe is extended to other passages which speak of the coming of the son of man. Second, the theme of imminence is extended to those passages which do speak of a last judgment, so that it becomes imminent. And finally, the combined elements of imminence and universal world collapse and renovation are extended to that large category of threats of unidentifiable content. The crisis of which Jesus spoke is thus affirmed to be the final crisis of history.” (Marcus J. Borg, Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teaching of Jesus. new ed. (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998), 224-5.)

\(^\text{17}\) See, for example, 4 Ezra 5:4-5; 7:39; 2 Bar. 10:12; T. Mos. 10:5.

\(^\text{18}\) However, this end is not so very imminent that it isn’t worth writing down the encouragement in literary form. The fact that we have apocalypses at all seems to indicate that immediate imminence is being needlessly emphasised.
The cosmic language that is used to describe this transition is therefore not to be interpreted literally but is intentionally metaphorical, illustrating the significance of the events in question, underlining the fact that the process will only come about by means of the divine intervention of the creator God.

This viewpoint was first expressed in full by G. B. Caird:

1. The biblical writers believed literally that the world had had a beginning in the past and would have an end in the future. 2. They regularly used end-of-the-world language metaphorically to refer to that which they well knew was not the end of the world. 3. As with all other uses of metaphor, we have to allow for the likelihood of some literalist misinterpretation on the part of the hearer, and for the possibility of some blurring of the edges between vehicle and tenor on the part of the speaker.¹⁹

Proposition 1, he notes, is easily established for the OT, for it is implied in Ps. 72:7 and Gen. 8:22, and explicitly stated in Ps. 102:25-26; Is. 51:6; 54:10.

The first problem, however, arises with the phrases ‘the latter end of the days’²⁰ and ‘the day of the Lord’²¹. The first of these is “the equivalent of the English expression ‘in the end’ or ‘ultimately’ when we use them to mean ‘sooner or later’ or ‘in the future’; and it has precisely that vagueness which makes for the blurring of the edges mentioned in Proposition 3.”²² The origins of the phrase ‘the day of the Lord’, on the other hand, are obscure:

When it is first used in the eighth century B.C. by Amos, it clearly has a long history behind it. His contemporaries who long for it regard it as a day of Yahweh’s victory in which they will share, and Amos warns them that it will be Yahweh’s victory over them. What is not in doubt is that the day came to be described in terms of cosmic disaster, as the return of primaeval chaos, and so by imaginative elision to be seen as the end of the world.²³

The unmaking of creation can be seen quite clearly in the fact that the day of the Lord is explicitly said to be ‘as darkness, not light’ (Amos 5:18)²⁴. This is then illustrated more

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²¹ Amos 5:18, 20; Is. 2:12; 13:6, 9; Zeph. 1:7, 14; Jer. 46:10; Ezek. 13:5; 30:3; Obad. 15; Zech. 14:1; Mal. 4:5; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14.
²² Ibid., 258.
²³ Ibid.
²⁴ Similarly in Joel, the day of the Lord will be ‘a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness’ (2:2).
specifically by the darkening of the sun and the moon, and the falling from the sky of the stars. As such, the language of cosmic chaos is subordinate in some way to the day of the Lord.

Furthermore, in 13 of the 18 occurrences, the day of the Lord is said to be imminent or present.

It is here that Proposition 2 comes to our aid. For when we examine the contexts, we find that in one case the referent is the overthrow of Babylon, in another the annihilation of Edom, in another the ravaging of Judah by a plague of locusts. Now these prophets were not claiming that the contemporary crisis was the day of the Lord... None of them would have argued that, because he himself was right, the others must be wrong. Yet neither did they believe in a succession of days of the Lord. The day was his victory, when he would come decisively for salvation and judgment, and they were inviting their hearers to see that day in the current crisis. In other words they were using the term as metaphor.

Thus Caird distinguishes between a ‘long-range’ vision of the final Day of the Lord, and a ‘short-range’ vision in which the current or imminent crisis can be described as being like that final Day of the Lord in some way, most often because this crisis is also to be viewed as God’s judgment. As such, the role of the language of cosmic chaos is clear: it evokes the final Day of the Lord thus bringing out the theological significance of the current or imminent crisis (namely, that the creator God is involved, bringing judgment on the people of Israel – in the case of Amos, Jeremiah, and Joel; on Babylon – in the case of Isaiah; or on Egypt – in the case of Ezekiel), without necessarily implying that the current or imminent crisis is the final Day of the Lord involving the end of the world.

Caird provides a ‘case-study’ concerning Jeremiah to prove this position:

At the outset of his ministry (626 B.C.) Jeremiah predicted the destruction of Jerusalem by an enemy from the north (Jer. 1:14-15; 4:6; 6:1, 22; 10:22), and in synthetic vision he saw this as God’s judgment, depicting it as the return of chaos and even using the words tohu wabohu (waste and void), which occur elsewhere only in the account of creation in Gen. 1:2.

However, the attack did not come immediately, leading Jeremiah to fear that either he was a false prophet or that God had duped him (Jer. 20:7). However, in 605 BC he reissued his earlier prophecies dictating them to Baruch. “This time his prediction came

See Amos 8:9; Is. 13:10; 14:12-15; 34:4; Zeph. 1:15; Jer. 4:23-8; Ezek. 32:7-8; Joel 2:10, 30-31; 3:15.

Ibid.

Ibid., 259.
true, for Jerusalem was captured in 598 B.C. and reduced to ruins in a further siege eleven years later. But it never occurred to Jeremiah or anybody else that he might still be regarded as a false prophet because the world had not come to an end.”

In other words, the historical events that Jeremiah had predicted had come true, but the accompanying ‘un-creation’ of the world had not. But since this was not seen as an indication that Jeremiah had prophesied incorrectly (and there were certainly those who were looking for just such a thing as Jer. 20:10 makes clear), it is strong evidence that the language of cosmic chaos that Jeremiah uses in passages such as 4:23, 28 was never intended to be taken literally as referring to the end of the world. Instead, it showed the seriousness of the judgment upon Israel; the only thing that the coming destruction of Jerusalem could be compared to was the unmaking of creation.

Caird then applies his propositions to the corpus of apocalyptic books.

When an author writes a book consisting wholly or mainly of symbols, there is a prima facie case for not supposing him to be a literalist… But this generalisation does not decisively settle the more particular question whether the apocalyptists intended their eschatology to be taken literally. This can be determined only by reading the books.

He then examines in turn Daniel and the Ezra Apocalypse, bringing out the two opposing concepts of the end of history and the continuation of history that are held together without apparent tension in these works indicating the presence of metaphor. In other words, the apocalypticists too had a ‘short-range’ and a ‘long-range’ aspect in their message.

Given the fact that Caird’s interpretation of apocalyptic goes against many centuries of tradition it is not surprising that his propositions have been criticised. Dale C. Allison, for example, questions whether eschatological language can be demonstrated to be metaphorically applied to things other than the last:

When a document depicts the present or immediate past in apparently eschatological terms, talk of metaphor is appropriate only if the redemption remains distant; for as we shall see straightaway, if it is thought to be proximate, the present becomes the time immediately before the redemption and hence naturally draws to itself the language of eschatology. This has nothing to do with metaphor.

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28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 262.
Allison’s critique seems to be that if Caird is correct about the presence of metaphor then there is no imminent expectation in the various apocalyptic books, and this is unacceptable, especially for a book like Daniel. Alternatively, if there is an imminent expectation then it cannot be meant metaphorically. However, this is both a misunderstanding of Caird’s argument and a misunderstanding of metaphor. Firstly, as Caird himself quite clearly points out, there is an imminent expectation: in Daniel the promise of deliverance from suffering and persecution (Allison’s ‘redemption’) is imminent; the final judgment glimpsed in Daniel 12:1-3, however, is still a long way off. Allison has thus ignored Caird’s distinction between the ‘long-range’ and ‘short-range’ aspects to be found in the apocalypticists’ vision and in the preaching of the Old Testament prophets before them. This greatly diminishes the credibility of Allison’s critique.

Secondly, Allison seems to be under the impression that if something is meant metaphorically then it cannot refer to something concrete such as an actual event in history; rather, it can only have an abstract referent such as an idea or a state of mind. This can be seen in the above quotation where Allison says that metaphor is present when eschatological language (that is, language about the end of history) is used to describe the present when the actual end is still well in the future; that is, the end is said to be near when in fact it is not. Thus, because in Allison’s understanding eschatological language and the end of history are inextricably linked, Caird’s metaphorical use of end-of-the-world language cannot possibly be referring to an imminent concrete event of history. If, on the other hand, the end is near then by definition it cannot be metaphor.

However, as N. T. Wright points out in his response to those who have critiqued his own position, the words ‘metaphor’ and its antonym ‘literal’ refer to the way words refer to things; the words ‘abstract’ and ‘concrete’ refer to the sort of things words refer to. These two pairs of words, Wright asserts, should not be confused. Just because the

31 Dale C. Allison, Jr. “A Plea for Thoroughgoing Eschatology” Journal of Biblical Literature 113 (1994), 664, n7: “I shall ignore another objection to my thesis, namely, that a literal reading of eschatological language fails to understand its metaphorical functions… I observe, however, that Caird’s hermeneutical program even eliminates a near expectation from Daniel and Mark 13. I can no more accept this result than I can suppose that Montanism and Sabbateanism were devoid of eschatological enthusiasm.”
32 Caird, 263.
language is being used metaphorically doesn’t mean it cannot have a concrete referent. Instead, the Old Testament prophets and the intertestamental apocalypticists used the metaphor of cosmic chaos to refer to the concrete judgment or redemption that was, in their minds, imminent. Thus, they were certainly not claiming that the end of the world was imminent; rather, they were using language that evoked the end of the world so as to underline the theological importance of what they were discussing, applying it to an actual event in history which they claimed was imminent. As such, we can say that the language of cosmic chaos was being used metaphorically.

Indirect support for Caird’s thesis comes from Christopher Rowland’s discussion of the apocalyptic literature of the intertestamental period. Rowland provides some important readjustments to the typical emphases of scholarly interpretation of apocalyptic, thus lending some support to Caird’s view of apocalyptic eschatology. Interestingly, Rowland seeks to make a clear distinction between ‘eschatology’ (a shorthand way of referring to the future hope of Judaism and Christianity) and ‘apocalyptic’ (the description of the literary genre and a particular religious outlook evident from the apocalypses themselves). He does this because he claims that “while it is certainly true that many Jews looked forward to the end of the present world-order, it would not be correct to suppose that the end of the world was the essential element of the Jewish hope for the future.”

Rowland maintains that concentration on the future orientation of the apocalypses has at times given a rather distorted view of the essence of apocalyptic. Apocalyptic is as much involved in the attempt to understand things as they are now as to predict future events. The mysteries of heaven and earth and the real significance of contemporary persons and events in history are also the dominant interests of the apocalypticists. There is thus a concern with the world above and its mysteries as a means of explaining human existence in the present.

Rowland goes on to essentially redefine apocalyptic as ‘knowledge of the divine mysteries through revelation’. His brief examination of Daniel and Revelation at this point in his book concludes: “the unifying factor which joins both these apocalypses and separates them from other contemporary literature is the conviction that runs through

35 Ibid., italics added.
both, that man is able to know about the divine mysteries by means of revelation, so that God’s eternal purposes may be disclosed, and man, as a result, may see history in a totally new light [cf. Dan 2:28].”

Rowland claims that this approach also does justice to the small amount of material in both apocalypses which is not in the strict sense eschatological. The ‘son of man’ vision in Daniel 7, for example, is, in the author’s eyes, not a revelation only about the future vindication of the saints of the Most High but also a demonstration of the temporary nature of dominance of the world power now oppressing Israel… Thus it is the significance of earthly persons and events as viewed from the divine perspective which comes across in the apocalypses.

It is this aspect of Rowland’s book which is of interest here: if the apocalypticists are interested in explaining the significance of people and events in the present then it is possible that the ‘end-of-the-world’ material is subordinate in some way to the material dealing with the present; perhaps, as Caird claims, it is only there to demonstrate the universal or theological significance of specific events. In fact, Rowland goes so far as to questions whether the apocalypticists did indeed predict the end of the world: We can also say that the apocalypses seem to have looked for a new age which would have formed part of the present world-order, but more often a restoration of the present universe rather than a new creation. Occasionally mention is made of the destruction of this world (e.g. 4 Ezra 7.31) but rarely is it to be found as the only and dominant view.

Similarly, only occasionally is the implicit dualism contrasting the poverty of the historical situation in the present and a glorious future turned into an explicit doctrine of the two ages. There is a sense of pessimism in the apocalypticists’ view of the present. However, this attitude arises not so much from the conviction that the present world was too corrupt for the establishment of God’s Kingdom, but from the frank admission that without God’s help the dominance of Israel and the coming of the new age could never be achieved…

Despite the inclusion of occasional mythological elements in the eschatological descriptions, whether it be a belief in a new creation or the intervention of supernatural beings, the apocalypses indicate a view of the future which stresses the outworking of God’s purposes within history.

36 Ibid., 13.
37 Ibid., 14.
38 Ibid., 28.
39 Ibid., 38, italics added.
At this point, Rowland’s interpretation of the cosmic language found in apocalyptic eschatology is not far from Caird’s.

**THE MOUNT OF OLIVES DISCOURSE**

When we come to the Mount of Olives discourse, it is arguable that we find precisely the mix of imminence and end-of-history that Caird identified in the apocalyptic theology of the Old Testament prophets. Jesus is predicting the imminent destruction of Jerusalem within a generation, but at the same time he also speaks about the return of the Son of Man as Judge, an event that certainly implies the end of history or at least the end of the present age and life as we know it.

These two aspects split both Mark and Matthew’s presentation of Jesus’ Mount of Olives discourse into two separate events.¹ Mark, after speaking about certain ‘days of distress’ in 13:14-23 goes on in verse 24 to say ‘in those days, following that distress’ and then proceeds with cosmic chaos language and the coming of the Son of Man which will occur ‘at that time’ (13:26).² Ben Witherington III discerns a distinct pattern in Mark’s presentation: A: v1-23, B: v24-27, A’: v28-31, B’: v32-37, where A stands for preliminary events and B stands for final events, and the emphasis of the text in terms of number of verses devoted is clearly on preliminary events.³

Similarly, there are two events in Matthew’s presentation: in 24:29 the coming of the Son of Man occurs ‘immediately after the distress of those days’. Matthew’s close temporal association between the two events has been seen as potentially problematic, especially if he is referring to the fall of Jerusalem specifically. However, scholars have argued that Matthew is referring to the general period of the church as described in 24:4-14 in which the fall of Jerusalem will occur as the ‘highlight’ at some point.⁴

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¹ Luke’s presentation, interestingly enough, does appear to treat the fall of Jerusalem and the coming of the Son of Man as one event since Luke does not use any temporal connectives such as ‘after’ or ‘following’. The only possible ‘delay’ is to be found in the cryptic ‘until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled’ (Luke 21:24) which immediately precedes the language of cosmic chaos and the coming of the Son of Man.

² The phrase ‘in those days’ has clear eschatological associations: see Jer. 3:16, 18; 31:33; Joel 2:28; Zech. 8:23, for example.


⁴ See D. A. Carson, “Matthew” in The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Vol. 8) (ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 495, for this latter interpretation.
However, the temporal problem is exacerbated by Mark 13:30 and Matt. 24:34. Was Jesus predicting his own return within a generation? Not necessarily. The text, as Witherington points out, deliberately distinguishes between preliminary events (‘all these things’) and final events (‘in those days’): “As the so-called Markan apocalypse is presently structured, there is a contrast between ‘these things’ which are expected to happen soon and ‘those days after that tribulation’ which are supposed to begin at some unspecified time later than the distress caused by ‘these things.’”

There is thus a deliberate tension between *inevitability* and *unknowability* seen in the juxtaposition of *imminent* and *final* events.

There is one further piece of evidence for this. Most scholars acknowledge that Matthew had access to Mark’s gospel. In Chapter Two of this thesis I argued that slavish use of Mark by Matthew was unlikely, thus rendering as problematic the looking for significance in every little difference in wording between Mark’s version and Matthew’s. However, *significant* differences in wording may yield insight into Matthew’s understanding of the material. Such a significant difference can be found in the disciples’ question that is answered by Jesus in the Mount of Olives discourse. In Mark, the question is phrased as follows:

‘Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled? (Mark 13:4)

In other words, their question appears to presuppose one event. However, as was argued above, Jesus’ answer involves two events. The question in Matthew, however, is as follows:

‘Tell us... when will [the destruction of the temple] happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?’

In other words, Matthew’s question involves *two* events. This suggests, therefore, that Matthew has altered the disciples’ question so as to make it more explicit that Jesus’ answer splits into two distinct parts: the imminent destruction of the temple and the (slightly) more distant end of history ushered in by the coming of the Son of Man.

The importance of this distinction will be realised once one begins to examine the parables that are found in Matthew’s version of the Mount of Olives discourse, for they

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5 Witherington, *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World*, 42. See also Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 287, n152.
are explicitly linked to the second aspect of the discourse, that is, the coming of the Son of Man. As Carson argues, 24:36 belongs properly with what follows, standing as an introduction to the entire section. In other words, the various exhortations to vigilance and stewardship that follow are predicated upon the fact of the unknown time of the return of the Son of Man. This unexpectedness is then illustrated by means of a comparison with life before the flood (24:37-41). This illustration also introduces an element of judgment, already hinted at in 24:31: just as the flood took those not in the ark, when the Son of Man comes there will also be those who will be taken. The point of the illustration is clear: the coming of the Son of Man at the final judgment will be unexpected and will therefore take many people by surprise. However, v42 makes explicit the implication of this: vigilance. Since Jesus has warned his disciples ahead of time, the coming of the Son of Man should not take them unawares: “Given ignorance of the parousia’s date, leisurely repentance is foolish. Fear of being caught off guard should motivate one to watch.”

The second illustration concerning the owner and the thief further develops this motif of vigilance (24:43-44). The ‘thief in the night’ motif crops up in a number of places in the New Testament suggesting that it does indeed go back to Jesus in some form. Perhaps this parable is the locus of origin. What is certain is that it fits very neatly into the Mount of Olives discourse emphasising as it does the two concepts central to this section of the discourse: unexpectedness and the consequent need for vigilance. But what does vigilance entail for Matthew? A literal meaning is unlikely. As such,

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6 Carson, “Matthew”, 507. See also Davies & Allison, Matthew, 3:374.
7 As Witherington says, “Since no one knows the timing, one must be watchful or, more to the point, always doing the job God gave one to do, for blessed are those found doing such a task when the Lord returns.” (Witherington, Mark, 349-350).
8 Blomberg correctly notes that v42 rounds out the preceding paragraph rather than starting the next paragraph as the NIV has it (Blomberg, Matthew, 366).
9 Davies & Allison, Matthew, 3:383.
10 See also 1 Thess. 5:2,4; 2 Pet. 3:10; Rev. 3:3; 16:15.
11 Davies & Allison, Matthew, 3:385.
12 Witherington thinks as much: “I would suggest that the origin of this motif goes back to the Q saying found in Luke 12:39 / Matthew 24:43. This metaphorical utterance, at an early date in the transmission of the tradition, seems to have been clearly understood to refer to the coming of the Son of Man at an unexpected hour.” (Witherington, Jesus, Paul and the End of the World, 45-6.)
13 Interestingly, in one of his earliest letters, 1 Thessalonians, Paul uses the motif of the ‘thief in the night’ to make precisely the same points: because the return of Jesus is unknown (1 Thess. 5:1-2), Christians are to stay awake and be sober (1 Thess. 5:6-8). Paul even refers this teaching back to Jesus’ own words (1 Thess. 4:15).
commentators usually opt for a figurative meaning: “one must be spiritually and morally alert.”  

The third illustration helps to clarify Matthew’s intentions. The Master and his Servants (24:45-51) continues looking at the implications of the unexpectedness of the Son of Man’s return; this time, however, vigilance (waiting expectantly for the return) is replaced by stewardship (doing something constructive whilst waiting expectantly for the return) as the main point of the parable, lending support to the figurative meaning behind ‘vigilance’ as mentioned above. More specifically, stewardship here is pictured as service to others (v45).

Matt. 24:45 asks the question ‘Who then is the faithful and wise servant…?’ This question appears to be somewhat programmatic for Matthew. The parable that follows the third illustration is the parable of the Ten Virgins, which more closely examines what it means to be ‘wise’ (as opposed to ‘foolish’). It teaches that the unexpected time of the coming of the Son of Man requires constant vigilance on the part of Christians. As Hagner says, “[t]he difference between the foolish and the wise is that the latter do all within their power to be ready for the parousia. They will join the Son of Man in the eschatological reward of the messianic banquet while the foolish will find themselves excluded and without recourse.”

The parable of the Talents then goes on to more closely examine what it means to be ‘faithful’ (as opposed to ‘wicked’).

THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

14. Similarly, it will be like a man going on a journey who summoned his servants and entrusted his property to them. 15. To one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. Immediately, 1

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14 Ibid., 383.
15 Hagner, Matthew 14-28, 730.

1 The manuscripts are divided as to whether εἴθειος modifies what precedes or follows. To clarify the ambiguous original text (R * B b g’), some manuscripts (Θ f 700 it sa ma) inserted the postpositional connective δὲ after εἴθειος, thereby linking the ‘immediately’ to what follows. Other manuscripts (R² A C D L W f¹ 33 Ρ: vg) inserted the same connective after πορευθέντας, thereby linking ‘immediately’ to what precedes, that is “Then he went on his journey immediately.” While the original text was ambiguous, Matthew’s strong tendency is for the adverb to relate to the following verb, not the preceding one (see 3:16; 4:20; 13:5, 20, 21; 14:27; 21:2, 3; 24:29). Hence the above translation.
16. the one who had received five talents went and traded with them and made another five. 17. In the same way, the one with two gained another two. 18. But the servant who had received one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

19. Then after much time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. 20. The one who had received five talents came forward bringing the other five talents saying, “Master, you entrusted me with five talents. See, I gained another five.”

21. His master said to him, “Well done, good and faithful servant. You were faithful with a few things so I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your master.”

22. The one with the two talents also came forward saying, “Master, you entrusted me with two talents. See, I gained another two.”

23. His master said to him, “Well done, good and faithful servant. You were faithful with a few things so I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your master.”

24. Now the one who had received one talent also came forward saying, “Master, I knew you, that you are a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering from where you did not scatter. 25. So being afraid, I went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.”

2 Some manuscripts (R* A W q syb) have ἔποιήσεν (with the meaning ‘he made (gain)’, cf. Wesley J Perschbacher (ed.) The New Analytical Greek Lexicon (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1990), 335) whilst others (R2 A* B C D L Θ f13 33 lat sybhm sa) have ἐκέρδησεν. (meaning ‘he gained (as a matter of profit)’, cf. Ibid., 237). The semantic difference is negligible; however, perhaps some scribes altered ἔποιήσεν to conform with ἐκέρδησεν in verse 17.

3 Some manuscripts (R A C D W f13 Ρ q syb) have unnecessarily inserted τάλαντα into the original text (B L Θ 33 lat syb co) at this point.

4 Some manuscripts (A C D W Θ f13 Ρ lat) have ἔν τῷ γῇ, others (C* 700) have τῷ γῇ, and still others (R B L 33) just γῇ. The first two readings appear to be grammatical emendations of the last.

5 A few manuscripts (D Θ 700 lat) have ἐπεκέρδησα (‘I have earned in addition’), others (A C W f13 Ρ syb) have ἐκέρδησα ἐπὶ αὐτὸς (‘I have earned in addition to them [the five talents entrusted to the slave’], and still others (R B L 33 ff1 g1 r1 co) just have ἐκέρδησα (‘I have earned’). The last appears to be the most original reading that has been subsequently improved. (The same situation occurs in verse 22.)

6 A few manuscripts (D lat co) begin the master’s words with ἐπεί (“Since you were faithful…”). This also occurs in verse 23.

7 Some manuscripts (R D Ρ lat sa) tidy up the original text found in 35 A B C L W Δ Θ f13 33 syb sa by adding λαμβάνον at this point.

8 A few manuscripts (D Θ lat sa mae) omit the redundant σε.

9 The original reading ὃτεν has been altered to ὃποιον in D W pc lat sa, presumably to match the earlier ὃποιον in this verse.
26. His master replied, “You wicked and lazy servant! You knew that I reap where I do not sow and gather where I do not scatter? 27. Then you should have invested my money with the bankers so that when I returned I would have received what was mine with interest. 28. Therefore, take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. 29. For everyone who has will be given more and he will have an abundance. But whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. 30. And throw that worthless servant into the outer darkness where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.”

Analysis

Verse 14

The introduction to this parable is quite abbreviated: verse 14 simply begins with Ὡσπερ γὰρ ἄνθρωπος ἀποδήμων ἐκάλεσεν. In other words, this parable is closely bound to the previous parable. The two parables are likened to the same thing, namely, the coming of the Son of Man at an unknown time. However, where the parable of the Ten Virgins taught the importance of being ready, the parable of the Talents develops the theme somewhat by showing what readiness means.

This verse introduces the reader to the main characters of the parable, a man and his servants. The question for the reader is to whom do these characters refer? This

10 Whilst not applicable in English given that ‘money’ is a non-count noun, some manuscripts (א C D L f 33 ग mae bo) have τὸ ἄργυριον (singular) while others (א B W ट 700 sy) have τὰ ἄργυρια (plural). The first reading appears to be an emendation of the second influenced by the parallel in Luke 19:23.
11 Instead of δέκα (‘ten’), D reads πέντε (‘five’), presumably in an attempt to remove the difficulty of how the slave can give the original five talents back to the master and yet still be referred to as the one with ten. Yet even this does not remove the difficulty, since the slave would also have given the extra five talents to the master as well.
12 A few manuscripts (C H; after v30 (Γ) f43) have added τὰῦτα λέγων ἐφώνει· ὥ ἔχων ὅτα ἄκουσεν ἂκούει· (‘Saying these things, he cried: “The one who has ears to hear, let that person hear.”’) This appears to be derived from a lectionary reading (cf. NA, 73).
14 ‘For like a man leaving home...’
17 Morris notes that the word δοῦλος usually denotes a slave, “but that can scarcely be the meaning here, for these men were able to enter financial arrangements involving quite large sums of money.” (Morris, Matthew, 627). However, M. A. Beavis, “Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context for the New
raises the issue of allegory. Blomberg provides a helpful methodology for dealing with allegorical identifications in Jesus’ parables. He states that the main characters of a parable will probably be the most common candidates for allegorical interpretation and that the main points of the parable will most likely be associated with these characters. Most parables therefore make three points because they have three main characters: an authority figure and two subordinates who exhibit contrasting behaviour. In this case, the authority figure is the man since, as we will discover in verse 15, he is clearly wealthy having servants and rather a lot of money.

To whom, then, does the wealthy man refer? If Rabbinic parables are any indication Matthew’s readers could well understand the wealthy man as referring to God. Looking to rabbinic parables for interpretive clues must be done with caution, however. As Sider notes: “Rabbinic parables may also illuminate the expectations of Jesus’ audience, even though none of the extant examples can be dated as early as the time of his ministry.” As such, at best they can be seen to be part of the common religious milieu. One of the most important features of the early Jewish parables is that they are always comparisons, having referents external to the story; furthermore, they often had more than just one point of comparison. Another important feature was that the central external referent was usually God. In almost all of the rabbinic parables that involve an authority figure, whether this be a king, a master, a father, or even a man, that figure

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19 John W. Sider in his book *Interpreting the Parables: A Hermeneutical Guide to Their Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995) elaborates an alternative method for dealing with allegory in the parables in a systematic way. His ‘proportional analogy’ analysis involves identifying series of related analogies of the form A:B = a:b with respect to (, where A:B describes the theme or tenor of the parable, a:b the pictorial image or vehicle of the parable, and ( is the point of resemblance (Sider, *Parables*, 29-30). His work further legitimates the presence of intentional allegory in Jesus’ parables. (See n. 142 below.)
21 Brad H. Young, *Jesus and His Jewish Parables: Rediscovering the Roots of Jesus’ Teaching* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 37: “The parables of Jesus, like those of Israel’s sages, are derived from the common environment of the rabbinical world of instruction.”
represents God.\(^{23}\) This suggests that this particular identification should be included in the common religious milieu. Finally,

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\text{It must be always kept in mind that what is primary in the relationship between parable and what it illustrates is the latter not the former. That is, the parable is told and shaped in such a way that it will aptly illuminate some reality that is already a given.}\(^{24}\)
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What this means in practice is that some elements within the parable may not ‘make sense’ if construed as reflecting normal life. Rather, the external referents tend to shape the direction of the parable’s narrative flow.\(^{25}\)

It is worth briefly describing some close rabbinic parallels of Jesus’ parable of the Talents. Brad H. Young gives two particularly relevant parables involving an authority figure and two servants who exhibit contrasting behaviour. In the first parable, the good servant both fears and loves the king, and so engages in work on his behalf while the king is absent on a journey. The bad servant merely fears the king and thus does nothing.\(^{26}\) In the second parable, a king gives wheat and flax to two servants. The wise servant uses the flax to make a tablecloth and the wheat to make bread; the foolish servant leaves the wheat and flax untouched. In each case, the servant who worked is rewarded when the

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\(^{23}\) Craig A. Evans, “Parables in Early Judaism” in *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables* (ed. Richard N. Longenecker, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 67: “There are some 325 extant Tannaitic parables, more than half of which feature a king, who almost always represents God.”

\(^{24}\) Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 188. See also Birger Gerhardsson, “If We Do Not Cut the Parables Out of Their Frames” *New Testament Studies* 37 (1991), 328: “When we say that the narrative meshalim are comparative texts, a qualification is necessary. The comparison is not made for its own sake with an equal interest in two entities which are placed side by side. The comparison is made to elucidate one of the two. The subject is lord, the mashal just a servant. The synoptic narrative meshalim are not created by a poet or a story-teller; they are designed by a man with a message which he wants to elucidate more closely on different points.”

\(^{25}\) For example, consider Witherington’s interpretation of the Workers In The Vineyard (Matt. 16:1-15) a parable which will prove to be important in the discussion of Herzog’s interpretation of the Talents: “One can envision that this parable was told as an answer to those who objected to Jesus’ approach to ministry. More particularly, Jesus was suggesting that his disciples, in part culled from the least, last and lost of Jewish society and brought into service in the vineyard at the eleventh hour, would be ‘made equal’ or at least receive equal treatment from the divine vineyard owner for the services they rendered. Some of Jesus’ audience objected to this as unfair, for they had labored long and hard in the vineyard. I submit that this interpretation makes better sense of the parable in Jesus’ life situation than the proposed alternatives, as Jesus on various occasions seems to have had to justify his ministry and the sort of people he called and used in his ministry.” (Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 199). In other words, by referring to the external referents Witherington can explain the ‘strange’ features of the parable, especially the seemingly inequitable behaviour of the owner.

\(^{26}\) Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 89-90, citing as sources Yakult Shimeoni and *Seder Elijah*. The parable is being used to illustrate the importance of love for God and comes in a sermonic portion that explains Deut. 6:5.
king returns; the servant who did nothing is not. Young concludes that authority figures with contrastive servants are stock characters and that the authority figure would most likely be seen as referring to God.

This would seem to be weighty evidence that the master in this parable also refers to God. However, given the context in which Matthew has placed this parable, that is, in the context of the unexpected coming of the Son of Man, following on directly after a parable in which the central authority figure referred to the Son of Man and immediately preceding an account of the Son of Man performing the final judgment, the wealthy man far more likely refers to the Son of Man as well.

Once this identification has been made, the two groups of subordinates exhibiting contrasting behaviour – the two faithful servants and the one wicked servant – quite naturally refer to Jesus’ disciples, just as did the wise and foolish virgins in the preceding parable. As Hagner says, “The underlying theme of the parable is introduced at the outset: the absence of the master (the Son of Man) and the interim responsibility of the servants (disciples).”

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27 Ibid, 90-91, from *Seder Elijah*. This parable is being used to illustrate the way that the Mishnah is used for a proper interpretation of the Bible. In his earlier book, Young describes an additional parallel that comes from Semachot Derabbi Chiya 3:3, attributed to R. Nathan (circa 125): “A king builds a palace and places his men servants and maid servants in charge of the estate. He provides them with gold and silver to carry on business and warns them not to steal from each other. After the stage has been set, in the next scene the king travels to a distant land and the drama begins. The servants are not faithful and steal from one another. After a long delay the king returns and discovers his servants have stolen from each other and are standing outside naked. The point of the parable is to say that likewise the wicked steal from each other in his world and will appear naked – without good works – before God.” (Young, *Jesus and His Jewish Parables*, 178.)

28 Ibid., 91.

29 A careful reader of Matthew’s gospel will have no difficulty in identifying ‘the bridegroom’ of Matt. 25:1 with Jesus, since this concept has been introduced in Matt. 9:15 (Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, 3:395).


31 Jesus in the discourse in which parable of the Ten Virgins is located is speaking to disciples (Matt. 24:3), and the details within the parable suggest that the 10 virgins as a group refer to Jesus’ followers. Both the wise and foolish virgins were waiting for the bridegroom. The foolish virgins call the bridegroom ‘Lord, Lord’ and yet are rejected. Matthew appears to be making an explicit parallel with Matt. 7:21-23 where the outward behaviour of disciples (prophecy, exorcisms, miracles) is unfavourably contrasted with inward relationship. Here, the outward behaviour common to all disciples is ‘waiting for the coming of the bridegroom’; the inward relationship is ‘readiness’, signified by the bringing along of extra oil. Consequently, the parable of the Ten Virgins is a warning to all disciples to be ready for the coming of the Son of Man. It is not an encouragement to all disciples that they are assured of a place in the Kingdom of Heaven whilst all non-disciples will be excluded. As Davies & Allison say, “The wise virgins, who stand for faithful disciples, reveal that religious prudence will gain eschatological reward. The foolish virgins, who stand for unfaithful disciples, reveal that religious failure will suffer eschatological punishment.” (Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, 3:392.)

Verse 15

The master entrusts his servants with τάλαντα. A talent was a measure of weight\(^{33}\) so as a monetary unit it would refer to a certain amount of gold, silver or even copper. However, it is usually equated to about 6,000 denarii, where a denarius was a labourer’s daily wage.\(^ {34}\) As such, since the man in the parable distributes eight talents in total he is indeed a wealthy businessman.

At this point the servants are differentiated in that their master entrusts them with differing amounts κατὰ τὴν ἰδίαν δύναμιν, that is, according to the business acumen of each. However, the master does not provide his servants with any instructions as to what to do with his money.\(^ {35}\) They are not even told to increase the money. Part of the reason for this may be to distance the master from how the servants will increase their money.\(^ {36}\)

As far as the underlying significance of the talents is concerned, since the talents are distributed unequally according to ability many scholars conclude that they probably symbolize personal gifts and abilities to be used in the service of the Son of Man.\(^ {37}\) However, this may be unduly influenced by the meaning of the word ‘talent’ in English\(^ {38}\) and an over-spiritualised interpretation of verse 29.\(^ {39}\) Furthermore, if one follows this equating of talents with gifts and abilities through the parable the end result is some rather puzzling readings. For example, the first two servants double their ‘talents’; this implies that using one’s gifts and abilities will result in the gaining of more gifts and abilities.\(^ {40}\) The issue is further clouded by verse 28, where the one talent of the third

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\(^ {35}\) Morris, *Matthew*, 627.

\(^ {36}\) “Because the pie was ‘limited’ and already distributed, an increase in the share of one person automatically meant a loss for someone else. Honorable people, therefore, did not try to get more, and those who did were automatically considered thieves. Noblemen avoided such accusations of getting rich at the expense of others by having their affairs handled by slaves. Such behavior could be condoned in slaves since slaves were without honor anyway.” (Bruce J. & Rohrbaugh, Richard L. Malina, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 149.)


\(^ {38}\) After all, the modern sense of the word ‘talent’ is derived from this very parable.

\(^ {39}\) See the discussion on verse 29 below.

\(^ {40}\) Alternatively, Bruner, *Matthew*, 2:904, speaks of ‘going to work with talents’ as using one’s gifts for the help of others; and ‘gaining more talents’ as winning men and women into or back into discipleship.
servant is taken away and given to the first servant. How this could be said to apply to gifts and abilities is not at all clear.

One alternative is to view the talents as part of the details in the parable that do not have any particular referent within the sphere of application. As John B. Carpenter says, “Parables are about principles, and this parable is about faithfulness of endeavor.” He goes on to say that the money was used as an example of everything with which we have been endowed by God. As such he considers that Adolf Jülicher was correct to conclude that the parable teaches “fidelity in all that God has entrusted to us.” To identify the talents more specifically, Carpenter claims, is to run the risk of eisegesis.

However, this is not necessarily the case. If we were studying the parable in isolation then any attempt to more precisely identify the underlying referent of the talents could result in any one of a number of diverse solutions as seen in Chapter One of this thesis. But one should not study the parable in isolation; rather, we must examine it within the context in which it is located, namely, Matthew’s gospel. When this is done, one discovers that there are wider contextual clues that point to a more specific referent for the talents. Firstly, this parable is, by its extremely close association with the parable of the Ten Virgins, a parable about the ‘kingdom of heaven’ (Matt. 25:1). This, then, implicitly connects the parable with other kingdom parables, such as those found in Matthew 13. Secondly, there is an explicit connection with this earlier chapter. In Matthew 13:11-12, Jesus says to his disciples when they ask why he speaks to the crowds using parables:

‘The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.’

mixed-metaphor nicely illustrates the problem of placing too much weight on identifying too specific a referent for the talents.

42 Ibid., 168.
44 Carpenter, “Missionary Perspective”, 168. Carson agrees: “Attempts to identify the talents with spiritual gifts, the law, natural endowments, the gospel, or whatever else, lead to a narrowing of the parable with which Jesus would have been uncomfortable. Perhaps he chose the talent or mina symbolism because of its capacity for varied application.” (Carson, “Matthew”, 516).
Unlike the crowds who only heard the parables, the disciples were given the interpretations: both the parable of the Sower and the parable of the Weeds are fully explained. In other words, the penultimate verse of the parable of the Talents appears earlier in Matthew’s gospel in the context of the giving of the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven to the disciples. As a result of this, one feels that it was Matthew’s intention that the talents be identified with ‘the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven’. A third but admittedly lesser connection comes later in Matt. 13 when the kingdom of heaven is likened to a treasure and a pearl of great value (Matt. 13: 44-46); equating the kingdom of heaven with talents – large amounts of money – also fits this pattern.

Interestingly, this particular interpretation of the talents finds strong support in 1 Cor. 4:1-5, where Paul states:

So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.

The conjunction of so many of the same motifs as are found in the parable of the Talents – disciples as servants, entrusted with the secret things of God, needing to be faithful with what has been entrusted until Christ’s return to judge, then receiving praise – is quite astounding. This is not to suggest that Matthew’s parable derives from Paul’s letter, or even that Paul is alluding to Jesus’ original parable. Rather, it demonstrates that these ideas, motifs and allegorical connections were certainly present in the church at that time.

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45 As R. T. France says, “In the context of Jesus’ ministry the sums of money entrusted to the slaves are more likely to represent not natural endowments given to men in general, but the specific privileges and opportunities of the kingdom of heaven. The opportunities open to a disciple may differ in character and magnitude, but they are all to be faithfully exploited before the master returns.” (R. T. France, Matthew. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 352.) See also John Paul Heil, “Final Parables in the Eschatological Discourse in Matthew 24-25” in Warren Carter & John Paul Heil Matthew’s Parables: Audience-Oriented Perspectives in The CBQ Monograph Series 30 (Washington DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1998), 199.

46 It remains to be seen how this particular identification of the talents works itself out as the parable progresses. On the one hand, the first problem is solved: someone with some knowledge can use that knowledge to gain further knowledge. On the other hand, it is not clear how one person’s knowledge can
Verse 16-17

The response of the first two servants is immediate (ἐξέθεω): they go out and use the money entrusted to them so effectively that their amounts are doubled. How they go about this is not stated. However, as we will learn from William R. Herzog II, they were operating, not in a free-market economy such as we have had operating in the West over the last couple of centuries, but in an advanced agrarian society where there was only a limited amount of resources to go around.\(^{47}\) What this means in practice is that for one person’s wealth to be increased another person’s wealth must decrease. For the servants to double their money implies that many peasants must have been reduced to abject poverty through defaulted loans and foreclosures on land.\(^{48}\)

This background information stemming from the Social Sciences could certainly result in viewing the first two servants in a different light compared with the traditional interpretation: instead of honourable servants working diligently for their master they are evil capitalists exploiting the powerless and oppressing the poor. There is an alternative to this approach, however. It is quite possible that the increases made by the first two servants would have been seen as deliberately hyperbolic, intending to highlight just how amazingly good stewards the first two servants were.\(^{49}\) This approach is to be preferred, although the supporting argument must wait until Chapter Four when Herzog’s interpretation will be examined in detail.

Verse 18

The third servant, however, buries the money entrusted to him in the ground. This was actually rather a common thing to do. Josephus refers to ‘the gold and the silver, and the rest of that most precious furniture which the Jews had, and which the owners had be taken away and given to another. However, as we will see when we come to verse 28, the focus there is not the rewarding of the first servant but the punishing of the third.


treasured up under ground, against the uncertain fortunes of war.’ Rabbinic literature, while coming from a later period than the Gospels, makes it clear that burying money was perfectly safe: ‘Samuel said: Money can only be guarded [by placing it] in the earth’ (Baba Mesi’a 42a). A footnote in the Soncino translation says, ‘Otherwise the bailee is guilty of negligence – In ancient days there was probably no other place as safe.’

There is no ‘editorial comment’ at this point in the parable explaining the servant’s reason for burying the money. The verse begins with an adversative δὲ which serves to contrast his behaviour with that of the first two servants, but the reader will still presumably be thinking that this servant’s action, while certainly not as profitable as the actions of the first two servants, will still please the master. After all, as Bruce J. Malina says, “most people in the first century Mediterranean world worked to maintain their inherited status, not to get rich.” As such, it is possible that, as far as peasants are concerned, the actions of the third servant are to be preferred. He has not entered into the exploitative and oppressive tactics of the first two servants; he has therefore not reduced some hapless peasants to abject poverty.

However, the alternative reading in which the first two servants made ‘hyperbolic’ gains suggests that the third servant’s actions would rather be perceived as decidedly cowardly. As Joel R. Wohlgemut says,

I do not believe that listeners would 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.

Again, this approach is to be preferred.

**Verse 19**

The master returns μετὰ... πολὺν χρόνον. Some commentators see this ‘delay’ as an important part of the allegorical meaning of the parable and consequently

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51 See also Aesop’s parable ‘The Miser’ in which a miser sells all his property to buy a mass of gold that he buries in a secret place. The plan is only foiled because he keeps coming back to inspect it, thus leading someone to the location who subsequently steals the gold (quoted in Young *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation*, 92.)
54 The verbs in verse 19 are deliberately in the present tense (Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 735), thus introducing “a note of vividness” (Morris, *Matthew*, 629).
not original to Jesus but rather an addition of the early Church or of Matthew.\textsuperscript{55} However, this is not necessarily the case. Rather, the delay is necessary for the parable’s narrative flow to function properly. This can also be seen in the parables that precede the Talents: the wicked servant’s true colours become apparent only after he loses his fear of the master’s return which requires some time (Matt. 24:48); the wise and foolish virgins are only distinguished by their preparation, or lack of it, when it is shown up by the delay of the bridegroom (Matt. 25:5). Similarly here, the delay is an integral part of the parable necessary to give the servants time to increase the money entrusted to them.\textsuperscript{56} Certainly, given the legitimate presence of allegory in these parables – most notably with respect to the identity of the master / bridegroom – it is not surprising that the delay motif also came to be allegorically applied. However, one could argue that this is a secondary development, one not necessarily intended by Jesus or indeed by the gospel writers themselves.\textsuperscript{57} In fact, as Blomberg points out, in the parable of the Owner and the Thief Jesus’ return is pictured as completely unexpected, in the Master and his Servants the return is sooner than expected, and in the Ten Virgins the return is later than expected. As he says, “Jesus covers all bases; Christians must remain prepared for him to come at any time.”\textsuperscript{58}

The return of the master results in a settling of accounts. This has been interpreted by some as referring to the eschatological judgment.\textsuperscript{59} That this is Matthew’s


\textsuperscript{56} Implied by Morris, \textit{Matthew}, 628. Hagner, \textit{Matthew 14-28}, 735, tries to have it both ways.

\textsuperscript{57} As further evidence of this, N. T. Wright can apply the delay to something completely different: the return of Yahweh to his people, something that Wright claims had not occurred when the people returned from exile (Wright, \textit{NTPG}, 299-301, 320). However, Wright can only do this by removing the parables from their Gospel contexts and placing them within his hypothetical reconstruction of Jesus’ ministry. Wright was not the first to do this, of course. Both C. H. Dodd’s \textit{The Parables of the Kingdom} (Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co Ltd, 1961) and Joachim Jeremias’s \textit{The Parables of Jesus}. rev. ed. (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1963) interpreted the parables of crisis in the context of their understanding of Jesus’ ministry as referring to an imminent catastrophe that was the culmination of a long delay. As such, the delay in these parables when they are considered in isolation can be said to fit both Wright’s, Dodd’s, Jeremias’ and the later church’s application equally well. However, it is doubtful whether these allegorisations were intended by Matthew. This will also depend on one’s dating of the gospel of Matthew. A later date will result in more emphasis on the delay as important to Matthew. However, if Matthew wrote prior to AD 70 as was argued in chapter 2 in this thesis, and in the light of the ‘immediately’ in 24:29, delay is not uppermost in his mind. Rather, Matthew appears to view the imminent fall of Jerusalem as closely, even temporally, linked to the return of the Son of Man.

\textsuperscript{58} Blomberg, \textit{Matthew}, 364.

understanding can be seen in the motifs of judgment in the wider context: the gathering of the elect in 24:31; Noah’s flood (especially the one person ‘taken’ and the other ‘left’) in 24:37-41; the reward given to the faithful servant and the judgment imposed upon the wicked servant in 24:47, 51; the inclusion of the wise virgins and the exclusion of the foolish virgins in 25:10, 12; the separating of the people from all the nations of the world into two groups by the Son of Man in 25:31-46. Furthermore, as 24:30-31 makes clear, this judgment is inextricably linked to the coming of the Son of Man. As such, since the master of the parable refers to the Son of Man, the master’s return to judge his servants quite naturally invokes the return of the Son of Man to judge the nations of the earth.

Verse 20-21
The first servant presents his success very deliberately by placing the emphasis on the amounts in question: ‘Five talents you gave me; look, another five talents I have gained.’

The master responds with praise. Commentators often note that calling five talents a small amount is not very accurate, unless Jesus wanted us to understand that this man was very rich indeed. However, perhaps the emphasis is being placed on the future responsibilities entrusted to the faithful servant: even five talents will be seen as small in comparison. The overall import of the master’s words is clear: “the servant has received the warm approval of his master and… his future is one in which joy will be prominent.”

If what was said about how the servants went about increasing their money was true then the master here is implicitly endorsing the exploitation and oppression of the poor. Perhaps, then, the master’s conduct is not as blameless as the traditional interpretation of the parable has presumed. This may have a bearing on the way the character of the master relates to the Son of Man, as well as how the parable is to be

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60 Morris, Matthew, 629.
61 For example, Hendriksen, Matthew, 881. Hagner, Matthew 14-28, 735, sees it as ironic.
62 Morris, Matthew, 629.
63 As Hagner says, it “emphasizes the contrasting greatness of the divine generosity in eschatological blessing.” (Hagner, Matthew 14-28, 735).
64 Morris, Matthew, 629.
applied to the disciples. However, as has already been said, Jesus’ penchant for
hyberbole must not be ignored.

**Verse 22-23**

The second servant is treated exactly the same as the first despite only gaining an
additional two talents. In other words, there is not supposed to be any comparison
between the amounts gained – two compared with five – but with the relative increase.
Both servants had *doubled* their master’s money; as such, they are to be equally praised.
The repetition serves to build the tension, especially since we already know what the
third servant did with his talent.65 Perhaps at this point the readers of the parable may be
reconsidering his actions in the light of the master’s response to the first two. Will the
master be content just to get his money back?

**Verse 24-25**

The narrative has been building towards a climax: what will become of the third
servant? Furthermore, the rule of ‘end stress’ suggests that the main point of the parable
will be located in the material concerning the third servant.66

Davies & Allison make a good point: “Evidently the third slave expects to be
commended for his caution; and perhaps Jesus’ hearers and Matthew’s readers would
have thought him prudent.”67 However, the servant, perhaps sensing that his efforts will
not look very good when compared to the first two servants, begins by *excusing* his
cautions at the expense of the master’s character: he blames the master for his own
inactivity. He claims that the master is οὐκληροῦς… ἄνθρωπος, literally ‘a hard man’.
The word οὐκληροῦς usually means ‘hard’ with a secondary, figurative meaning of ‘harsh’
or ‘difficult’ when applied to words. However, when applied to people, especially in the
context of business dealings, the sense is ‘harsh’, ‘merciless’ or ‘cruel’68: the master reaps

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1983), 53.
translated and adapted by W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich; 2nd ed. Revised and augmented by F. W.
Gingrich and F. W. Danker (Chicago: The University Of Chicago Press, 1979), 756. See also Gundry,
what he did not sow and gathers what he did not scatter. Out of fear, then, the third servant decided to do nothing with the talent entrusted to him.

These verses raise an intriguing issue: are the third servant’s accusations concerning his master’s business dealings true or are they merely a dishonest attempt to excuse his own inactivity⁶⁹? The issue arises because in the underlying allegorical interpretation of the parable the master refers to the Son of Man and many commentators want to avoid imparting such rapacious behaviour to such a figure.⁷⁰ For example, instead of seeing the master as someone who takes from others what does not belong to him, Hendriksen notes:

This master, in assigning tasks, had mercifully figured with each man’s capacity. And as to whether he at all sowed and scattered, the answer is that he certainly did, namely, when he distributed his talents among the three servants. So now he had every right to reap and gather.⁷¹

However, this to some degree misses the point. It was the servant’s perception of the master that determined his response.⁷² Whether he truly is or is not as rapacious as the servant thought is not at issue.

Verse 26-27
The third servant is at once branded Πονηρε… καὶ ὄκνηρε, that is ‘evil and lazy’. This designation is not, however, the result of the servant’s misrepresentation of his master for the master appears to accept the third servant’s harsh assessment.⁷³ However, he draws a different conclusion from the premise. Where the third servant had concluded that inaction was best in that it preserved the principal intact, the master concludes that his (alleged) rapaciousness should have spurred the servant on all the more

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⁶⁹ See, Hendriksen, Matthew, 882, for an example of someone who takes the latter view.
⁷⁰ On the other hand, Blomberg, Matthew, 373, notes sadly: “Such a view of God proliferated among ancient religions and unfortunately recurs far too often among Christians as well.”
⁷¹ Hendriksen, Matthew, 882.
⁷² Interestingly, Hendriksen goes on to provide an excellent paraphrase of the third servant’s words: “If in doing business with the talent which you entrusted to me I had lost it, you would have demanded it of me nevertheless. That’s the kind of man you are. I was afraid, therefore. That fear was not really my fault but yours. You made it so that the only thing I could do was to dig a hole in the ground and hide the talent.” (Ibid.)
⁷³ Although it is perhaps going too far to conclude, as Bruner does, that “The Lord leaves out the servant’s description of him as ‘a hard man,’ because it is not true… But he leaves in the servant’s description of his sovereignty and incalculable omnipotence because it is true…” (Matthew, 2:909). Bruner appears to be confusing the details within the parable with its allegorical referents.
to make an increase with the money entrusted to him. At the very least he should have placed the money with the bankers and so make some gain, even if it would not bring 100% return. Consequently, what the servant did out of inward fear is perceived outwardly as laziness.\textsuperscript{74}

Again, commentators are divided as to the significance of the master’s advice. Lightfoot, for example, wants to avoid seeing this advice as supporting usury:

\begin{quote}

The lord did not deliver the talents to his servants with that intent, that they should receive the increase and profit of them by usury; but that, by merchandise and some honest way of trade, they should increase them. He only returns this answer to the slothful servant, as fitted to what he had alleged; ‘You take me for a covetous, griping, and sordid man: why did you not make use of a manner of gain agreeable to these qualities, namely, interest or usury (since you would not apply yourself to any honest traffic), that you might have returned me some increase of my money, rather than nothing at all?’ So that our Lord, in these words, doth not so much approve of usury, as upbraid the folly and sloth of his servant.\textsuperscript{75}
\end{quote}

Against this, Hendriksen concludes that Jesus “is not opposed to responsible capitalism. Profit promotes employment and makes possible helping those in need, etc.”\textsuperscript{76} In this, Lightfoot is closer to the point of the text: the third servant did not act in an appropriate way given what he thought of the master. If he truly believed the master to be a hard man, then he should have known that he would not be pleased merely to receive back the original amount of money. The method of increase is irrelevant and should not be seen as indirect support for Western capitalism.

\textbf{Verse 28}

The punishment of the third servant comes in two stages. Firstly, the talent entrusted to the third servant is taken away from him and given to the first servant. Was this intended as a bonus for good service? Probably not, since the second servant was

\begin{footnotes}
\p{74} Bruner, \textit{Matthew}, 2:910; “This parable criticizes the idea of the innocence of laziness”; and Carpenter “Economic Spirituality”, 170: “This parable places laziness firmly on the biblical sin list.”
\p{75} John Lightfoot, \textit{A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica: Matthew - 1 Corinthians} Vol. 2 (Matthew - Mark). (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1859), 324. See also Carson, “Matthew”, 517: “It is wrong to assume that Jesus is here either supporting or setting aside the OT law [prohibiting charging interest]. The question does not arise, for Jesus’ parables are so flexible that he sometimes uses examples of evil to make a point about good (e.g., Luke 16:1-9; 18:1-8).”
\p{76} Hendriksen, \textit{Matthew}, 883. See also Bruner, \textit{Matthew}, 2:905: “Entrepreneurial business comes out well in the Parable of Talents.”
\end{footnotes}
praised in exactly the same manner as the first servant yet he does not receive any extra bonus. Rather, what is in focus is not the rewarding of the first servant but rather the *punishing* of the third servant. He has been found wanting with respect to stewardship so what has been entrusted to him must be taken away. It is given to the first servant presumably because he has proven himself to be a trustworthy steward.

### Verse 29

The master’s action could be seen to be somewhat unjust. As Joel R. Wohlgemut says about verse 29, “this statement appears not to summarise the story, but rather to deal with discomfort over the fact that, in the end, the richest servant gets even richer. The invocation of such a proverb may have been an attempt to mitigate the sense of injustice.”

Some commentators have noted that it does not perfectly fit this context. For example, Davies & Allison note, “the wicked slave is deprived not because he had little but because he did not multiply what he had.”

How the proverb applies to the parable depends on one’s interpretation of the talents. It is doubtful that the talents could only be meant literally to refer to one’s stewardship of money. Consequently, verse 29 was probably also not intended literally, that is, to refer merely to material possessions or money being taken from the poor and given to the rich.

Some have therefore argued for a spiritualised understanding of the talents and hence of the proverb. It is true that one can apply this principle in a metaphorical sense. After all, the saying can be applied to talents in the sense of gifts and abilities such as, for example, the ability to play a musical instrument. If one practices one’s musical ability will increase; if one refrains from practice then whatever musical ability one has will

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78 Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, 3:410. Similarly, Harrington notes: “While loosely connected with the parable, the saying does not exhaust its main point, which is responsible activity in the face of the Son of Man’s coming.” (Harrington, *Matthew*, 353). However, this is not sufficient evidence to argue that Jesus did not use the proverb in the context of thisparable, as many of the scholars examined in Chapter One of this thesis contend. Rather, as Witherington notes, “Wisdom sayings or proverbs are frequently used to bring about the final denouement in a pericope, or to conclude a discussion or speech.” (Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 157.)
79 *Contra* Carpenter who uses this verse to argue that poverty is the realised eschatological judgment of God on wicked servanthood (Carpenter, “Economic Spirituality”, 168, 171, 174.)
80 As Bruner, *Matthew*, 2:910, puts it: “‘Use it or lose it.’ Unused muscles atrophy; unused talents damn; unfruitful trees are chopped down and thrown into fire…”
atrophy. It is not a great leap from this to a spiritual interpretation: Morris thus refers to verse 29 as a principle or law of the spiritual life.\textsuperscript{81} As a result, this saying is used to reinforce the underlying meaning of the talents as referring to personal gifts and abilities.

But this approach misses the direct context of the verse. Verse 29 is used to explain the taking away of the talent from the third servant and the giving of it to the first. It is \textit{not} being used to explain how the first two servants doubled their talents. Consequently, we need to see the verse as applying in the context of the eschatological judgment: one’s eschatological reward will merely heighten or make complete that which one has already experienced in part during this life.\textsuperscript{82} In other words, the partial experience of the Kingdom that we as Christians experience now will be greatly surpassed once the Kingdom comes in full. But for those who will miss out on an eternal reward, for whatever reason, and are thrown into the outer darkness and therefore away from the presence of God, will lose even that partial experience of God that even non-Christians have.\textsuperscript{83}

\textbf{Verse 30}

The second stage of the now useless (\textit{άδικος} servant’s punishment is banishment into ‘the outer darkness where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.’ This phrase has already appeared previously in Matthew’s gospel. In 8:12 it is used to refer to those who miss out on attending the eschatological banquet. In 13:42 it is used in the explanation of the parable of the Weeds to refer to the fate of ‘the sons of the evil one’ who are weeded out of the kingdom by the angels of the Son of Man at the end of the age. In 13:50 it is used in the explanation of the parable of the Net to refer to the fate of the wicked after they have been separated from the righteous by angels at the end of

\textsuperscript{81} Morris, \textit{Matthew}, 632: “Anyone who has a talent (using the word in the modern sense) of any kind and fails to use it, by that very fact forfeits it. By contrast, anyone who has a talent and uses it to the full finds that the talent develops and grows. This is a law of the spiritual life, and we neglect it at our peril.”

\textsuperscript{82} Gundry tries to have it both ways: “Having and not having refer to good works and lack of good works; having an abundance and suffering the loss of the little that one has refer to reward and punishment.” (Gundry, \textit{Matthew}, 510.)

\textsuperscript{83} This is therefore a forward-directed version of C. S. Lewis’ backward-directed idea that one’s eternal fate retrospectively determines one’s perspective towards existence on earth. In \textit{The Great Divorce}, the heavenly George MacDonald, speaking in the foothills of Heaven, says, “Not only this valley but all their earthly past will have been Heaven to those who are saved. Not only the twilight in that town, but all their life on earth too, will then be seen by the damned to have been Hell.” (C. S. Lewis, \textit{The Great Divorce} (London: HarperCollinsReligious, 1946), 62.)
the age. Since these other uses of the phrase come in the explanation of parables rather than the imagery internal to parables its use here further points to the underlying meaning of the parable as a whole. The tears are “those of inconsolable, never-ending wretchedness, and utter, everlasting hopelessness.” The gnashing of teeth “denotes excruciating pain and frenzied anger.” As Hagner notes, this description stands in sharp contrast to the words of blessing spoken to the first two servants.

**Interpretation**

When the parable is allowed to speak within the context that Matthew has located it the interpretation of the parable is clear. The passage builds on the previous parables to expand what it means to be prepared for the coming of the Son of Man at an unknown time. When the Son of Man returns to usher in the final judgment Christians will be called to account for their stewardship of what has been entrusted to them for that interim period. Just as a rapacious master wants a return on his investment so the Son of Man wants a return from what he has entrusted to his disciples. Just as that master will reward those servants who make increase so the Son of Man will reward those disciples who take what has been entrusted to them and make increase. Just as the master punishes a servant who fails to use what has been given to him so the Son of Man will punish disciples who fail to make increase.

So much is incontrovertible. The central problem comes from trying to apply the parable more specifically. What has been entrusted to disciples? What does ‘making

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85 Ibid.
87 As Blomberg puts it, “(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.” (Blomberg, *Parables*, 214.) These could also be translated into Sider’s ‘proportional analogies’ as follows: (1) Son of Man : Disciples = Master : Servants with respect to stewardship during absence; (2) Son of Man : Gifts = Master : Talents with respect to entrusting for the purpose of making increase; (3) Faithful Disciples : Gifts = Faithful Servants : Talents with respect to making increase with what has been entrusted; (4) Son of Man : Faithful Disciples = Master : Faithful Servants with respect to reward for making increase with what has been entrusted; (5) Unfaithful Disciples : Gifts = Wicked Servant : Talent with respect to failing to make increase with what has been entrusted; (6) Son of Man : Unfaithful Disciples = Master : Wicked Servant with respect to punishment for failing to make increase with what has been entrusted.
increase’ involve? Will some disciples be treated as non-Christians as far as their eternal fate is concerned on the basis of their lack of works?

It is so hard to get away from the equating of ‘talents’ with gifts and abilities because of the meaning of the word ‘talent’ in English. But that equation was not in Matthew’s mind. A talent for him was a weight measurement used to apportion out amounts of money. As a result, we need to ask how Matthew would have interpreted the talents, and as was argued above, the wider context would suggest that the talents, like the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price, stands for the kingdom of heaven in the sense of the fuller understanding given to the disciples as opposed to the crowds who merely heard the parables. This knowledge has been given to the disciples (Matt. 13:11), and the parable of the Talents teaches that they will be judged according to what they do with that knowledge: to whom much is given, much is expected.88

This interpretation presents quite a challenge to the church of today especially the church of the developed West. We have been entrusted with the gospel, gifts of the Spirit, a Bible in a language we understand, the freedom to worship God publicly, as well as easy access to formal Biblical education of a very high standard. If so much has been entrusted to us, what is expected of us so that we double its value for the sake of the kingdom? We need to ask ourselves: ‘Are we bearing fruit to the equal of what we’ve been given?’

88 As Luke 12:47-48, coming at the end of Luke’s account of Jesus’ teaching on watchfulness, says: “That servant who knows his master’s will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.”
CHAPTER 4

A CRITIQUE OF HERZOG AND WRIGHT

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter two very different interpretations of the parable of the Talents will be examined further. However, instead of rehashing those interpretations in any detail\(^1\), this chapter will examine the presuppositions and argumentation that underpin them. William R. Herzog II’s view of the Talents is entirely non-eschatological; in fact, Herzog’s interpretation is explicitly non-theological since he has chosen to approach the parables from a social-scientific background. In contrast, N. T. Wright’s interpretation is thoroughly eschatological but it is a form of realised eschatology in that the future events predicted by Jesus were to occur during the 1\(^{st}\) century AD. These two interpretations are not just startlingly different from each other but they are both quite different from the traditional understanding as well. It is hoped that the following critique will not just be negative but that positive gains will be elicited as far as the interpretation of the parable of the Talents is concerned.

WILLIAM R. HERZOG II

The parable of the Talents, according to Herzog, was intended by Jesus to generate discussion amongst his peasant audience as to the plight of the retainer who, instead of oppressing the peasants to generate further wealth for his master, in word and deed shows the oppressive system for what it is and is punished as a result. The many steps taken to get to this end-point of interpretation need to be examined in detail.

Background

Herzog is not the first biblical scholar to approach the parables from the perspective of the social-sciences. In their *Social-Science Commentary On The Synoptic*...
The evangelists neither begin with what we know about the world nor do they make any attempt to explain their ancient world in terms we might understand… They presume we are first-century, eastern Mediterraneans and share their social system. They assume we understand the intricacies of honor and shame, that we are fully aware of what it means to live a preindustrial city and/or village life, that we know how folk healers operate, that we believe in limited good assuaged by patrons and brokers, and the like. This is certainly a valid point. Translators of the Bible have certainly recognised the existence of ‘implicit information’. However, it is always a more difficult task to identify this implicit information.

Malina & Rohrbaugh give the parable of the Talents the title “Story Illustrating A Peasant Truism: The Rich Get Richer”, and, like Herzog, they condemn the actions of the first two servants whilst praising the efforts of the third:

From the peasant point of view, therefore, it was the third slave who acted honorably, especially since he refused to participate in the rapacious schemes of the king. Moreover, the harsh condemnation he received at the hands of the greedy king, as well as the reward to the servants who cooperated, is just what peasants had learned to expect. The rich could be counted upon to play true to form – they take care of their own.

In a later article, Rohrbaugh expands the discussion by citing a variant of the parable quoted by Eusebius that apparently comes from the Gospel of the Nazoreans, a non-extant work. In this version, the three slaves all behave differently. The first squanders his master’s money on prostitutes and flute-girls; the second increases his amount; the third hides his talent in the ground. When it comes to the outcomes, Rohrbaugh maintains that the parable is organized chiastically:

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2 Ibid., 10.
5 Ibid., 150.
A. squandering servant  
B. multiplying servant  
C. hiding servant  
C’. acceptance  
B’. rebuke  
A’. imprisonment

In other words, the servant who hides the money is rewarded whilst the servant who increased the money is rebuked. This Rohrbaugh regards as definitive evidence for the honourable nature of the third servant’s activity in the eyes of some.\(^7\) As such, he concludes:

> We theologize about responsible stewardship of the gifts of grace, by which we mean, of course, a profitable (capitalistic) investment before the return of the Master. Yet Jesus’ peasant hearers would almost certainly have assumed it was a warning to the rich about their exploitation of the weak.\(^8\)

Much of this earlier work Herzog cites as contributing to the perspectives informing parts of his book.\(^9\)

**The Hypothesis**

Herzog begins his examination of the parables by asking “What if the parables of Jesus were neither theological nor moral stories but political and economic ones? What if the concern of the parables was not the reign of God but the reigning systems of oppression that dominated Palestine in the time of Jesus?”\(^10\) He therefore refers to his study as an “experiment in reading the parables”\(^11\). In other words, he is acknowledging

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\(^{7}\) Ibid., 37-38.  \(^{8}\) Ibid., 38.  
\(^{9}\) William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), x (where Herzog makes a general acknowledgement), 152 (where Herzog uncritically accepts Rohrbaugh’s interpretation of Eusebius). There are other scholars who follow this interpretive approach: Robert T. Fortna, “Reading Jesus’ Parable of the Talents Through Underclass Eyes” *Foundations & Facets Forum* 8,3-4 (1992), 211-228, who concludes that the Talents “would have been a declaration – as in many of Jesus’ authentic sayings – of the liberating and political empowerment afforded by the Reign of God to those who previously believed themselves powerless.” (Fortna, 226); and Megan McKenna *Parables: The Arrows of God* (Mary Knoll: Orbis, 1994) which I was unfortunately unable to locate during the research for this thesis. There are most assuredly others.  
\(^{10}\) Ibid., 7.  
\(^{11}\) Ibid.
the hypothetical nature of his work. As such, it is not surprising that he concludes his book by saying:

It needs to be clear that this approach to the parables neither exhausts their meaning nor offers a new proposal about their ‘original’ meaning as parables of Jesus. It would be more accurate to say that this experiment indicates what kind of readings result from the assumptions made and the information used in this inquiry. It is hoped that these interpretations are interesting enough to provoke the kind of fruitful discussion that will measure these readings’ usefulness and limitations.\(^\text{12}\)

It is, therefore, the purpose of this part of the chapter to test Herzog’s hypothesis.

**The Parables And The Gospels**

The first consequence of Herzog’s hypothesis is that the parables must be removed from their Gospel contexts. This is because, in the Gospels, the parables are stories with entirely theological and ethical meanings.\(^\text{13}\)

As they stand in their present narrative settings, the parables serve the theological and ethical concerns of the evangelists. However, if the purpose they served in Jesus’ ministry was quite different from the purposes of the evangelists, then they have to be analyzed with a concern for making that distinction clear. Consequently, the present study utilizes the tools growing out of the historical-critical method, including form criticism and redaction criticism. Conversely, this approach devotes little attention to the narrative contexts of the parables and uses literary-critical approaches most sparingly.\(^\text{14}\)

This, then, is essentially an *a priori* assumption of Herzog’s methodology.

The second consequence of Herzog’s hypothesis is that the presence of allegory in the parables is the responsibility of the Gospel writers not Jesus:

Before integrating the parables into their narratives, the Gospel writers had selectively invested them with theological and ethical meanings consistent with their larger themes and concerns. They were not interested in allegorizing the parables [fully] and were

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 259-60. However, one wishes that those who have read and highly recommended Herzog’s book keep this point in mind. For example, Walter Wink, the Professor of Biblical Interpretation at the Auburn Theological Seminary in New York writes on the back of Herzog’s book: “This book revolutionizes the study of Jesus’ parables. The classics in the field are rendered instantly obsolete. Herzog has succeeded in the impossible: on a subject seemingly exhausted, he has introduced an entirely new approach that solves one anomaly in the parables after another. His results have become self-validating, as parables that have previously resisted intelligibility suddenly become transparent.”

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 10.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 3-4.
therefore inconsistent. One detail or character might be invested heavily with theological meaning (the man who went out to hire laborers becomes a God figure) while other details were ignored (the bargaining with the laborers). This selective investment of the details of these parables may be called ‘theologory,’ a kind of allegory in the making but incomplete, inconsistent, and highly selective.”

This is, perhaps, the most intriguing factor in Herzog’s work. Unlike many scholars in the history of parable interpretation who explicitly rejected the presence of allegory but still implicitly interpreted them using allegorical referents, Herzog is truly non-allegorical. If the parables describe wealthy exploiters of the peasants then the parables must be about the exploitation of the peasants by the wealthy.

**Jesus and Paulo Freire**

Herzog raises an important issue with respect to the interpretation of Jesus’ parables when he notes that any study of Jesus’ parables will be predicated on some larger understanding of what Jesus’ public work was all about. However, he notes that most models used are more often than not contemporary ones, that is, contemporary to the interpreter. Being aware of this danger, Herzog himself has made recourse to his own contemporary model: the modern educator Paulo Freire:

This study of Jesus’ parables follows that precedent by using the work of a modern educator, Paulo Freire, as a paradigm for understanding Jesus of Nazareth. In particular, this study compares both the larger social role each one has played as pedagogue of the oppressed and their use of analogous communication tools, the codification and the parable. Freire used codifications as tactics in his larger educational strategy, and in similar fashion, Jesus used parables for tactical purposes related to the strategy of his larger public activity.

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15 Ibid., 11-12.
16 Ibid., 14.
17 Ibid., 16.
After noting the somewhat obvious differences between the two figures\(^{18}\), Herzog details the basis for his comparison. Both worked with poor and oppressed peoples and both worked with peasants; both lived in what sociologists call advanced agrarian societies; both ministered in societies affected by colonial exploitation that continued to shape the life of its inhabitants.\(^{19}\) Most importantly,

Both figures can be identified as teachers with similar students. They work with the illiterate, the marginalized, and the poor, with peasants and villagers in the countryside… Taking a cue from Freire, one may propose that Jesus’ parables dealt with issues of interest to his ‘students.’ Their social scenes are therefore important for what they tell us of the world in which the peasants and rural underclass lived.\(^{20}\)

Finally, both men were considered politically subversive, and both suffered political consequences because of their work. Freire was imprisoned and then exiled by a fascist military regime; Jesus was tortured and crucified by the Roman Empire.

On the basis of this comparison between Freire and Jesus, Herzog concludes that the parables of Jesus “encode generative themes and objectify conditions of oppression so that they can be examined… They re-present a familiar or typified scene for the purpose of generating conversations about it and stimulating the kinds of reflection that exposes contradictions in popularly held beliefs or traditional thinking.”\(^{21}\) The parables were meant to be discussion-starters, whose purpose was to raise questions and pose dilemmas for their hearers. They were open-ended stories that invited their hearers to enter into conversation for the purposes of exploring the social scenes they presented and connecting the hearers to the realities of their lives and the larger systemic realities in which they were caught.\(^{22}\)

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\(^{18}\) “At the outset, it needs to be clear that this study does not depict Jesus of Nazareth as a first-century version of Paulo Freire. Jesus did not anticipate Freire’s ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’ by launching a literacy campaign in Galilee and Judaea during the early decades of the common era.” (Ibid.) Similarly, whilst both were educators, Jesus was a first-century rabbi and Freire is a twentieth-century university professor; nor are their social and geographical settings the same. Their cultural influences and ideological commitments are as distinct as their historical settings: Freire’s influences range from Karl Marx to Sigmund Freud, from existentialism to humanistic psychology, from structuralism to liberation theology; Jesus’ central influence was the Torah (Ibid., 17.)

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 25.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 26.

\(^{21}\) Ibid.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 259.
The Social-Sciences

The impetus for Herzog’s social-sciences approach came from his inability to understand the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16) using traditional methods and presuppositions. As he says, “The ending of the parable had remained puzzling in spite of many efforts to explain it. It did not seem either just or equitable that each worker received a denarius.”

Furthermore, Herzog could find nothing definitive about the value of a denarius in an attempt to clarify whether the landowner was being generous. This led to research concerning day laborers and advanced agrarian societies. In the end, “the final strand in the cable connecting the parabolic part to the theological whole snapped.”

…why would Jesus formulate his parables in such a way that their characters and events undercut the theology usually assigned to them? How could a scene in which a rich landowner exploits day laborers express the generosity of God and the unfathomable nature of God’s grace?

This, then, was the inspiration for Herzog to examine the parables as purely political and economic rather than theological and ethical.

It is at this point that Herzog provides modern parable scholarship with important background information concerning the social setting of first-century Palestine. Of especial interest to his interpretation of the Talents is his discussion of ‘retainers’. These were men who served the ruler and the ruling class; they were the functionaries who implemented the exploitative and oppressive policies of the elites. Their most important function was to identify the surplus produced by the peasants, artisans, and other villagers and to transfer it to the control of the ruler. As such, they were the agents of redistribution in the economy. But they had another important function: because they served as intermediaries between the elite and the peasants they also shielded the elite from violence and resentment, and would take the blame if a serious problem arose.

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23 Ibid., 49.
24 Later, in his detailed examination of the Workers in the Vineyard, Herzog says that one denarius a day is not as generous as previously thought. Most day labourers could barely support themselves on such a wage let alone a family. True, half a denarius would be needed for basic survival for one person per day, but because day labourers worked so infrequently one denarius would not go very far (Ibid., 89-90).
25 Ibid., 50.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 53-73.
Their salaries were usually low but they supplemented this through ‘honest graft’.28 “Taken together, the ruler, the ruling class, and some of their retainers controlled the great majority of wealth in advanced agrarian societies. They constituted the top tier; below them, everyone else lived in subsistence poverty or worse.”29

Herzog also draws attention to the way these retainers would increase the wealth of their masters. A landowner could demand rent from the peasants working his land in cash rather than a proportion of the produce. If they were unable to repay the loan this resulted in foreclosure and their removal from the land. This land would then be added to the holdings of the elite who provided the loan.30 Of course, it would be the retainers who would actually mediate all this. The retainers would also bargain with merchants for the rights to transport the landowner’s produce. Again, there were ways they could take their own cut, as well as ensuring profits for their master.31

Herzog’s Conclusion

Given all of this preliminary material, Herzog then goes on to discuss in detail nine carefully selected parables, one of which is the parable of the Talents. One thing should be added at this point. Herzog arranges these nine parables into two groups. In the first we find parables that unmask the world of oppression, that pose the problems of exploitation suffered by the peasants, that “codify various aspects of the oppressive social systems that dominated the rural populace of Palestine.”32 In the second, the parables “offer glimpses into another reality in which the strictures of limit situations lead to courses of action that surprise and open up new possibilities.”33 The parable of the Talents comes in the first group.

28 Ibid., 61.
29 Ibid., 63.
30 Ibid., 72.
31 Ibid., 249-251.
32 Ibid., 77.
33 Ibid., 171.
THE CRITIQUE OF WILLIAM R. HERZOG II

The Hypothesis

The most striking thing about Herzog’s interpretation of the parables is their thoroughly non-allegorical nature. For example, the Workers in the Vineyard codifies the exploitation of day-labourers¹; the Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:1-9) codifies the spiral of violence by describing a local peasant revolt (and its futility) on a great estate²; the Unforgiving Servant (Matt. 18:23-35) demonstrates 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 rule³. In other words, since the characters in Jesus’ parables are wealthy exploiters of the lower classes, Jesus must be talking about the exploitation of the lower classes. This complete rejection of allegory follows directly from Herzog’s hypothesis that the parables are political and economic rather than theological and ethical. However, a hypothesis must be tested and judged by the results.

Despite strident argumentation against the validity of allegory in the past, such a narrow position is no longer tenable. Furthermore, there are a number of studies coming out that compare Jesus’ parables with those found in rabbinic literature.⁴ As Craig L. Blomberg says,

> Arguing that social and economic issues should (and could) be divorced from theological interpretations proves highly anachronistic. Given the unvarying use of masters to stand for God in hundreds of rabbinic parables, it is almost inconceivable that Jesus should have intended anything otherwise without some far clearer indication in one of his stories somewhere.⁵

Many of these rabbinic parables involve a king and his subjects, or a master and his servants, and they also make it clear that these characters are supposed to represent God and the people of Israel. In the same way, when Jesus uses a king and his subjects, or a

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¹ Ibid., 95.
² Ibid., 113.
³ Ibid., 148.
master and his servants, he is not merely making a political or economic statement; he is using stock characters with familiar allegorical meanings.\(^6\)

Perhaps it is simply the weight of tradition and familiarity, but it is hard to get away from how appropriately the parables fit the allegories which Herzog claims have been imposed on them by the Gospel writers. It is nearly impossible to read the parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard without making the various allegorical references: the owner as God, the vineyard as Israel, the tenants as Israel’s religious leaders, the servants as the prophets, and the son as Jesus. These references appear to be so natural. Herzog’s interpretation, that the parable serves to codify the futility of peasant revolts, comes across as somewhat banal.

We could also refer back to the parables found in the Old Testament.\(^7\) Whilst some of these may have been political or economic in nature\(^8\), most were theological or ethical. What is certainly true is that these parables, even the political and economic ones, are allegorical in nature. Take, for example, the Poor Man’s Only Lamb (2 Samuel 12:1-4). Following Herzog’s analysis, we could posit that this parable had prior existence as a purely economic parable – consequently non-allegorical in nature – which detailed the way in which the wealthy exploit the poor, and that Nathan “selectively invested [it] with theological and ethical meanings consistent with [his] larger themes and concerns”\(^9\) which was, of course, David’s adulterous relationship with Bathsheba. However, this reconstruction is patently absurd. As such, we should be somewhat reluctant to hypothesise that Jesus eschewed allegory entirely.

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\(^8\) Perhaps Jotham’s mashal of the Trees would be an example of a political parable.

\(^9\) Herzog, 11.
**Jesus and Paulo Freire**

There are reasons for not wanting to push the comparison between Jesus and Paulo Freire as far as Herzog pushes it. Firstly, if Jesus’ parables were supposed to stimulate discussion about how to respond to the exploitation and oppression that they allegedly codified then it is surprising that there is not a hint anywhere in the early Christian tradition that this was how they were originally used.\(^{10}\) Herzog has perhaps anticipated this particular criticism when he says that the parables were used to invite conversation and to lure their hearers into the process of decoding and problematizing their world. But there are no records of the conversations that they generated. No one was around to write a verbatim account.\(^{11}\)

But, as Blomberg notes, this is wholly inadequate:

> The Gospel tradition is replete with summary statements about the kinds of things Jesus and his followers talked about, and such summaries could easily have indicated if they had tried to resolve problems codified in the parables in the way Herzog postulates.\(^{12}\)

This lack of support for Herzog’s hypothesis is problematic.\(^{13}\)

Secondly, Herzog has been rather selective in terms of the parables he has chosen to analyse in his book. The reason he gives for this is lack of space\(^ {14}\); however, as some reviewers of his book have noted,

> Herzog has chosen the parables which reflect social and economic issues; one could have studied a very different group of parables and been hard pressed to discover a Jesus who could be described as ‘the parabler, pedagogue of the oppressed and prophetic social critic’… Herzog has ignored also the fact that there are other aspects of the teaching of Jesus which will not easily fit into the framework of his exposition: parts of the Sermon on the Mount, for example read like subversion of the subversives!\(^ {15}\)

If Herzog’s hypothesis is to stand successfully, it should explain more about Jesus’ teaching than it actually does.\(^ {16}\)

\(^{10}\) Blomberg, “Subversive Speech”, 122.

\(^{11}\) Herzog, *Subversive Speech*, 261.

\(^{12}\) Blomberg, “Subversive Speech”, 130, n53.

\(^{13}\) This is, of course, an argument from silence. However, it is a pretty damning silence!

\(^{14}\) Herzog, *Subversive Speech*, 4: “It seemed preferable to study nine parables in some detail than to survey a greater number of parables in superficial fashion.”


\(^{16}\) Interestingly, in Herzog’s most recent book, *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God: A Ministry of Liberation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), Paulo Freire barely appears. Instead, Herzog’s ‘larger understanding of Jesus’ is that he was a prophet who argued against the Jerusalem elites’
Herzog’s Assumed Audience

Herzog assumes that Jesus’ audience were peasants. This follows directly from his hypothesis that Jesus’ ministry can be likened to the work of Paulo Freire. However, this covers over a potential weakness in Herzog’s methodology. The issue can be more clearly seen in Richard L Rohrbaugh’s interpretation of the Talents. Reacting to traditional interpreters of the parables who remove them from their Gospel contexts and supply them with a new context and therefore a new audience, Rohrbaugh argues

since estimating the audience from the supposed thrust of the parable is both risky and premature, we might prefer at the outset to envision a much more general audience that could have included not only opponents, but also disciples of Jesus, as well as a wider group of unspecified hearers. Given the fact that upwards of ninety percent of agrarian populations were rural farmers, it may have even included Galilean peasants.17

However, he then goes on to posit that this group was the intended audience for Jesus’ parables.

This approach falls foul of John W. Sider’s general critique of a form-critical approach to the parables:

Scholars who theorize about Jesus’ actual audience try to match what they take to be the meaning of a parable with the most likely occasion for it in ‘the recorded experience of Jesus’ (Cadoux, 55). But we can gain little new knowledge about Jesus’ meaning in a parable from this sort of theory about its original hearers, because it is based on someone’s prior ideas about the meaning of the parable…18

One feels that Herzog should be aware of this problem since he himself says, “Any study of Jesus’ parables will be predicated on some larger understanding of what Jesus’ public work was all about.”19 In other words, the context in which one places the parables

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17 Rohrbaugh, “Text of Terror”, 33.
19 Herzog, Subversive Speech, 14.
affects one’s interpretation of the parables. Yet, one could argue that Herzog’s interpretation of the parables has affected the context in which he places them.

The Parables And The Gospels

Finally, Herzog’s interpretation does not do justice to the contexts given to the parables by the evangelists, implying that, if Herzog is right, the evangelists (and presumably the early church before them) misunderstood the parables. This is especially true of the parable of the Talents since both Matthew and Luke have (independently?) used the parable in a specifically eschatological context.

Two factors lend weight to the veracity of the Gospel contexts:

(1) After examining all the comparisons in the Old Testament, whether these appear as a phrase (simile), reduced to a word (metaphor), or expanded into a story (parable), Claus Westermann concludes:

The occurrence and use of the comparisons in the OT contradicts the view that all comparisons have an illustrative function, that they can therefore be described as ‘images’. Rather, the comparisons receive their function from their particular contexts; this function is derived from the context.20

Furthermore, Westermann notes that these comparisons only appear in dialogical texts. In other words, the context from which the function of the comparison is derived is a dialogue. Therefore, “The relation in which the comparison is involved is not one of image and subject matter, rather, in the comparison an event from one sphere is juxtaposed with an event from another (with the image serving the subject matter).”21 In other words, what the parables are likened to is ‘built-in’ from the start. If Jesus’ parables are explicitly likened to ‘the Kingdom of God’ then this is quite likely original.22

(2) Witherington notes that “parables often came with interpretations or explanations in early Judaism; they were not normally self-contained and self-

20 Claus Westermann, The Parables of Jesus: In the Light of the Old Testament (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 150.
21 Ibid., 150-1.
22 See also Birger Gerhardsson, “If We Do Not Cut the Parables Out of Their Frames” New Testament Studies 37 (1991), 324-5: “When it is said in the gospels that ‘the kingdom of God / Heaven is like’ something, this is mostly a very loose indication; in my opinion it hardly tells us more than that the mashal will elucidate something about God and us, something in the religious domain. That is a very imprecise piece of information but it is nevertheless a fundamental one: we do not deal with wild texts, loose narratives without intended messages.” (italics original)
explanatory… [O]ne should not automatically assume that an explanation of a parable in the Synoptics is necessarily a product of later Christian reflection on Jesus’ parables…”^{23}

Taken together, and therefore approaching the parables of Jesus from opposite directions, this suggests that the Gospel contexts should not be too quickly disregarded. However, it seems that not many of the scholars who follow the social-science approach to the parables consider the possibility that the Gospels accurately record the contexts in which the parables were originally spoken by Jesus.^{24} Yet if one brings the wealth of background information provided by the social sciences to the interpretation of the parables within the contexts supplied by the Gospels then many of the important insights made by Herzog and others can still be seen to apply.

For example, most of the characters in the parable of the Talents may well be exploiting the peasants. However, without commending or condemning how they went about the task, the ‘faithful’ stewards can still function as examples for Jesus’ disciples to follow in that they were faithful in doing their allotted task.^{25} Jesus often used unlikely characters in his parables to make the point of the parable drive home all the harder. Jesus’ choice of a Samaritan in the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) is culturally unexpected and significantly widens his teaching about one’s neighbourly responsibilities. The two characters in the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14) would have been perceived by Jesus’ audience to be at opposite extremes on the religious scale of piety such that the conclusion is all the more striking. The Dishonest Steward (Luke 16:1-9) can also function as a model for disciples, despite his dishonesty, in that he used his position to secure his future.

Alternatively, Joel R. Wohlgemut suggests that the enormous gains made by the first two servants were intentionally hyperbolic:

I insist that the amazing gains reported on the entrusted sums in the parable are exactly that, amazing. The brevity with which their acquisition is described is not designed to provoke investigation, but rather amazement. Against Herzog, I do not believe that

^{23} Witherington, *Jesus The Sage*, 160.
^{25} As Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 508, puts it: “the portrait has to do with the forcefulness of Jesus’ demand for good works, not with the ethics of taking what belongs to others.”
listeners would 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.\textsuperscript{26}

However, this still leaves the issue of the ‘rapacious’ master referring to God. Blomberg suggests one approach: “the picture of God as both a generous rewarder and a stern judge is not one that sits well with many modern commentators, but it is a thoroughly biblical portrait.”\textsuperscript{27} More can be said, however. In his discussion of the Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1-8) Herzog mentions but essentially dismisses a potentially helpful analysis, \textit{argumentum a minori ad maius}\textsuperscript{28}: Because he reads the judge as a God figure, Luke appears to use the parable to argue from the lesser to the greater: if the judge responds to the widow, how much more will God respond to the cries and petitions of the saints.\textsuperscript{29}

Yet this could be how we are supposed to approach the master of the Talents as well: God desires us to use that which he has entrusted us just as a rapacious master wants his servants to increase the money entrusted to them by whatever means possible. As Richard T. France puts it, “As in other parables (notably Luke 11:5-8; 18:2-5), where an unattractive human trait is used to illustrate the character of God, we need not assume a simple allegorical equivalence. The message is not that God is a ‘rapacious capitalist’, but that he is not satisfied with inaction.”\textsuperscript{30}

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\item[27] Blomberg, \textit{Parables}, 216.
\item[28] This is the rabbinic principle ‘from the lesser to the greater’ (\textit{qal wahomer}) or, as Bailey calls it ‘from the light to the heavy’ (Bailey, \textit{Through Peasant Eyes}, 136-7). This hermeneutical principle can also be seen at work in Matt. 6:26; 7:9-11 for example.
\item[29] Herzog, 216.
\item[30] Richard T. France, “On Being Ready (Matthew 25:1-46)” \textit{in The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables} (ed. Richard N. Longenecker, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 185-6, quoting briefly from F. W. Beare \textit{The Gospel According to Matthew} (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 486. There is a danger in going too far in equating the master with God. John B. Carpenter, for example, argues on the basis of v29 that the parable teaches us that poverty is the realised eschatological judgment of God upon wicked servanthood. As such, he states: “Not only can great disparities between affluence and want be acceptable to God; they can be, if based on the fruit of one’s stewardship, the work of God. The wicked, lazy servant’s poverty after he had been judged was in contrast to the great wealth of the first, faithful, and good servant. And that was the product of the master’s (i.e., God’s) judgment based on the merits of the servant’s development.” (John B. Carpenter, “The Parable of the Talents in Missionary Perspective: A Call for an Economic Spirituality” \textit{Missiology} 25 (1997), 171.)
\end{enumerate}
Specific Criticism of Herzog’s Interpretation of the Talents

With respect to Herzog’s interpretation of the Talents, a number of literary arguments can be raised against Herzog’s reading. Firstly, if the hero of the parable is the third servant, why does the parable not end with his declaration, rather than the master’s retort? “As the parable stands, it is only with great difficulty that we side with the servant in the face of the master’s criticism.”31 Secondly, if the servant was making a stand, why are his actions said to be the result of his fear of the master? “If he indeed caches the money out of ‘fear’, this would suggest that his action is something other than a heroic defiance of the oppressive system.”32 Herzog completely avoids any discussion of this component of the parable.

Barbara Reid makes an intriguing point about the audience of the parable:

[T]o follow [Herzog’s] line of interpretation does leave one puzzling over why a retainer would do such a thing. Is that question meant to be the challenge of the parable itself? Then would not the audience for the parable need to be retainers, to whom such an action is posed as a possibility, rather than peasants? [Herzog] proposes that the parable confronts peasants with the question of whether they would welcome such a former retainer into their village. Would peasants be inclined to speculate about such an unlikely situation?33

Of course, Herzog’s peasant audience is derived from his hypothesis. However, this inconsistency further weakens Herzog’s interpretation.

Herzog definitely goes too far when he sees ‘weeping and gnashing of teeth’ in the final verse of the parable as indicating the life of the poor:

Gnashing of teeth can refer to the sound of chattering teeth caused by being in the cold without adequate clothing or shelter, or it can refer to the sound of teeth grinding because one is in pain or deep anguish… No doubt, peasants gnashed their teeth when they lost their family plots or saw their subsistence threatened by new tributes and extractions, and after they became day-laborers, inadequately clothed and poorly fed, their teeth chattered in the cold.34

32 Ibid., 115.
34 Herzog, Subversive Speech, 166.
Such a reading is unlikely in the extreme especially since the weight of scholarly exegesis sees these references as likely Matthean additions.\textsuperscript{35} Furthermore, should the phrase go back to Jesus – and the one Lucan reference makes this a possibility – it is better seen as originating from an Old Testament idiom for anger or malice.\textsuperscript{36}

Finally – in deference to chiasm – Rohrbaugh’s interpretation of the parable found in the Gospel of the Nazoreans, which Herzog uncritically accepts, should be examined. At first glance, this version of the parable \textit{does} appear to support Rohrbaugh’s (and Herzog’s) peasant reading of the parable. However, as Wohlgemut has pointed out, Rohrbaugh has misread Eusebius.\textsuperscript{37} Eusebius is trying to reconcile two differing versions of the parable, the one found in Matthew and the one in the Gospel of the Nazoreans. The key is found in the statement that follows his summary of the parable:

\begin{quote}
I wonder whether in Matthew the threat which is uttered after the word against the man who did nothing may not refer to him, but by epanalepsis to the first who had feasted and drunk with the drunken.
\end{quote}

Rohrbaugh takes this to mean Eusebius is trying to figure out “how the rebuke of the third servant in Matthew could really have been meant of the first.”\textsuperscript{38} However, Rohrbaugh has conjoined two things that Eusebius explicitly keeps distinct: the ‘threat’ (the casting into the outer darkness of v30, strongly reminiscent of the imprisonment found in the Nazorean version) and the ‘word against the man who did nothing’ (v26). As such, “Eusebius’ comment in no way suggests that he found the ‘rebuke’ (i.e. the ‘word against’) the servant who hid the talent inappropriate.”\textsuperscript{39} Instead, Eusebius has laid the Nazorean order (squanderer, multiplier, hider) over the Matthean version. He then ignores Matthew’s reward of the first servant, accepts Matthew’s reward of the second servant and condemnation of the third servant, before finally (by epanalepsis) applying...


\textsuperscript{36} Compare with Job 16:9; Ps. 35:16; 37:12; 112:10; Lam. 2:16. See especially Ps. 112:10: “The wicked man will see and be vexed, he will gnash his teeth and waste away; the longings of the wicked will come to nothing.”

\textsuperscript{37} Wohlgemut, “Entrusted Money”, 113.

\textsuperscript{38} Rohrbaugh, “Text of Terror”, 36.

\textsuperscript{39} Wohlgemut, “Entrusted Money”, 114.
the casting into the outer darkness to the delinquent first servant. Consequently, instead of supporting a peasant reading, Eusebius supports the traditional reading of the parable.\textsuperscript{40}

\section*{Conclusion}

Ultimately, then, Herzog’s hypothesis must be rejected. The parables are intentionally theological and ethical. But that need not mean that they are not political or economic at the same time. Rather, the political and economic elements are subservient to the overarching theological and ethical story. As Blomberg says, the sociological interpretations of parables dare not be neglected, precisely because ancient religion was virtually inseparable from economics and politics. It would be worth exploring the possibility that many of Jesus’ parables, including examples from both of Herzog’s categories, actually reflect problem and solution in one and the same passage. The Laborers in the Vineyard reads absurdly when taken as advice for management-labor disputes but may well be a reminder of the radical dissimilarity of God’s grace from human wage-paying – precisely against such a backdrop.\textsuperscript{41}

Consequently, the way the parables have been interpreted by the Gospel writers should not be so hastily rejected. It is hard to imagine that, assuming Herzog was right and that Jesus’ parables were political and economic codifications of oppressive exploitation that they came to be so differently interpreted by the evangelists within such a short span of time. As Birger Gerhardsson so stridently puts it:

\begin{quote}
If we really accept this view [that early Christianity has misunderstood Jesus’ mashal teaching entirely, fundamentally and pervasively], then we have sawn off the branch Jesus research is sitting on. And I suggest that in that case we pass on to some less meaningless and superfluous occupation than guessing what in fact Jesus might actually have meant, since nobody among his early adherents seems to have understood it.\textsuperscript{42}
\end{quote}

This is, unfortunately for Herzog, precisely the situation that arises if his hypothesis is followed.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{41} Blomberg, “Subversive Speech”, 122.
\textsuperscript{42} Gerhardsson, “The Narrative Meshalim”, 357.
The parable of the Talents, according to Wright, is all about the return of YHWH to Zion and the imminent judgment that will fall upon Jerusalem and her current leaders – who have not been faithful to his commission – and which will signal the vindication of Jesus and his people as the new Israel. It therefore provides a theological explanation for Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem as the symbol and embodiment of YHWH’s return to Zion.

Wright’s interpretation is integrally linked to the context in which it is found in Matthew’s gospel. As such, it is thoroughly eschatological, unlike Herzog’s interpretation. Consequently, it is not so easily dismissed as being totally divorced from Matthew’s understanding. However, Wright’s interpretation is still quite different to the traditional understanding. This is because he has reinterpreted the context in which the parable is found thus altering the interpretation of the parable itself. There are two components to Wright’s reinterpretation of the Mount of Olives discourse: a metaphorical understanding of the language of cosmic chaos and a metaphorical understanding of the coming of the Son of Man.

The Language of Cosmic Chaos

Firstly, then, Wright echoes Caird when he says that apocalyptic language “uses complex and highly coloured metaphors in order to describe one event in terms of another, thus bringing out the perceived ‘meaning’ of the first.”1 The reason for this is clear: “In a culture where events concerning Israel were believed to concern the creator god as well, language had to be found which could both refer to events within Israel’s history and invest them with the full significance which, within that worldview, they possessed. One such language, in our period, was apocalyptic.”2 In particular

Metaphors from the exodus would come readily to mind; and, since the exodus had long been associated with the act of creation itself, metaphors from creation would likewise be appropriate. The sun would be turned to darkness, the moon to blood. This is to say: when the covenant god acts, it will be an event (however ‘this-worldly’ by post-

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2 Ibid., 283.
enlightenment standards, and however describable by secular historians) of cosmic
significance.\(^3\)

In this way, Wright clearly delineates the function of the language of cosmic chaos: it is
not meant to be taken literally to indicate the end of human history; rather it demonstrates
the cosmic significance of the creator God acting within human history.

Wright then applies this to the Mount of Olives discourse. In the Old Testament,
the cosmic darkness meant ‘Babylon will fall – an earth-shattering event!’\(^4\) Thus, by
using the language of cosmic chaos in the Mount of Olives discourse Jesus is saying
something about the significance of Jerusalem’s fall: that God is judging the city just as
he judged Babylon.

It is crass literalism, in view of the many prophetic passages in which this language
denotes socio-political and military catastrophe, to insist that this time the words must
refer to the physical collapse of the space-time world. This is simply the way regular
Jewish imagery is able to refer to major socio-political events and bring out their full
significance.\(^5\)

We should deal with one criticism of Wright’s position immediately. Reacting
strongly to the phrase ‘crass literalism’, Dale C Allison, Jr. has insisted that the cosmic
language must still be taken literally. Referring firstly to the examples of cosmic chaos in
the Old Testament, he states “I wonder whether some of these texts only appear nonliteral
to us after the fact because we associate them with historical events that in the event were
(against the prophets’ expectations) unaccompanied by cosmic signs.”\(^6\) After all, he says,
the “other dramatic events prophesied in Mark 13 – wars, famines, earthquakes – must, as
the consensus of commentaries indicates, be intended as literally as Exodus intends the
plagues, or as literally as the list of portents Josephus associates with the Jewish War.”\(^7\)

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\(^3\) Ibid.


\(^5\) Ibid., 361. Marcus J. Borg is in agreement with Wright here: “The religious loyalties of first-century
Jewish people thus suggest that only the imagery of cosmic disorder and world judgment would have been
adequate to speak of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple… For only such language can express
the ‘radical cultural disorder,’ ‘the loss of meaning of inherited symbols and rites,’ the conviction that ‘the
old order of life’ was coming to an end and a new age being born, which attended such an expectation.”
(Marcus J. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teaching of Jesus* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press
International, 1984), 227; the quoted phrases are taken from A. Wilder “Eschatological Imagery and
Earthly Circumstance” *NTS* 5 (1959), 239-40.)

Allison’s claim is not substantiated by Caird’s ‘case-study’ concerning Jeremiah given in Chapter 3 of this
thesis.

\(^7\) Ibid., 160-1.
Therefore, “One wants to ask how Mark, if he had wished to forecast an astronomical
disaster, could have forecast it. What more could he have said?”

Wright has, in turn, responded:

I am quite happy to think that some apocalyptic texts, and some of their readers, did
envisage actual stars falling from the sky and so on; the question is, how were these texts,
the ones Jesus and the early Christians drew on, being read in this period, and what did
Mark and the others think they meant. If Mark had intended us to read his thirteenth
chapter as an account of physical stars falling from the sky, why has he so carefully told
us that Jesus was answering a question about the fall of Jerusalem?

This, then, is Wright’s first main argument: the cosmic language should not be taken to
refer to the end of the world; it rather demonstrates the theological significance of the
central event of the chapter, namely, that the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple is
God’s judgment upon rebellious Israel.

The Coming of the Son of Man

The second part of Wright’s reinterpretation of the Mount of Olives discourse is
his metaphorical interpretation of the coming of the Son of Man. This follows from
Wright’s understanding of Daniel 7 and how that chapter was understood in the first
century AD.

There is widespread scholarly agreement concerning the function of Daniel 7 as a
whole: it is a message of hope for the people of God who are undergoing intense
persecution at the hands of Antiochus Epiphanes, aiming to convince them that “the
dominion of the barbarian power will only be temporary and the vindication of the
righteous assured.” However, there is considerable disagreement concerning the
specific significance of the Son of Man figure. At one extreme there are those who argue

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8 Dale C., Jr. Allison, “Jesus & The Victory of Apocalyptic” in Jesus & The Restoration of Israel: A
Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright’s Jesus and the Victory of God (ed. Carey C. Newman, Downers
Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 131.
Assessment of N. T. Wright’s Jesus and the Victory of God (ed. Carey C. Newman, Downers
Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 262-3. One could also add in Wright’s favour and contra-Allison: if Mark
wanted to predict actual astronomical phenomena why has he used a complex of Old Testament quotations?
Surely descriptive prose such as was used to describe the (literal) wars, famines and earthquakes would be
preferable (even if these, as well, are derived from the Old Testament).
10 Christopher Rowland, The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity
(London: SPCK, 1982), 179.
that we have here the beginnings of a belief in a heavenly saviour-figure, which contributed to the developing belief in a supernatural messiah in Jewish religion. As John J. Collins states: “At the least, the phrase ‘Son of Man’ was thought to be a well-known, readily recognizable title for a messiah of a heavenly type, in contrast to the national, earthly, Davidic messiah.”\footnote{John J. Collins, \textit{The Scepter and the Star: The Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature} (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 174.} However, this understanding was severely criticised in the latter part of the 20th century, since this Son of Man figure was reconstructed by combining features from Daniel, \textit{4 Ezra} and the \textit{Similitudes Of Enoch}, and scholars were correct to question the historical validity of such a composite figure. Instead, Collins argues for a mediating position: “the ‘one like a son of man’ in Daniel 7 should be understood as a heavenly individual, probably the archangel Michael”\footnote{Ibid., 176.}. This is because of the well-attested expectation of angelic, heavenly saviour figures in the Dead Sea Scrolls. “These angelic saviors are not properly called messiahs, as they are not anointed and in any case are not human figures. They are, however, immediately relevant to the development of traditions relating to the Son of Man.”\footnote{Ibid.}

At the other extreme, the Son of Man is in no way a heavenly figure at all but merely functions as a symbol of the saints of the Most High who are mentioned in the interpretation of the vision.\footnote{Dan. 7:18.} In other words, as Christopher Roland says, this latter interpretation holds “that the Son of Man has no independent existence in the world above and acts merely as a symbol of the righteous people of God in exactly the same way as the four beasts symbolize four kings (v. 17).”\footnote{Rowland, 178-9.} This has also been criticised as not allowing for the existence of a son of man figure in its own right. Thus, Rowland too argues for a mediating position, coming to a very similar conclusion as Collins’ although approaching it from the other direction. Following on from the fact that Dan 7:9-10 describes the scene in the court of God himself, then

\begin{quote}
the coming of the Son of Man to the Ancient of Days must be regarded as a coming to the presence of God in heaven of a real figure… The message of the chapter is simply this:
\end{quote}
just as the Son of Man triumphs in the heavenly court, so the saints of the Most High will
triumph in the face of the kings of the earth. The triumph of the Son of Man in heaven
over the heavenly counterparts of the earthly kings is a sign that the dominion of those
kings cannot be continued for much longer. It is this which is a mark of hope for the
persecuted people of God.\textsuperscript{16}

Rowland then goes on to identify the heavenly figure as an angel, possibly Michael, the
guardian angel of the people of God: “It is only to be expected that his dominion in the
world above would be followed by the vindication of the people whom he represents.”\textsuperscript{17}
In this, he is clearly importing some of the ‘princes’ imagery from Daniel 10.

In contrast with these interpretations, Ben Witherington III understands Daniel 7
as predicting the royal-investiture of a future leader of Israel. In dismissing Collins’
position that the one like a son of man refers to an angelic being, Witherington states: “It
seems far more likely that beastly human rulers would be replaced at a tribunal on earth
by a humane human ruler… What Israel hoped for is what they had possessed during the
monarchy – a king who would rule on their behalf.”\textsuperscript{18} He also rejects the symbolic
approach where the one like a son of man stands for corporate Israel:

\begin{quote}
[P]reviously the beastly empires all had heads and they were not simply synonymous
with those heads. One would expect the pattern to play out the same way in 7:13-14.
Furthermore, the son of man is to rule a dominion of God’s people as well as all other
peoples and nations once he has come on the clouds from heaven. He is not synonymous
with his dominion of the ruled. Finally, corporate Israel coming on clouds from heaven
is hardly a likely image to be employed here. We are thus left with the notion of a
representative figure who is like a human being yet comes from heaven and furthermore
can be bequeathed an everlasting dominion…\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

Wright brings to this rather convoluted debate a very helpful clarification when he
identifies three levels of ‘representation’ that can be discerned in the apocalyptic
literature. First, is \textit{literary (or rhetorical)} representation, where “a writer or speaker uses
a figure, within a complex metaphor or allegory, to represent a person, a nation, or indeed
anything else.”\textsuperscript{20} He gives the following Old Testament examples: the beasts in Daniel 7

\begin{tabular}{l}
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 181. \\
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 182. \\
\textsuperscript{18} Ben Witherington, III, \textit{Jesus the Seer: The Progress of Prophecy} (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 210. \\
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{20} Wright \textit{NTPG}, 289.
\end{tabular}
represent kingdoms; the sea represents evil or chaos; Jeremiah’s smoking pot represents God’s wrath; Nathan’s ewe lamb represents Bathsheba. Second, is sociological representation where a person or group stands for (or carries the fate or fortunes of) another person or group, such as when David fought Goliath as the representative of Israel. Third, is metaphysical representation, where heavenly beings are counterparts for earthly beings (often nations or individuals); this is what is found in Daniel 10.

The problem for interpretation is that “it is perfectly possible to envisage these three quite different senses of ‘representation’ being used at the same time.” So the first three beasts of Daniel 7, at the literary level, may represent kingdoms or kings – since in the sociological sense a king represents his kingdom – but the fourth beast definitely represents a kingdom, and its horns represent kings. Similarly in Daniel 10, it could be argued that the princes are merely literary devices, since in Daniel 11 the same material is covered and the princes are nowhere to be seen. However, Wright thinks this would be wrong:

There is sufficient evidence of belief in the actual existence of angels, some of whom were entrusted with special responsibility for particular nations, to warrant us in saying that first-century readers would believe in the actual existence of these ‘princes’ while not believing in the actual existence of the monsters of Daniel 7.2-8. Rather, the language of Daniel 10-11 is to be put on the same level as the language of 2 Kings 6.15-17: what one can normally see is only one part of the total picture.

However, in general, when one approaches an apocalyptic text in which representation is to be found, Wright asserts that it is not necessary “to suggest that either sociological or metaphysical representation is present. For those, further evidence needs to be forthcoming. Unless it is, the demands of the genre are satisfied by highlighting literary representation alone.”

Thus Wright comes to Daniel 7. Up to verse 12, there is no problem: the monsters represent, on a literary level, nations that war against Israel. He questions why interpreters have then gone on to read the ‘son of man’ figure as referring to an individual, either a human or divine being, or an angel.

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21 Ibid., 290.
22 Ibid., 290-1.
23 Ibid., 291.
Part of the answer is the confusion between the different senses of representation. What we have in this chapter, I suggest, is literary representation, whereby a figure in the story – a human figure, surrounded by monsters – functions as a symbol for Israel, just as the monsters function as literary representations of pagan nations… To say, off the surface of the text, that either the writer or others reading his work would have thought the text was speaking of a ‘son of man’ who was a historical individual, and who, as such, ‘represented’ Israel as a nation in the second, sociological, sense, would be simply to confuse categories.24

After all, argues Wright, no one would expect that actual monsters would appear on earth who would then represent the pagan nations in that sociological sense. “Equally, it would be wrong to jump from the literary ‘representation’… to a metaphysical representation whereby the ‘son of man’ becomes a transcendent heavenly being existing in another realm.”25 In other words, as far as the original intention of Daniel 7 is concerned, Wright categorically places himself at one extreme of the continuum: the ‘son of man’ figure is simply a collective symbol for Israel. The image of the son of man is found in Daniel’s vision where it is contrasted with the bestial images; it must therefore not be allowed to ‘cross-over’ into the vision’s interpretation becoming an actual individual being in doing so.26

The result of this debate is clearly of great importance, for it impinges directly on how Jews would have understood the book of Daniel in the first century AD. Wright claims that “those who read this (very popular) chapter in the first century would have seen its meaning first and foremost in terms of the vindication of Israel after her suffering at the hands of the pagans.”27 He then gives a brief precis of the first six chapters of Daniel:

The first six chapters of the book have, indeed, two common themes. First, Jews are invited or incited to compromise their ancestral religion, and refuse to do so. They are tested in some way, proved to be in the right, and exalted. Second, various visions and revelations are granted to a pagan king, and are then interpreted by Daniel.28

24 Ibid., 291-2.
25 Ibid.
26 These arguments answer Witherington’s objections to the ‘corporate Israel’ interpretation admirably.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 293.
It is quite clear how this would be read by Jews of the Syrian and Roman period: “Pagan pressure for Jews to compromise their ancestral religion must be resisted: the kingdoms of the world will finally give way to the everlasting kingdom of the one true god, and when that happens Jews who had held firm will themselves be vindicated. We may cite 2 Maccabees 7 as a close parallel.”

Then comes Daniel 7:

Within the second half of the book as a whole, the two themes from the first half are modified but not abandoned. The individual fortunes of Daniel and his companions become the national fortunes of Israel; and it is Daniel, now, who has the visions, which are interpreted by an angel. Putting chapter 7 in this setting, and reading it as a whole, instead of dismantling it in search of earlier meanings for its hypothetical earlier parts, a consistent picture emerges. The four beasts who come out of the sea (verse 2-8) culminate in the little horn of the fourth beast (verse 8), who makes war with ‘the saints’ (verse 21). But when the ‘most high’, the ‘Ancient of Days’, takes his seat, judgment is given in favour of ‘the saints’ / ‘one like a son of man’ (verses 13, 18, 22, 27): they are vindicated and exalted, with their enemies being destroyed, and in their vindication their god himself is vindicated…

This then brings out the close parallels between chapters 1-6 (particularly chapter 6 with the human surrounded by beasts) and chapter 7. A Jew of the second-temple period would have understood these chapters in this way:

Faced with pagan persecution, such a Jew would be encouraged to remain faithful while awaiting the great day of victory and vindication, when Israel would be exalted and her enemies defeated, when the covenant god would show himself to be god of all the earth, and would set up the kingdom which would never be destroyed. The later visions in

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29 Ibid., 294.
30 Ibid.
31 Witherington, Jesus the Seer, 197-9, also argues for grouping Dan. 7 with Dan. 1-6, and that it provides the climax of this block. He cites as evidence: (i) it is written in Aramaic, as is the material since 2:4b; (ii) Dan. 7 is dependent on Dan. 2; (iii) only Dan. 8-12 are presented directly in the first person; (iv) Josephus in Ant. 10.267 makes a clear distinction between Dan. 8-12 and what comes before; (v) Dan. 7 ends with the words ‘Here is the end of the matter’, indicating the end of a major section of the book; (vi) there is a close similarity between the words of Darius in 6:26-27 and Daniel in 7:14, implying that the same kingdom is being referred to in both cases. “In short, the visions do not begin in ch. 7; rather, Daniel’s vision is seen as a continuation of the revelations of God in visions that had previously been given to the pagan rulers.” (199). In addition, Witherington discerns a chiastic series in the Aramaic portion of the book of Daniel: (A) ch. 2: a vision of four kingdoms and their end (Nebuchadnezzar); (B) ch. 3: faithfulness and a miraculous rescue (the three friends); (C) ch. 4: Judgment previewed and experienced (Nebuchadnezzar); (C’) ch. 5: Judgment previewed and experienced (Belshazzar); (B’) ch. 6: Faithfulness and a miraculous rescue (Daniel); (A’) ch. 7: a vision of four kingdoms and their end (Daniel) (202).
Daniel 8-12, in my opinion, are to be read as developments from this basic position, rather than as themselves determining the meaning of the earlier portions of the book.\(^{32}\)

Wright cites Josephus as evidence for this particular understanding. *Antiquities* 10.203-10 describes the dream found in Daniel 2:1-45, but Josephus alters it to avoid making an explicit connection between the Roman Empire and the mixture of iron and clay. One can conclude from this that “in first-century interpretation the stone was taken as a prophecy of the messianic kingdom which would destroy the Roman empire.”\(^{33}\) Similarly, in *War* 6.312-15, Josephus describes ‘an ambiguous oracle’ that ‘more than all else incited [the Jews] to the war’. This oracle prophesied that ‘one from their country would become ruler of the world’ and the Jews thought it would be one of their race; Josephus argues instead that it signified Vespasian ‘who was proclaimed Emperor on Jewish soil.’ Unfortunately, Josephus does not footnote this allusion. Wright provides a convincing argument that the book of Daniel is being referred to: Daniel 2 gives the prophecy, and Daniel 9 gives a chronology, the whole being read as “a prophecy of imminent messianic deliverance…”\(^{34}\)

But what about the first-century understanding of the Son of Man figure? Wright argues that Daniel 7 fits right into this ‘ambiguous oracle’:

> It looks as though some first-century exegetes, combining Daniel 9 (which is explicitly messianic) with Daniel 2 (which can be made so via the figure of the ‘stone’, which is a messianic term elsewhere), had achieved… a radical new possibility: a messianic, i.e. individualized, reading of Daniel 7.13f.\(^{35}\)

It should be pointed out that this interpretation of Daniel goes beyond the original intentions of the book as stated above: literary representation has been replaced by sociological, or even metaphysical, representation. This is a later development, however, a conjoining of concepts previously kept separate. Similar rereadings are also found in a number of apocalyptic works dating from the first two centuries AD that refer to ‘a son of man’. 4 Ezra 11:36-46 (a vision of a lion that speaks with a man’s voice that destroys the fourth beast this time described as an eagle) and 12:10-35 (its interpretation) detail an explicit reinterpretation of Daniel 7 where “the ‘one like a son of man’ represents, in the

\(^{32}\) Wright, *NTPG*, 296.
\(^{33}\) Ibid., 304.
\(^{34}\) Ibid., 313-4.
\(^{35}\) Ibid., 314.
literary sense, the Messiah, who in turn represents, in the sociological sense, the remnant of Israel; and the Messiah is responsible for the destruction of the Roman Empire. Wright also cites 2 Baruch 39-40 as another example of Daniel 7 being read messianically; however, it may not count as an independent witness if it is dependent on 4 Ezra. The Second and Third ‘Similitudes’ (1 Enoch 45-57, 58-69, particularly 62:1-5) certainly refer to the concept of a messianic son of man in such a way as to presume metaphysical representation.

One further interpretive issue that arises is the direction that the one like a son of man travels. Wright is certain that he is coming from the earth to the Ancient of Days who is in heaven. As he says, “there is no evidence for anyone supposing that the denouement of Daniel 7 – the Son of Man coming to the Ancient of Days – was intended literally; and, even if they had supposed it to be so, it would have referred to an upward movement, not a downward one.” With respect to Mark 13:26, Wright states: “The word ‘coming’, so easily misread in English, is in Greek erchomenon, and so could mean either ‘coming’ or ‘going’. Even if ‘coming’ were pressed, that would not advance the cause of those who read the verse as predicting a downward cloudborne movement of the ‘son of man’, since Daniel 7 conceives the scene from the perspective of heaven, not earth. The ‘son of man’ figure ‘comes’ to the Ancient of Days. He comes from earth to heaven, vindicated after suffering.”

Wright then applies this to the Mount of Olives discourse:

Jesus has been asked about the destruction of the Temple. His reply has taken the disciples through the coming scenario: great tribulation, false messiahs arising, themselves hauled before magistrates. They need to know both that Jerusalem is to be destroyed and that they must not stand and fight, but must escape while they can. There will then occur the great cataclysmic event which will be at the same time (a) the final judgment on the city that has now come, with awful paradox, to symbolize rebellion against YHWH; (b) the great deliverance promised in the prophets; and (c) the

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36 Ibid., 316.
37 Ibid., 317.
38 However, the dating of the Similitudes is problematic. See the discussion in T. F. Glasson, Jesus and the End of the World (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1980), 36-41, where he concludes that the Similitudes should be dated to the second century AD, and that they have been influenced by the Gospels.
39 Wright, “Grateful Dialogue”, 266.
40 Wright, JVG, 361.
vindication of the prophet who had predicted the downfall, and who had claimed to be
embodying in himself all the Jerusalem and the Temple had previously stood for.41

The end-point of Wright’s argument is that Mark 13, Matthew 24 and Luke 21 are
not suggesting that “the space-time universe is about to come to an end, or that a
transcendent figure is about to come floating, cloudborne, towards earth.”42 What is
being spoken of in Mark 13:24-27 and Matt. 24:29-31 is not a different event from the
one predicted at the start of the chapter. Rather, the use of the language of cosmic chaos
is how any Jewish prophet would speak of a series of events that would possess ‘earth-
shattering’ significance. The coming of the Son of Man and the gathering of the elect is
how any Jewish prophet after Daniel would refer to God’s vindication of his true people,
and especially of the Messiah, and the destruction of the forces that had opposed them
and him.43 In other words, Wright sees the coming of the Son of Man as referring back to
the fall of Jerusalem, just as he saw the language of cosmic chaos as referring back to the
fall of Jerusalem.

Jesus’ Second Coming And The Disciples

Wright also has one further argument against the traditional interpretation: how
could Jesus possibly teach his disciples about his ‘second coming’ if they hadn’t even
graped the simple fact of his imminent death and resurrection?44 As a result of this,
Wright’s interpretation that Jesus’ Mount of Olives discourse is solely concerned with the
fall of Jerusalem is an attempt to as naturally as possible fit the passage into a
reconstruction of Jesus in his historical context. The disciples, Wright claims, would not
have been aware that Jesus would return until they are informed of it by the two men in
white who appear after Jesus’ ascension in Acts 1.45

41 Ibid., 515.
42 Ibid., 516.
43 Ibid., 516.
44 Wright, JVG, 635, quoted in chapter 1 of this thesis (referenced by n200.) See also Wright, JVG, 345.
45 Wright, NTPG, 462.
Wright’s Conclusion

On the basis of these arguments, Wright concludes that the Mount of Olives discourse is dealing with one event only: the fall of Jerusalem predicted within the lifetime of a generation. As a result, the parables that Matthew records in this context must also apply to this event. If one were to grant the veracity of these conclusions the interpretation that Wright arrives at for the parable of the Talents, while fitting the context quite naturally, is at once compelling and challenging.

THE CRITIQUE OF N. T. WRIGHT

The Language of Cosmic Chaos

The first point in Wright’s reinterpretation of the Mount of Olives discourse is complicated by the literal versus metaphorical debate. However, there is less difference between the two opposing ways of interpreting the cosmic chaos than the opponents make out. Both Wright and Allison see Jesus as referring to an in-breaking of God into the present historical order, not the end of the space-time universe. One could say that Jesus is envisioning a re-creation, rather than an un-creation followed by an entirely new creation. The difference is that Allison sees Jesus as predicting actual astronomical accompaniments with all that that would entail to the first century mind, whereas Wright takes these as making a theological statement about the significance of the events in question. As Morna D. Hooker says,

The language is the traditional language used by the prophets for the day of the Lord, and it is used because it evokes all the ideas associated with that day of judgment. It is more than metaphorical, less than literal: the closest parallels are in the passages he uses – Isaiah 13 and 34 – which are equally ambiguous. In this context, commonsense questions about what will actually happen are out of place, for the language is the language of myth.

1 As Allison says: “By ‘end’ is not meant the cessation of the space-time universe – although that possibility should not be excluded… [M]ost millenarian movements, whether ancient, medieval, or modern, have expected not the utter destruction and replacement of this world but rather a revolutionary change… not another earth but this earth made new – a revised, second edition with the earlier deficiencies corrected.” (Allison, Millenarian Prophet, 154-5.)

Furthermore, Wright is not alone in holding to a metaphorical understanding of the language of cosmic chaos. James A. Brooks says of the cosmic language: “The various items are not to be taken literally but as symbolic of an event of cosmic significance. Certainly the darkening of the sun at Jesus’ crucifixion (15:33) does not constitute fulfillment of v. 24b, although it too is a symbol of divine wrath.”

Similarly, C. S. Mann says

The artificiality of the whole construction in its present position in both Matthew and Mark is such that to attempt to discover why we now have celestial signs after the terrestrial manifestations is to fall into the trap of providing historical context for material which in the nature of the case is metahistorical. The signs and celestial portents are a common feature of apocalyptic literature and are interpreted as signs of God’s activity, and to look for precise historical contexts there, or above all in the terrestrial phenomena, is to misconceive the function of the literature and its imagery.

C. E. B. Cranfield is almost dismissive of the need to discuss this issue at all: “That this is picture-language which we must not seek to compress into a literal interpretation should go without saying.”

Where Wright can be legitimately criticised, however, is that he has chosen to see the language of cosmic chaos in its literary context as referring back to the fall of Jerusalem whereas the writers of the gospels have very clearly linked it with what follows, namely the coming of the Son of Man. Mark 13:24 says, ‘But in those days, following that distress’; Matthew 24:29 says, ‘Immediately after the distress of those days’. In addition to this, as was argued in Chapter Three of this thesis, Matthew may have deliberately altered the disciples’ question that gave rise to the Mount of Olives discourse as a whole so as to make more explicit that Jesus’ answer split into two distinct parts. As D. A. Carson says,

There are already hints, early in the discourse (esp. in Matt), that the reader is to bear in mind that there are at least two topics under discussion, not one: the Fall of Jerusalem and the Second Advent (cf. vv.3, 5, 14, 23-27). Thus, since the reader is already primed to

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expect mention of the Second Advent, it would be difficult for him to take vv.29-31 in any other way.\textsuperscript{6}

Only in Luke 21 could Wright’s interpretation said to be possible for Luke does not have any temporal linking words at all. In Luke’s presentation of the Mount of Olives discourse Jesus \textit{does} appear to be speaking of one event that would encompass the fall of Jerusalem, the cosmic chaos and the coming of the Son of Man. However, this is not sufficient to sustain Wright’s argument since Luke is almost certainly dependent on Mark, and possibly even Matthew’s version.

As a result, it is \textit{not} appropriate to see the language of cosmic chaos as a metaphor for God’s judgment upon a city. If the Gospel writers had recorded the language of cosmic chaos in the immediate context of the fall of Jerusalem then the Old Testament prophets’ parallels to the destruction of a city as being God’s judgment would be highly appropriate. As it is, the language of cosmic chaos quite explicitly comes in the context of the coming of the Son of Man. As such, we can still see the language of cosmic chaos as referring to God’s activity, although, if we wanted to be more specific, then Old Testament parallels of theophany would be more appropriate. As Ben Witherington III says, these verses “reflect the use of theophanic language to indicate the coming of the divine one, and may not have been intended to describe actual cosmic phenomena.”\textsuperscript{7}

Davies & Allison agree, given that the Son of Man comes ‘on the clouds’:

\begin{quote}
In Exod 13.21-2 the Lord goes before Israel in a pillar of cloud, while in Exod 40.35-8 the cloud over the tabernacle is the glory of God. In these texts as in others – some of which reflect the Canaanite designation of Baal the storm god as ‘Cloud Rider’ (cf. Ps 68.4) – a cloud is the visible sign of the invisible presence of God and so a regular element of the theophany. So the Son of man’s coming on the clouds marks the approach of God himself.\textsuperscript{8}
\end{quote}

However, the fact that the Son of Man comes for the purpose of judgment, as Matt. 25:31-46 makes clear, may indicate that the two options are not as different as first

\textsuperscript{8}Davies & Allison, 3:362.
appears. However, the judgment that the Son of Man performs is upon individuals, not a city.

The Coming of the Son of Man

Wright is not alone in interpreting the ‘coming of the Son of Man’ as referring metaphorically to vindication, although, as the following will demonstrate, precisely what will vindicate the Son of Man differs from scholar to scholar. J. A. T. Robinson provides a helpful schema when he categorises all the coming Son of Man sayings found in the gospels into either ‘vindication’ (which he defines as victory out of defeat) or ‘visitation’ (a coming among men in power and judgment). Into the first, Robinson includes Jesus’ predictions of his death and resurrection after three days, as well as crucial verses like Mark 14:62:

[T]he two predictions of ‘sitting at the right hand of God’ and ‘coming on the clouds of heaven’ are to be understood as parallel expressions, static and dynamic, for the same conviction. Jesus is not at this point speaking of a coming from God: in whatever other sayings he may refer to the coming of the Son of man in visitation, here at any rate he is affirming his vindication.

And, as Robinson notes, this is to be an imminent vindication in line with the ‘three days’ of the previous predictions, which Robinson traces back to Hos. 6:2, implying “speedy restoration.” As such, “there can be no doubt that it refers to the only moment to which all the enthronement language applied to Jesus does refer, namely, to the moment of the Resurrection onwards; for there is never a suggestion that Jesus enters upon his triumph only at some second coming.”

When it comes to sayings involving visitation, Robinson

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9 Similarly, the following quotation shows how closely related the two options are: “The following motifs, found in the Sinai theophany recorded in Exodus 19 (see also 1 Kings 19), recur in various of the Yom Yahweh passages: descriptions of lightning, smoke, fire, earthquake and even cosmic upheaval. To these accompanying manifestations the Yom Yahweh traditions add the concept of judgment, sometimes even on Israel.” (Witherington, Jesus, Paul and the End of the World, 148-9).
11 Ibid., 45.
12 Ibid., 46.
13 Ibid., 50-1. See also Lloyd Gaston, No Stone on Another: Studies in the Significance of the Fall of Jerusalem in the Synoptic Gospels. Supplements To Novum Testamentum Vol. 23. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), 388-390, who also sees Mark 13:26 and 14:62 as products of the early church: “it seems clear that from the perspective of history of tradition the latter passage is earlier and the source of the former… It is best not to try to read this statement as a genuine saying of Jesus but rather as an interpretation by the church of his resurrection… Jesus’ vindication after his death, his exaltation[,] has been interpreted through
claims that almost all of them originally referred to Jesus’ present ministry, specifically his coming to Jerusalem as God’s representative, but that much of the material has been subsequently reapplied to the situation in the early church as they awaited Jesus’ return. However, there are a few sayings in which this coming is unavoidably future. Some, like Luke 12:40; 18:8 and Matt. 10:23; 24:44, Robinson still sees fitting within the scope of Jesus’ present ministry, but that they are focussing on the approaching climax of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Others, like Mark 8:38 and 13:26 are dismissed as early church additions. Thus, Robinson claims, Mark 13:24-27 has been added into what would otherwise have been a purely historical warning about the coming destruction of Jerusalem. However, excising material on the basis that it does not fit one’s hypothesis comes across as too convenient. Robinson has done well to emphasise the present aspect of the coming Son of Man sayings, but one feels that a better hypothesis will try to include the Mount of Olives discourse as being meaningful within the context of Jesus’ ministry. This, of course, is what Wright has attempted to do.

C. S. Mann, following Robinson, also interprets ‘the coming of the Son of Man’ in Mark 13 and parallels as vindication, but, like Wright and unlike Robinson, he sees it as going back to Jesus:

The language of [Mark 13:26], like 14:62, does not in our view encompass any expectation on the part of Jesus of a return to the scene of his ministry in exaltation-glory. What this language does suggest is a dramatic expression of the faith in God’s vindication of his mission and ministry. Moreover, elsewhere there are sayings which underscore his conviction that this vindication would shortly take place, and that in and through his trials and sufferings God would inaugurate his reign. The evidence for this is too significant to be ignored. For whatever elements of future expectation there may be the use of Ps 110:1 and Dn 7:13… It is very improbable that two different events should be referred to here: first exaltation and then parousia, and since the two texts refer to one event, the order in which they are cited is irrelevant. Mk 14:62 is not to be interpreted in the light of the parousia usage of Dn 7, but on the contrary, Mk 13:26 is to be interpreted in the light of the exaltation usage here.”


15 Robinson, Jesus and His Coming, 121.
Mann, however, markedly departs from Wright when he then claims that the imminent event demonstrating Jesus’ vindication that the gospel writers had in mind was the crucifixion. In this, Mann perhaps relies too heavily on the gospel of John and the realised eschatology of the motif of Jesus’ glorification as occurring on the cross.

A position that mediates between Wright and the traditional interpretation of Jesus’ Mount of Olives discourse is argued by R. T. France, who holds that Matt. 24:1-35 deals with the imminent destruction of the temple, but that from Matt. 24:36 onwards Jesus’ coming at an unknown time is in view. The ‘coming of the Son of Man’ therefore fits well with the apocalyptic language in v. 29 in describing the destruction of the temple, viewed as an act of divine judgment, whereby the authority of Jesus is vindicated over the Jewish establishment which has rejected him. The language is allusive rather than specific, and depends for its force on a familiarity with Old Testament imagery which is unfortunately not shared by all modern readers.

However, France does not demonstrate satisfactorily why the phrase ‘the coming of the Son of Man’ can be used to refer to both events without explicit indications that something different is meant. According to France, in verses 27 and 30 the phrase refers to Jesus’ vindication at the destruction of the Temple, but in verses 37 and 44 it refers to his second coming. This is a decided weakness in his argument.

This, then, suggests caution must be exercised when it comes to metaphorical interpretations of the coming of the Son of Man. This caution becomes rejection, however, when one examines the logical consequences of holding to a metaphorical interpretation. The central question is whether what Wright claims Jesus meant is the same as what the writers of the Gospels understood Jesus to mean. Wright is caught in his double dissimilarity / similarity method. On the one hand, Wright’s Jesus is

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16 Mann, Mark, 532.
18 Wright describes his method for getting at ‘the historical Jesus’ in terms of similarity and dissimilarity to both the Jewish context in which Jesus exercised his ministry and the early church which developed from Jesus’ ministry and teaching. “Along with the much-discussed ‘criterion of dissimilarity’ must go a criterion of double similarity: when something can be seen to be credible (though perhaps deeply subversive) within first-century Judaism, and credible as the implied starting-point (though not the exact replica) of something in later Christianity, there is a strong possibility of our being in touch with the genuine history of Jesus.” (Wright, JVG, 132.)
appropriately dissimilar and similar to the Jewish context. Wright is on solid ground with his understanding of the first century interpretation of apocalyptic language in general and ‘the one like a son of man’ in Daniel 7 specifically, and Wright’s reconstruction of Jesus’ use of this material in this context is quite believable, if not compelling. However, on the other hand, Wright’s Jesus is too dissimilar and not similar enough when compared to the early church and the gospels whose final form arose out of that context. The belief that Jesus would return in bodily form at some point in the future and usher in the final judgment seems to be one that originated quite early in the church’s existence, as 1 & 2 Thessalonians and Acts 1 testify. But Wright would have us believe that this belief was not explicit in Jesus’ teaching.

This, then, is the critical problem: how did the early church come to believe in Jesus’ second coming if not from Jesus’ own explicit teaching on the subject. T. F. Glasson, like Wright, argues that Jesus never spoke about his parousia at all. When he examines the earliest evidence we have for the early church’s belief in Jesus’ second coming, namely Paul’s teaching on the coming of the Lord in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, he claims that the language used by Paul is derived from Old Testament promises of the coming of God. For example, 2 Thess. 1:7-9 owes much to the theophany described in Is. 2:10, 66:15. He also demonstrates extensive parallels between the Isaianic apocalypse (Is. 24-27) and 1 and 2 Thessalonians: (i) the coming of the Lord (Is. 26:10; 1 Thess. 4:13-18; 2 Thess. 1:7-10); (ii) judgment (Is. 26:21; 2 Thess. 1:9; 2:8); (iii) the resurrection (Is. 26:19; 1 Thess. 4:16); (iv) the trumpet (Is. 27:13; 1 Thess. 4:16); (v) the gathering of the elect (Is. 27:12; 1 Thess. 4:17). He concludes: “Broadly speaking the Christians took over the Old Testament doctrine of the advent of the Lord, making the single adjustment that the Lord was the Lord Jesus. He comes with the angels to judge the world not because he is Messiah but because he is Lord.”

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19 See also James 5:8; 1 Peter 4:7; 1 John 2:18.
20 Wright has yet to explain precisely how this belief did arise. It will presumably form part of the subsequent volumes in his series of books on the New Testament and the rise of Christianity: volume 3 is to deal with Paul, volume 4 is to deal with the Gospels. See Wright, NTPG, 11-14, 28.
21 Witherington argues that it is unlikely Jesus ever used the term parousia to refer to some future eschatological event, since Jesus probably did not speak of the coming of the Son of Man in Greek, and that the use of the term in Matt. 24 is clearly redactional (Jesus, Paul and the End of the World, 171). On the other hand, he also argues that Jesus spoke about the concept itself.
22 Glasson, Jesus and the End of the World, 104.
23 Ibid., 105.
to the man of lawlessness in 2 Thess. 2 and the apocalyptic material in Mark 13, Glasson discerns traces of the book of Daniel: apostasy, a great figure of evil, the profanation of the temple, the flight of the faithful, and a severe tribulation.24 “All of these appear in the New Testament as the signs heralding the return of Christ.”25

While this approach may help to explain some of the details found in such passages, it does not explain the origin of the belief in the second coming itself. On this, Glasson remains vague: “It may well be… that Jesus spoke in some way of his return to his own, and that in interpreting a promise left in unspecified terms the early Christians turned to the Old Testament and found in the prophecies of ‘the coming of the Lord’ something that would be fulfilled in the return of the Lord Jesus.”26 Alternatively, Jesus could have spoken about something quite different but his words may have been applied by his followers to the developing belief in the second coming:

Words of Jesus about ‘this generation’, which originally referred to other matters (cf Luke 11:50), could easily have been misapplied. References to the doom upon Jerusalem would be looked upon in the light of Old Testament prophecy; in a number of places an attack of the nations upon the city is immediately followed by the coming of the Lord, whose feet are to stand upon the Mount of Olives; this is succeeded by an age of peace.27

This understanding, then, is remarkably similar to Wright’s interpretation; and, like Wright’s, such a conclusion results in too marked a discontinuity between Jesus and the early church.

How, then, can these reconstructions of Jesus’ teaching be critiqued? Essentially, we cannot really go beyond what we have in front of us in the text of the Gospels. When we look closely at Wright’s arguments concerning Jesus’ Mount of Olives discourse we find that he bases his argument on some sort of underlying reconstructed original discourse, one that glosses over the details in each particular Gospel as each one attempts to describe Jesus’ teaching given in response to the question concerning the timing of the destruction of the Temple. However, when one examines each of the three accounts that we have of Jesus’ Mount of Olives discourse, it becomes increasingly difficult to

24 Ibid., 111.
25 Ibid., 112.
26 Ibid., 106. Glasson refers to the ambiguous statements found in John’s gospel: ‘I am going away and I am coming back to you’ (John 14:28), and ‘In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me’ (John 16:16).
27 Ibid., 113.
subscribe to Wright’s interpretation. At worst, if one was to follow Wright’s interpretation of the discourse one would have to say that the writers of the gospels did not understand what Jesus was talking about and that they therefore misapplied his words to something Wright claims Jesus never spoke about, namely, his bodily return to earth.28 At best, they knowingly reapplied Jesus’ teaching. As Ben Witherington says, Wright “is arguing for an interpretation that neither Paul nor other early Christians seem to have accepted of the coming of the Son of Man and other eschatological events.”29 Or as Robert H. Stein puts it,

> It is… extremely difficult to interpret all the sayings of the Son of Man returning to judge the world in the abstract manner that Wright does. The sayings are clearly understood by the Gospel writers as referring to a second coming of the Son of Man at the end of history… [The sayings] cannot be demythologized into being a metaphorical reference to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.30

Similarly with Glasson’s understanding: it involves a hypothetical reconstruction based on the supposition that the earliest source material we have – the Gospels – is a misunderstanding of Jesus’ words.31 These approaches definitely fall foul of Gerhardsson’s observation: “Theories which presuppose that the synoptic evangelists have misunderstood basic things in Jesus’ teaching pervasively must be regarded as very adventurous.”32

There are other problems with Wright’s reinterpretation of the Mount of Olives. Firstly, his metaphorical interpretation is not always convincing. For example, he interprets Mark 13:27 and Matt. 24:31 as referring to the mission of the church. When Jerusalem fell, Wright argues, the Son of Man would be vindicated.

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28 See also the previous quotation from Glasson.
29 Witherington, Jesus the Seer, 277.
30 Robert H. Stein, “Jesus and the Victory of God: A Review Article” Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society Vol. 44, No. 2 (June 2001), 213. See also James D. G. Dunn, “Review of Wright’s Jesus and the Victory of God” The Journal of Theological Studies 49 (1998), 733: “Wright’s metanarrative is too curtailed, too narrowly focused; it squeezes too much of the Jesus tradition into a constricted mould and in doing so leaves too much out of account [earlier Dunn had listed the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment], as well as leaving Jesus open to the charge of being another failed prophet, and leaving the use made of this tradition by the early churches that much more problematic.” (italics added)
31 See also the detailed critique of Glasson in Witherington, Jesus, Paul and the End of the World, 171. Witherington’s conclusion is worth quoting: “Glasson places himself in the position of trying to explain away too many texts, using a variety of expedients to accomplish his ends, and his theory dies the death of too many qualifications.” (Ibid., 171-2).
That would be a sign that the followers of this ‘son of man’ would now spread throughout the world: his ‘angels’, that is, messengers, would summon people from north, south, east and west to come and sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of YHWH.  

Given the many parallels in apocalyptic literature in which heavenly beings are associated with a final judgment, parallels that are even found within Matthew’s gospel itself, this interpretation is not convincing. Furthermore, as Davies & Allison point out, Matthew associates the angels with a loud trumpet blast, probably alluding to Is. 27:12-13; this underlines the fact that the event in question takes place on the eschatological day of judgment. In addition to this, historically speaking the Christian mission did not begin following the fall of Jerusalem; it began following Pentecost. Similarly, when Jesus commissioned his disciples in Matt. 28:18-20 there is no talk of them being ‘angels’.

Secondly, as was discussed earlier, both Mark and Matthew’s presentation of Jesus’ Mount of Olives discourse are set out in such a way as to imply that Jesus spoke of two separate events, one involving the fall of Jerusalem the other involving the coming of the Son of Man. Mark, after speaking about certain ‘days of distress’ in 13:14-23, goes on in verse 24 to say ‘in those days, following that distress’ and then proceeds with the language of cosmic chaos and the coming of the Son of Man which will occur ‘at that time’ (13:26). In other words, 13:24-27 cannot be speaking of the fall of Jerusalem, since it clearly follows it. Similarly, in Matthew 24:29 the language of cosmic chaos comes ‘immediately after the distress of those days’. Despite the exceptionally close temporal link between the coming of the Son of Man and ‘those days’, 24:29-31 cannot also refer to the fall of Jerusalem. France attempts to get around this by arguing that 24:15-28 refers to the lead up to the destruction of the Temple, and then 24:29-35 refers to the

33 Wright, JVG, 362-3. Again, France provides a mediating position: “Angeloi might be translated ‘messengers’ (as it is in 11:10), and referred to human preaching of the gospel throughout the world, or taken in its normal sense of angels (as the roughly parallel language of 13:41; 16:27 may suggest), in which case it refers to the supernatural power which lies behind such preaching. But whereas in 13:41 the ‘angels of the Son of Man’ gather the evil out of his kingdom, here they gather the chosen into it. The reference is not, therefore, as in 13:41, to the final judgment, but to the world-wide growth of the church… which is consequent on the ending of Israel’s special status, symbolized in the destruction of the temple.” (France, Matthew, 345).

34 For a possible Old Testament example, see Zech. 14:5.


36 See also Joel 2:1; Zech. 9:14; 2 Esdras 6:23; Sib. Oracl. 4:174; 1 Thess. 4:16; 1 Cor. 15:52.

37 Davies & Allison, 3:363.
destruction itself.\(^\text{38}\) After all, he argues, the text is ambiguous: the ‘abomination that causes desolation’ is not explicitly the destruction of the temple. However, other commentators have equally responded by saying that neither is the destruction of the Temple explicit in 24:29-35.\(^\text{39}\) More tellingly, Luke has ‘translated’ the ‘abomination that causes desolation’ for the benefit of his Gentile audience into ‘when you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies’ (21:20), so that he at least understands that part of Mark’s presentation to be referring to the destruction of Jerusalem, rather than the latter section.

Thirdly, Witherington has negated a crucial part of Wright’s argument by arguing that the direction that the one like a son of man travels in Daniel 7 is from heaven to earth:

The natural balance of vv. 1-4 should be that creatures come up from the sea and the human figure comes down from and with the clouds. The issue is where the final-judgment scene is envisioned as taking place, and I will suggest that, as elsewhere in the prophetic corpus, the Yom Yahweh, which involves judgment for some and redemption for others, is seen as transpiring on earth, not in heaven. At the end of human history, court is held where the offenders and the vindicated are.\(^\text{40}\)

He goes on to provide several arguments for this view: (i) the courtroom scene, coupled with the motif of the final judgment of nations, favours an earthly setting, since there are a number of prophetic texts indicating that God comes forth from heaven to judge the earth\(^\text{41}\); (ii) what is being depicted in this chapter is a royal-investiture ceremony for a human figure who would supersede the beastly rulers, and that this would most naturally occur on earth not in heaven\(^\text{42}\); (iii) the judgment scene referred to in v11-12, 23-27 would also most naturally occur where those who are being judged reside; (iv) there is no reason to assume that there has been a shift from earth to heaven in v9, especially since v9 implies a continuing of the same perspective; (v) the coming of the one like a son of man with the clouds of heaven suggests a theophany involving a descent from heaven;

\(^{38}\) France, Matthew, 340.

\(^{39}\) For example, David Wenham, “‘This Generation Will Not Pass...’ A Study of Jesus’ Future Expectation in Mark 13” in Christ the Lord: Studies in Christology Presented to Donald Gutherie (ed. Harold H. Rowden, Leicester: IVP, 1982), 139.

\(^{40}\) Witherington, Jesus the Seer, 203.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 208. Witherington cites Zech. 14:5; Joel 3:12; Jer. 49:38; and Ps. 96:13.

\(^{42}\) It should be acknowledged that this point would be nullified by Wright’s insistence on a corporate representation interpretation of the one like a son of man in Dan. 7.
(vi) v22 says that the Ancient of Days also came, implying that the scene must be on earth. One could also add a seventh point, that in v9 thrones ‘were set up’ as Daniel watches; thus, he is not here seeing the Ancient of Days sitting on his permanent heavenly throne.

These arguments, together, are compelling; yet the overall interpretation of Daniel 7 does not exactly hinge on whether the one like a son of man comes from earth or from heaven. However, an earth-bound Son of Man in Daniel 7 severely weakens Wright’s case for a metaphorical interpretation of a heaven-bound Son of Man in the Mount of Olives discourse.

### Jesus’ Second Coming And The Disciples

Wright’s question concerning whether Jesus could have spoken about his second coming to disciples unable to even comprehend his death and resurrection must be addressed. Is it possible to see Jesus’ teaching on the coming of the Son of Man in the sense of a future return post-death as fitting appropriately into his ministry to the disciples? Witherington, in his book *Jesus The Seer*, presents just such a reconstruction.

Firstly, Witherington agrees with Wright that Jesus did not envisage the end of the world, or as we would say, the space-time continuum. “But a drastic transformation of creatures and creation at the return of Christ is contemplated, not merely a major historical crisis surrounding the fall of the temple.”

Secondly, he notes that Jesus’ most characteristic phrases ‘Son of Man’ and ‘Kingdom of God’ are both found together in only one place in the OT: Dan 7. “Thus some phrases from an apocalyptic vision are used as the main themes of Jesus’ discourse, but the form of that discourse is generally not apocalyptic, if by that one means the recounting of apocalyptic visions.” He goes on, however, to identify the account of Jesus’ temptation by Satan as just such an apocalyptic vision that Jesus may have had that he later recounted to the disciples.

Notice that the last temptation contains an offer of all the kingdoms of the world. This is what was promised, in essence, to the Son of Man in Dan 7. This would have been a

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43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., 277.
45 Ibid., 278.
severe temptation if indeed Jesus believed it was his role to play the part of the Danielic Son of Man. The devil then would be offering a shortcut to how the prophecy of Dan 7 could be fulfilled for him.46

Furthermore, “In this testing, Jesus responds in all three cases by quoting Scripture and thus passing the test, much as Enoch passed the test and so it was revealed to Enoch that he was the Son of Man.”47 Witherington concludes: “What this experience likely meant to Jesus is that he had successfully resisted adopting any messianic Son of God styles of acting that would have accorded with the popular expectation of a Davidic ruler who would come and conquer the pagan occupiers.”48

Thirdly, Witherington discusses the significance of the exorcisms that Jesus performed: they stem from the initial victory Jesus had over Satan when he successfully resisted the three temptations. This follows directly from the ‘binding the strong man’ parable that Jesus gave in response to queries about the legitimacy of his exorcisms.49 Thus, “when Jesus practiced exorcisms, he was at the same time liberating the captives and enacting judgment on the powers of darkness. In short, he was beginning to exercise the role of the Son of Man in judging the spiritual realm before pronouncing judgment on the human domain.”50

Fourthly, he examines Jesus’ symbolic actions in entering Jerusalem and cleansing the Temple. This latter action, as Wright also argues, was extremely important for it forms the basis of why Jesus was crucified:

Notice what Jesus actually did – he briefly stopped some of the activities in the temple. The cutting off of some of the temple’s activities symbolizes the severing of the positive link with God. Notice the horror reflected in Dan 8:11.f, 11:31, and 12:11 (cf. 1 Macc 1:45-46) about the cessation of the regular sacrifices. The only time sacrifices ceased would be when a temple was either abandoned or destroyed… What Jesus said and did in regard to the temple is what seems to have precipitated his demise: he would suffer a prophet’s fate because of a prophetic sign and some oracular words he had spoken about the fate of the temple.51

46 Ibid., 280.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
50 Ibid., 281.
51 Ibid., 286.
This leads Witherington to Mark 13. He first notes a chiastic structure: “After the preliminary remarks about the destruction of the temple, the disciples ask about the timing and the signs of what is to come. The response discusses first the signs, then the issue of time or timing. In other words, the response is given in the reverse order of the questions.”\(^{52}\) He also discerns an ABAB pattern: “The A section is far longer than the B section and has to do with a rather long litany of preliminary events. The B section has to do with final events. Thus one finds this schema: (1) A: vv. 5-23; (2) B: vv. 24-27; (3) A’: vv. 28-31; (4) B’: vv. 32-37. If this observation is correct, then nothing specific at all is said about when the final events will take place – v. 24 simply says, ‘but in those days, after that suffering,’ with no specificity at all as to how long after is meant.”\(^{53}\) It is at this point that Witherington introduces his helpful discussion on ‘all these things’: “the oft repeated phrase ‘these things’ or ‘all these things’ refers, in each and every case in this discourse, to preliminary events, not to the final events. Compare v. 4: ‘all these things’ that are to be accomplished are the preliminary events, which, when completed, will be followed by the final events ‘in those days’ after the messianic suffering (v. 24). See also v. 23, which brings to a close the first telling of all the preliminary things.”\(^{54}\)

Witherington then attempts to interpret the ‘coming of the Son of Man’ in the light of his claim that Jesus saw himself as filling this role, essentially, by alluding to Dan. 7:13 in Mark 13:26-27:

If it is indeed possible that Jesus believed that he was the Danielic Son of Man, a belief confirmed through visionary experiences among other things, then he would have anticipated playing a role in the final judgment and the ruling of the world. If he saw the eschatological ruling already beginning during his lifetime in part through such things as the exorcisms, it would be natural for him to be confident that God would allow him to complete the tasks of the Danielic Son of Man at some point.\(^{55}\)

In other words, Jesus’ self-understanding as the ‘son of man’ spoken of in Daniel 7 led him to believe that God would have a role for him post-death – that is, as judge at the end of history – and thus Jesus can appropriately make a prediction of his return to fulfill that role.

\(^{52}\) Ibid.
\(^{53}\) Ibid., 287. In Matthew’s version, however, there is that troublesome ‘immediately’ at this point.
\(^{54}\) Ibid., 287, n152.
\(^{55}\) Ibid., 290.
Interestingly, Wright himself has acknowledged that the concept for Jesus’ second coming of Christ must have come from somewhere. He states:

This is the real novelty. Judaism knows nothing of a human being appearing from heaven in this manner. But it is not an arbitrary innovation. Like Paul’s explanation of the two-stage resurrection (first Jesus, then his people at a later date), this innovation is occasioned directly by the redrawing of Israel’s hope around the actual events of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. As he has taken Israel’s destiny upon himself, being now exalted to the position of power and authority for which Daniel 1-6, as well as Daniel 7, provided some of the models, so it is inconceivable from within the early Christian worldview that the ultimate future of the world should have no place for him. And, since that ultimate future is not a disembodied bliss but a renewal of the whole created order, in which evil will be judged and defeated, that renewal, that judgment, and his return will belong closely with one another.56

However, these themes – renewal, judgment, and Jesus’ return – are precisely what we find in Mark 13:24ff. and parallels.57 If the early church could deduce such a future for Jesus, is it beyond possibility that Jesus, given his self-understanding as the Son of Man, could do likewise?

Conclusion

Wright’s interpretation of the parable of the Talents must, therefore, be rejected. A metaphorical understanding of the language of cosmic chaos need only imply a theophany, perhaps for the purpose of judgment, rather than the more specific judgment upon a city. More importantly, a metaphorical understanding of the coming of the Son of Man simply cannot be held given the way Matthew has structured the Mount of Olives discourse. Consequently, instead of dealing with one event – the fall of Jerusalem predicted within the lifetime of a generation – the Mount of Olives discourse speaks of two events, the imminent fall of Jerusalem and the integrally related but distinct coming of the Son of Man. Finally, since Matthew has placed the parables in the context of the

56 Wright, NTPG, 462.
57 In a footnote, Wright acknowledges that this might be the context in which Matt. 25:31 fits: “This is one possible context in which Mt. 25.31 may make sense. Here we have a reference to Zech. 14.5, which ‘attracts’ the idea of the ‘coming of the son of man’ from Dan. 7.13, and places it in a different context from that of e.g. Mt. 24.30. Alternatively, the passage can still be seen as another reference to the great judgment which is involved in the vindication of Jesus himself.” (Ibid., n. 66). This latter interpretation is the one he discusses in Jesus and the Victory of God.
second event, Wright’s interpretation is seen for what it is: something that Matthew did not present. One must have good reasons for rejecting the earliest interpretation of the parable that we have access to, and Wright’s reasons are simply not good enough.
CHAPTER 5
OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS AND MATTHEW

The aim of this thesis was to critique two recent interpretations of the parable of the Talents. In Chapter One, after surveying more generally the interpretation of the Talents over approximately two thousand years of Biblical exegesis, William R. Herzog II and N. T. Wright’s interpretations were identified as requiring a more specific examination. Herzog’s interpretation is an excellent example of interpreting the parable apart from its Gospel context, as well as being thoroughly non-allegorical. Wright, on the other hand, attempts to interpret the parable within its Gospel context, but he has significantly altered the traditional interpretation of that context.

To successfully critique such diverse interpretations requires one to come to some conclusions regarding one’s own interpretation of the parable. This can only be done with due appreciation for the context in which the parable is found since we can only come to definite conclusions about how Matthew understood the parable. Consequently, some of the scholarly issues surrounding the Gospel of Matthew as a whole were discussed in Chapter Two.

The immediate context of the parable of the Talents, however, is the Mount of Olives discourse. The conclusion of Chapter Three was that this discourse has two focal points: the imminent fall of Jerusalem and the temporally distinct coming of the Son of Man at the end of the age. The parable of the Talents comes in the context of the latter and teaches something about the nature of preparedness for the coming of the Son of Man at an unknown time. Just as a rapacious master wants a return on his investment so the Son of Man wants a return from ‘the secrets of the kingdom of heaven’ that have been entrusted to his disciples. Just as that master will reward those servants who make increase so the Son of Man will reward those disciples who take what has been entrusted to them and make increase for the sake of the kingdom. Just as the master punishes a servant who fails to use what has been given to him so the Son of Man will punish disciples who fail to make increase for the sake of the kingdom.

This, then, is what Matthew understands the parable to be teaching. However, as Chapter Four discussed, William R. Herzog II attempts to get behind this interpretation to what Jesus intended the parable to teach. Herzog does this by using a
dubious comparison with the pedagogue of the oppressed, Paulo Freire, as well as a somewhat more convincing appeal to social-science reconstructions of the peasant environment of Jesus’ day. Yet his non-allegorical conclusion, that Jesus spoke the parable to challenge peasants as to their attitudes towards potential whistle-blowers, is not at all convincing. Herzog clearly demonstrates the kind of interpretive extreme that is possible if one abandons the context in which one finds the parables.

N. T. Wright, on the other hand, wants to examine the parable within the Gospel context. However, he has significantly altered the traditional interpretation of that context. Wright argues that the Mount of Olives discourse has only one focal point: the fall of Jerusalem. Instead of forming a focal point in its own right, the material concerning the coming of the Son of Man is a metaphorical way of speaking of the fall of Jerusalem. Using Daniel 7, Wright argues that the coming of the Son of Man from earth to the presence of the Ancient of Days means the vindication of the Son of Man. Therefore, when Jerusalem falls the Son of Man will be vindicated: the city that rejected God’s representative will have been judged by God. However, as Chapter Four argued, Wright’s arguments are shaky. The Mount of Olives discourse can only be seen to have one focal point if Matthew’s careful distinction between preliminary events (‘all these things’) and final events (‘in those days’) is ignored. In addition, Wright’s use of Daniel 7 appears faulty: it has been convincingly argued that in Daniel 7 the Son of Man comes from heaven to earth. As such, there are not sufficient reasons to abandon Matthew’s understanding in favour of Wright’s reconstructed (and therefore hypothetical) Jesus’ understanding.

Both Herzog and Wright, therefore, demonstrate the danger of downplaying the context in which we find the parables. In this, Herzog is at least overt about applying such a methodology, just as he is open about the hypothetical nature of the exercise. Wright, however, attempts to interpret the parable within the wider context whilst neglecting those details that oppose his interpretation. As such, both can be legitimately criticised for arguing for an interpretation of the parable not intended by Matthew. After all, the earliest source of the parable is Matthew’s account. We would require rather incontrovertible evidence to abandon the earliest understanding of the parable that we have. To put it simply, neither Herzog nor Wright provide this evidence.
THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS AND JESUS

Yet does this mean we can say nothing about Jesus’ understanding of the parable? Not necessarily, but such discussion must needs be recognised as hypothetical. One possible way forward would be to apply Richard Bauckham’s thesis, discussed in Chapter Two, that Matthew is writing a gospel that records what he considered to be important for the wider Christian church about the life and ministry of Jesus. Prior to Bauckham, scholars generally pictured Matthew as directing his gospel to the needs and abuses within his own community. Thus, given that Matthew consciously moulded the traditions to suit these issues – even creating material if none could be found – then he is not to be trusted in matters of historicity such as the situation in which a particular parable was spoken by Jesus. However, if Bauckham is correct then Matthew is not ‘pushing his own barrow’. Rather, his more general aims suggest that he has less need to shape the tradition. As such, one need not question Matthew’s general faithfulness to his sources.

Applying this to the parable of the Talents, then, one can say that Matthew’s understanding of the parable essentially follows directly from Jesus’ understanding of the parable. Jesus felt that the special teaching that the disciples had received from him had not been entrusted to them merely for their own sake. Rather, he had entrusted it to them so that they might use it to further the kingdom of God. The judgment that falls upon the third servant demonstrates just how serious Jesus felt this issue was. The eschatological fate of disciples rests upon how they make use of what they have learnt from Jesus.

THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS AND ME

It must still be acknowledged that this reconstruction is hypothetical, based on Matthew’s faithfulness to his sources. This might not be sufficient for some scholars; personally, I find it rather compelling and not a little frightening. For I, too, as a postgraduate Masters student have been entrusted with knowledge about the kingdom of God. But how am I using that knowledge for the sake of the kingdom? The scholarly tendency is to bury one’s knowledge in the ground of obfuscation (for example, articles and books targeted at other scholars) or even agnosticism (‘this is what I think, but no one can be sure of anything, so let’s not be too definite’). Yet the master wants a return. How can I use the knowledge I have received from the research that went into this
thesis in such a way as to double its worth? That is the personal challenge of the parable of the Talents.


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