

Recent Research on the Parable of the Wicked Tenants: An Assessment

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The Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:1-12) remains in the spotlight as one of the most debated—and misunderstood—parables of Jesus. Three factors lead to failure in understanding this parable: (1) ignoring its OT and Jewish context; (2) the desire on the part of interpreters to avoid any thought of judgment; and (3) the desire to avoid any correlation with Jesus. It is concluded that this parable is a juridical parable, modeled after Isaiah's juridical parable, or song, of the vineyard (Isa 5:1-7), which passes judgment against the ruling priests of Jerusalem.

Key Words: parables, tenant farmers, vineyard, Dodd, Jeremias

If, as Luther said, scripture has a wax nose,¹ parables are "absolute sculptor's clay." Whatever one thinks is the gospel—or even a good idea—is read into the parables. If in Adolph Jülicher's day the scandal was the Church's allegorizing the parables,² in my judgment the offence of our day is method that allows an equally unjustifiable reading into parables of whatever agenda we wish. Parables were not told as creative fictions without reference, despite C. Hedrick,³ or discussion starters, despite W. Herzog,⁴ for they are quite clearly stories with an intent.

Recent research on the Parable of the Wicked Tenants provides ample demonstration of the problem. At virtually no point is there agreement concerning this parable. The amazingly varied approaches provide a window both into parables research and into analysis of the Gospels. An awareness of publications on this parable since the appearance of my own treatment (*The Parable of the Wicked Tenants*) in 1983 provides insight and deserves to be chronicled. As much as

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1. See, e.g., Pelikan 1961, *Luther's Works*, 3.191.

2. Jülicher 1888-89.

3. Hedrick 1994. Hedrick did not treat the Parable of the Wicked Tenants.

4. Herzog 1994: 259-60.

anything, attention to these publications forces consideration of methodological issues.

The problem is that the Parable of the Wicked Tenants says too much for many scholars to be comfortable that it represents the view of Jesus, but if taken out of the sphere of Jesus talking about his own mission, the interpretations appear trivial, banal, and without significance.⁵ The problem was felt so keenly by J. C. O'Neill, who could accept neither that Jesus spoke of himself with this parable nor that the parable could stem from the Church, that he suggested the parable was originally told by John the Baptist.⁶ The problem is so large that several who have attempted to reconstruct an earlier parable in which Jesus did not refer to himself end up saying the parable frustrates any attempt to understand or is mutilated.⁷ Surely, however, this act of desperation is too extreme.

Since the publication of my own analysis in 1983 (and I make no assumption that every contribution has been included in my research), over 60 articles or specific discussions of this parable have appeared. They range from a few pages to over 100 pages⁸ and treat every imaginable issue. Since an overview of recent research cannot treat each work individually, I will treat primary issues and will group approaches thematically.

Grouping recent research thematically, however, is no easy task. When I surveyed representative approaches to the parable in my earlier study, the task was relatively simple. One could discuss Adolph Jülicher, deallegorizing approaches, W. G. Kümmel, and novel approaches, and fairly well cover the field. Now the picture is much more complex. The complexity results partly from the deficiencies of these earlier attempts but partly also from disagreements over methodological issues and partly from ideological concerns. These methodological and ideological disagreements haunt the efforts to interpret the parable and diminish the value of the contributions. This is not to deny value is present, for worthwhile information and significant insights are to be found in many of the studies, even where one may find points of debate.

ALLEGORY AND LITERARY CRITICAL CONCERNS

One of the key issues, of course, is the understanding of allegory. Rare is the person who would confess to approaching parables and

5. Herzog (1994) admitted that his conclusions are often minimal and unsatisfying. See the interpretation by Scott (1989: 252-53), and note Hedrick (1994: 27 and 35), who also implied that his resulting interpretations appear banal.

6. O'Neill 1988.

7. Duplantier 1989: 265; Harnisch 1989: 29; Petzholdt 1984: 45; Scott 1989: 252.

8. Mell 1994. This count does not include sermons and popular works.

allegories as Jülicher did. The problem Jülicher addressed was *allegorizing*, not allegory, but he virtually ruined the word *allegory* in the process. Today, despite the recoil many still have against the word *allegory*, Jülicher's position has completely eroded away. Some scholars even urge the use of the word *allegory* to describe NT parables because parables often have more than one point of correspondence.⁹ Some would argue that allegory is not a literary genre at all but a device of meaning,¹⁰ and many would say no distinction can be made between parable and allegory. Both parable and allegory—if allegory is a genre—are stories with two levels of meaning. The more one is aware of OT and Jewish parables, the less one finds it necessary to denigrate allegorical significance. Note, for example, the critiques leveled against Jülicher and his followers by David Flusser and David Stern.¹¹ Even scholars who confidently mark out allegory as something entirely different from a parable end up qualifying their statements to such a degree that the distinctions become unclear.¹² Incidentally, the frequent claim that after an allegory has been interpreted the text may be left behind is simply not true, certainly not more so than for any other form of literature. Otherwise the Wizard of Oz—originally a political allegory on the gold standard, the allegorical significance of which has long been lost--would never be retold.¹³

The number of points of comparison between a story and the reality it seeks to mirror cannot be derived by some preset literary definition. This must be determined by interpretive insight, and in fact some parables have numerous correspondences while others have few or only one. To some degree every parable is molded on its reality or it would not have been told.

Whether one uses the word *allegory* or not is in itself relatively unimportant. What cannot be denied is that various elements in the

9. Blomberg 1990: 29-69; cf. Drury 1985; and Brooke 1995: 281-83. Note that Davies and Allison (1997: 3.175) identify this parable as an allegory.

10. Boucher 1977: 17-25; and Sider 1995: 19-23 and see 58-69.

11. Flusser 1981: 121-22; Stern 1989: 45-66; Stern 1991: 11-12, 16, and 18. See also Wright 1996: 178.

12. See Feldmeier 1994: 9-11.

13. The Wizard of Oz is a wonderful and enjoyable story with a great deal of wisdom, but if one understands the symbolism, it is a historically rooted, howling, political satire on the American scene. The work was written in 1900, about the time of the collapse of the Populist party that was based on an alliance of Midwestern farmers and industrial workers who challenged bankers and economic interests and also wanted a silver standard to replace gold. The scarecrow represents the Midwestern farmers, the tin man the industrial workers, the cowardly lion who can roar but little else represents reformers like William Jennings Bryan (the orator who failed in his presidential campaign), and Dorothy the common person. They all travel along the yellow brick road (the gold standard) to Oz (the abbreviation for *ounce*) to seek favors from the the wizard (the president), who is just a common man who has power by deception.

Parable of the Wicked Tenants are representative of another reality. One is allowed—forced—to see the other reality through the parable. The practice of rejecting some element of the story because it has representative (that is, allegorical) significance is unjustified. At the same time, quite clearly all of the evangelists have shaped their stories. One must legitimately distinguish what is redactional shaping by the evangelists, but one may not exclude an element of the text just because it has representational significance. If the story had no representational significance, it would not have been told.

On the other hand, it is easy to read into the parable representational significance from theological presuppositions (Christian or otherwise) that do not arise from the parable itself. With such a procedure one may conclude that Matthew's account is the most allegorical,¹⁴ while at the same time others argue that Matthew is the least allegorical.¹⁵ Meaning can be assigned because of later Christian knowledge so that the parable points to Jesus' death outside of Jerusalem, the destruction of Jerusalem, the rejection of Israel, and the granting of election to the Gentiles,¹⁶ none of which is explicit in the parable or the Gospel narratives.

Other literary critical issues also have been raised by recent research. R. Brawley focused on the way in which the parable duplicates the main narrative in microcosm.¹⁷ Similarly, M. Tolbert underscored the way in which the parable charts the course of the passion narrative.¹⁸ The relation of the parable to the passion narrative is obviously close, and in some ways the parable serves as an introduction to the passion narrative. Some have attempted to mark intertextual connections between the stone and builders in the quotation of Ps 118:22 at the end of the parable (Matt 21:42/Mark 12:10,/ Luke 20:17) and the mention of stones and buildings in the Apocalyptic Discourse (Matt 24:1-2/Mark 13:1-2/Luke 21:5-6).¹⁹ For all of the rhetorical value that later readers might find in playing off the two contexts and even if Temple issues surround both the context

14. E.g., Harnisch 1989: 25.

15. Milavec 1989a: 102; 1989b: 303.

16. See Stein 1992: 490.

17. Brawley (1995), who labeled the parable a *mise en abyme*, the literary device in which the macrocosm is enclosed by a microcosm. See the similar arguments by van Eck and van Aarde (1989) and by Drury (1985: 65-66).

18. Tolbert 1989: 232.

19. Marcus (1992: 120-21), who therefore saw Jesus as the cornerstone of the new temple; Tolbert 1989: 237. Kim (1987) also emphasized the connections between the parable, the quotation, and the Temple, but he did so both because of the context in the Synoptics and because of the influence of Zechariah. See also Combet-Galland (1987), who used a semiotic analysis for understanding the parable.

and the Jewish understanding of Isaiah 5,²⁰ I find it doubtful that any of the evangelists thought of the connection or expected their readers to link the two Gospel passages. Similarly, although I do think the parable fits thoroughly within a Jewish framework, I am not impressed with the suggestion that the parable is a rabbinic proem midrash with the stone citation being linked to סָקֵל ("clear of stones") in Isa 5:2.²¹ The wording is too different.

Possibly the most helpful discussions from a literary standpoint are the studies that draw attention to the similarity of function of Isaiah 5, the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, and other similar texts. Several scholars point to the tripartite structure in Isaiah 5 and the parable (for example, expectation, disappointment, judgment),²² even if there are both continuity and discontinuity between the two accounts. The most complete discussion of genre is provided by U. Mell, who also included 2 Sam 12:1-7a, 14:1-20; and 1 Kgs 20:35-42. These texts, Isaiah 5, and the Parable of the Wicked Tenants all are narratives about individual cases intended to provoke spontaneous judgments by the hearers.²³ They are juridical parables or parables eliciting self-condemnation.²⁴ These literary-critical studies render even more suspect the suggestions that the allusions to Isaiah 5 in the Synoptic Gospels are later additions. The parable is not the same as Isaiah 5, but the allusions establish resonances for the story and show that it points to the same theological reality.²⁵

ANTI-SEMITISM

This parable is often charged with being anti-Semitic, but this is an area where biases both toward Christianity and toward Judaism—or at least in defence of Judaism—create unlevel playing fields in interpreting the parable. In both cases the parable is subverted. If one is convinced of the typical Christian allegorical reading, by default the

20. Brooke (1995) argues that 4Q500 1 shows that Isaiah 5 was interpreted in connection with the Jerusalem Temple and that therefore the parable is primarily about Israel in miniature, i.e., Jerusalem, its Temple, and its cult. This connection can be demonstrated on other grounds as well. Brooke's instincts about the parable are reasonable, and the Qumran fragment is enticing, but readers may well feel too much has been proved from too small a document.

21. Kimball 1993: 80 and 89-92, following Ellis 1978.

22. Brawley 1995; Jones 1995: 372-73; and Milavec 1989a: 104-5; 1989b: 294.

23. Mell 1994: 82-85. Mell followed Graffy (1979) in reaching this conclusion.

24. See the discussion by Graffy 1979 and Evans 1984.

25. Childs 1992: 345. Any fear that the use of the LXX renders the allusion secondary is unfounded. Quotations were often assimilated to the LXX. See Gundry 1993: 684.

parable is anti-Semitic. A case can be made, however, that the anti-Semitic features have been read into the parable, for they certainly are not explicit. On the other hand, concern to defend against anti-Semitic readings subverts the parable just as easily. This is most obvious in the works of P. Culbertson, A. Milavec, and David Stern.²⁶ When the message of the parable is reduced to God's unflinching predilection for Israel²⁷ or seen as comfort for the Jews,²⁸ something is amiss.

Although several elements in the parable bear on conclusions about its supposedly anti-Semitic character, the most important issues are the identification of the son (which will be dealt with later) and the identification of "the others" in Matt 21:41//Mark 12:9 // Luke 20:16 and "nation" in Matt 21:43. The number of scholars who understand this judgment statement as a rejection of Israel, and "the others" or "nation" as a reference to Gentile Christians or the Church is surprising.²⁹ Even if one were persuaded from other texts that the evangelists believed this, the assertion that this is the intent of this parable is unsubstantiated. The text is much more limited. All three synoptics place the parable in the context of the question from the chief priests and elders about the source of Jesus' authority. In Matthew and Mark the persons addressed at the beginning of the parable are the Jewish leaders, while Luke has Jesus address the people. In Matthew the Jewish *leaders* pronounce their own judgment and must be the persons referred to with "you" in 21:43. In all three narratives the persons who become angry at the end when they realize the story is against them are the leaders. All three also specify that the rea-

26. Culbertson 1988: 264-70; 1995: 219-55; Milavec 1989a, 1989b, 1990; Stern 1989: 53-69; 1991: 188-97. Cornette (1985) was also concerned about an anti-Semitic reading and suggested that the others to whom the vineyard is given are the Pharisees, as those intended by God to lead the Jewish people. Levenson (1993: 226-32) presumed that the evangelists pushed the parable in a supersessionist direction.

27. Milavec 1989b: 307.

28. Culbertson 1988: 267; 1995: 225.

29. Childs (1992: 342), who viewed the tenants as the entire people of Israel, even though on p. 343 he recognized that the kingdom is taken from the chief priests and Pharisees in Matt 21:43; Kingsbury 1986: 645; Lambrecht 1991: 119 and 123; Mell 1994: 149-51; Morrice 1987: 105; Stein 1992: 490; and Stern 1989: 52; 1991: 191. Hagner (1995: 617 and 623), argued the leaders function as representatives of the people, and therefore, their rejection means the removal of Israel's privilege as the people of God. Marcus (1992: 116) interpreted Mark's use of the psalm quotation to mean that God now fights against Israel and that the title "people of God" now refers to Gentiles. Not surprisingly, he complained of the danger of Mark's images, but I would suggest that the danger is in the way he has read Mark. Later (128-29), in an excursus on "you" and "others" in Mark 12:9, he was uncertain whether "you" refers only to the leaders or to the whole people. Davies and Allison (1997: 3.1990: with regard to Matthew) rightly state that the parable implies nothing about the eschatological fate of Israel, and any thought that the parable signals the final dismissal of the Jews is eisegesis.

son the leaders did not seize Jesus immediately is that they feared the people, which indicates that the opinion of the people was quite different from the opinion of their leaders. It also indicates a different attitude toward the people. This is hardly the way to indict the whole Jewish nation.

The identity of "the others" and "nation" is left unspecified, but one might expect this other group would be composed of Jews, particularly if the purpose of Jesus was to reconstitute Israel under his own leadership.³⁰ (Note that the two groups in the preceding parable in Matt 21:28-32 are both Jewish.) On the other hand, a case could be made that "the others" would include both Jews and Gentiles.³¹ In either case, however, to read this text as a rejection of Judaism is not justified. Christians have interpreted the parable in an anti-Semitic fashion, but the parable is not inherently anti-Semitic unless prophetic texts like Isa 3:14 and Jer 12:10 are as well. Like many prophetic critiques in the OT, the parable is an indictment of Israel's leadership.³²

THE VERSION IN THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

Another area of disagreement is the relation of the version of the parable in the *Gospel of Thomas* to the one in the Synoptic accounts. The short, simple, nonallegorical account of the parable in the *Gospel of Thomas* 65 looks so much like the deallegorized scholarly reconstructions of the parable that people often assume that the account in *Thomas* is close to the original version told by Jesus. The fact that the psalm quotation comes as the next logion was viewed as further justification for not viewing the quotation as originally part of the parable. The case was strong enough that even J. A. Fitzmyer, who

30. Fitzmyer (1985: 2, 1281); Milavec (1989a: 106-7), who focused on the twelve (cf. Matt 19:28); (Wright 1985: 83-93); E. P. Sanders (1985: 77-119), but not accepting his discussion of repentance in the message of Jesus.

31. See Davies and Allison 1997: 3.190. Luke-Acts certainly envisions a mission to both Jews and Gentiles, and the same case can be made for Matthew and Mark, even though the Gentiles have not received as much focus to this point in their narratives. But, if the Gentiles are included, the mission to Israel did not end. Although that mission may be difficult, it will continue until the final day (see Matt 10:16-23).

32. See Snodgrass 1983: 77 n. 20 and 90-95. Ulrich Mell (1994: 74-180) has a complicated explanation of the tradition history of this parable that I do not find convincing. Working from a reduced *Urform*, he viewed the development of the parable in several stages. The original was not from Jesus, but from a hellenistic Jewish Christian. The first stage expressed the irrevocable end of the election of Israel similar to 1 Thess 2:15. Later stages reframe the end and, from Mark 12:9c and the quotation of Ps 118:22, create a basis for a mission to the Jews. This was expanded later to include an atonement theology based on Heb 1:1-4. As will be shown later, his reasons for denying the parable to Jesus are not convincing. Further, the ease with which 1 Thess 2:15 and Heb 1:1-4 become frames on which the parable is stretched does not create confidence.

elsewhere was not enamored with the independence of *Thomas*, felt that *Thomas* likely preserves the earliest account of this parable.³³ While several others take this position,³⁴ the number arguing that the *Gospel of Thomas* account is an abbreviation of the version in the Synoptics is large.³⁵ Too often positions are merely stated, and no real discussion takes place of the issues involved in deciding whether the Gospel of Thomas is actually an earlier account.

In my own work I have argued that the *Gospel of Thomas* is a later Gospel representing a secondary orality (I would not argue for direct literary dependence of *Thomas* on the Synoptics) and that the form of the parable in *Thomas* is demonstrably secondary for three reasons: verbal contacts with Luke; the evidence from the old Syriac Gospels that *Thomas* represents a harmonizing tendency in Syria; and the attachment of Ps 118:22 as the next logion in *Thomas*, even though the writer does not understand the connection.³⁶ W. G. Morrice attempted to counter the evidence of the Syriac Gospels by suggesting instead that they have been shaped by *Thomas*.³⁷ For this to be taken seriously, evidence is required of other passages in the Syriac Gospels being shaped by *Thomas*. One can understand easily the attempt to harmonize the canonical accounts within the Syriac tradition, but the logic requiring the Syriac canonical accounts to be harmonized with *Thomas* is far from convincing. S. J. Patterson, in attempting to address the other two issues, admitted the problems involved for those advocating an independent *Thomas* tradition.³⁸ He countered that, in a context of a lively oral tradition, agreement on a few details does not indicate literary dependence. The issue is not literary dependence, however, but whether *Thomas* preserves an account unaffected by the Synoptic accounts in any way. Further, his argument for a source behind Luke and *Thomas* was built on slim evidence. With regard to the attachment of Ps 118:22 as the next logion, Patterson suggested that the present

33. Fitzmyer 1985: 2, 1280-81.

34. Mann 1986: 461; Morrice 1987; Petzoldt 1984: 42-44; Marcus 1992: 112; Davies and Allison 1997: 3.187. Note, however, that Scott (1989: 245) pointed out that even if *Thomas* is independent, it is not obvious that it is superior, for its simplicity may result from its wisdom ideology.

35. Bayer 1986: 96-97; Gundry 1993: 683; Hagner 1995: 620; Lambrecht 1991: 107; Nolland 1993: 948; Sevrin 1989; Wright 1992: 443.

36. Snodgrass 1989: 28-31; see also Snodgrass 1983: 52-54. For others arguing more generally that *Thomas* is late, see especially Tuckett 1988, and 1991, and Risto 1993. See also the assessment of Charlesworth and Evans 1994.

37. Morrice 1987: 106. Similarly Patterson 1993: 60 n. 16. Against his charge that the use of the old Syriac Gospels is anachronistic, it is not anachronistic to argue that a harmonizing tendency in Syria is reflected by these Gospels and that *Thomas* has been affected by the same tendency. The harmonizing took place and is, of course, evidenced by the Diatessaron. Why is there such confidence that *Thomas* is independent of such harmonizing?

38. Patterson 1993: 49-51.

position of this logion in *Thomas* may not be original. As T. Baarda commented, this is a very doubtful solution and, if the connection is due to the wordplay between ܐܘܢ ("son") and ܐܘܢܐ ("stone"), the author of *Thomas* may have had knowledge of the canonical Gospels.³⁹

Possibly the most significant discussion bearing on an assessment of the parable in the *Gospel of Thomas* is the one by J.-M. Sevrin, who analyzed the grouping of three parables in logia 63-65: the Rich Fool, the Great Banquet (which *Thomas* directs against buyers and merchants), and the Wicked Tenants.⁴⁰ The introduction of all three is virtually the same: "A man had. . . ." The purpose of *Thomas* in grouping these three is to demonstrate the futility of any attempt to amass wealth since riches are an impediment to salvation. With regard to the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, Sevrin argued that Thomas has significantly altered the parable by focusing on the servant's lack of knowledge ("Perhaps *he* did not know *them*") and the tenants' possession of knowledge. Knowledge is a key theme for *Thomas*. With this emphasis the author has made the tenants positive characters and the servants negative ones. Sevrin argued further that the reconstruction of the first line of the parable to read a "good" (*chrēstos*) man is in error. (Only the first three letters and the last letter remain in the text.) Rather, the text should read a "lender" (or "usurer": *chrēstēs*). On this reading the proprietor does not represent God but a man of wealth whose riches lead to destruction.⁴¹ The parallels between the parable of the Rich Man in logion 63 and the Wicked Tenants in logion 65 then take on added significance. Both focus on a man of wealth, focus on fruits, end abruptly with death, and have the appended saying, "He who has ears, let him hear." If the reading "lender" is correct, the case that *Thomas* is secondary is overwhelming, but even if one retains the reading "good," Sevrin's explanation of the grouping of the three parables and of the intent of the cryptic ending of *Thomas* still is convincing.⁴² His argument that the Gospel of *Thomas* is a reinterpretation of the Synoptic tradition is very strong.

SOCIOCULTURAL DISCUSSIONS

Another issue affecting interpretation of the parable is one's understanding of the cultural situation. The more improbable—or impossible—one views the story, the more likely one is to see it as an artificial construction and probably from the early Church. The most

39. Baarda 1995: 293-94. On the wordplay, see Snodgrass 1983: 63-65 and 113-18.

40. Sevrin 1989.

41. Sevrin 1989: 437; see also the discussion by Patterson (1993: 142-43), who accepted that *chrēstēs* is the probable reading.

42. The point could be that even a good person focused on wealth ends up with destruction.

important earlier discussions of the sociocultural background were those of Martin Hengel and J. Duncan M. Derrett, both of whom argued that the story was conceivable in the context of first-century Palestine.⁴³ While Mark's account is obviously overloaded with the multiple sendings in 12:5b, the basic story reflects well the tensions between owners and tenants in the ancient world. Even with the sending of the son, most scholars no longer balk at the story, for the sending of the son is understandable in that he would be an authorized agent who could take legal action.⁴⁴ U. Mell and B. Scott still focused on the incomprehensible actions of the owner, with the former seeing the parable as from an early Jewish Christian and the latter uncertain about the parable's meaning because in his view the story ends with the master being a fool.⁴⁵

A further factor for some that makes the story unbelievable is the expectation of the tenants that by killing the son they will have the inheritance. For example, U. Mell argued that tenants cannot inherit and that the focus on the son as heir and on the inheritance stems from a late stage of redaction based on Heb 1:1-4.⁴⁶ The stumbling block is that people read the word κληρονομία ("inheritance") as a reference to legal inheritance. However, the word often means "possession" and is used elsewhere of people usurping property. The most significant instances are of Ahab's seizure of Naboth's vineyard (3 Kgs 20[21]:15-16; Josephus *Ant.* 8.359-60; *J.W.* 2.249), but see also Sir 24:20 and 1 Macc 6:24. The issue is not legal inheritance, but possession by whatever means.

In recent research on the Parable of the Wicked Tenants only two studies provide serious treatment of cultural issues. S. Lewelyn reprinted a four-year lease contract from 44 AD and evaluated previous discussions of the cultural background of the parable.⁴⁷ He argued that it is improbable that a new vineyard would be leased immediately after construction, since it would not be commercially viable for a few years. (Cf. *Jub.* 7:1.) He suggested that a labor contract would be agreed upon instead of a lease contract. However, the parable narrative specifies neither the kind of contract nor the length of time. It merely gives an account of those who do not deliver the fruit when they are supposed to. Lewelyn also objected that Hengel made the difficulty of using legal proceedings in the ancient world the con-

43. Derrett 1963; Hengel 1968.

44. A task servants could not perform. See Snodgrass 1983: 37-38.

45. Mell (1994: 107 and 121-26), despite granting that the son comes as an immediate representative of the owner and that the story is understandable; Scott 1989: 247-53.

46. Mell 1994: 130-31 and 162-65. Dormandy (1989) also connected the parable to Heb 1:1-2.

47. Lewelyn 1992: 86-105.

text for understanding the parable. Lewelyn's primary concerns are methodological, and he argues that the majority of officials in the ancient world did not avoid their responsibilities. While he found aspects of unreality in the parable, he would not say that it lacked a historical core (particularly with regard to tenants seeking illegal possession of an estate) or that Jesus could not have told the story.

More important by far is the study of C. A. Evans, who builds on the work of Hengel and collects information from several early papyri to confirm that the parable is entirely realistic in its description of landowners and those who leased from them. The language detailing the lease agreement, development of the vineyard, disputes over debts, rejection of emissaries, and redress of wrongs is all closely paralleled in the papyri. He makes the important point that tenants were not always poor farmers, but often fairly well-to-do individuals.⁴⁸ Further, Evans demonstrates form-critically that the features of the story are paralleled in various rabbinic parables. After analyzing the parable from a traditon-critical standpoint, he sees the parable as Jesus' critique of the Temple establishment.

The purpose of discussion of cultural factors may need clarification. In arguing that the story is culturally understandable, no one is suggesting that it tells of an everyday occurrence. Stories are told because something unusual happens; in this case it is a reprehensible murder. Nor is there any thought that the details of a cultural understanding provide an unknown key to explain the purpose of the parable. The discussion about cultural factors is merely to determine whether the parable constructs a believable narrative world or whether it would have required so much of first-century hearers that it would have sounded like science fiction. The story would have been unexpected, possibly even shocking, but it fits in the first-century Palestinian narrative world. Conflict over farming agreements were an all-too-common occurrence.

Other recent contributions to understanding the parable, however, take the sociocultural issues in an entirely different direction. J. Hester and W. Herzog have stood the parable on its ear by arguing that the parable originally was told to express the plight of Jewish tenant farmers who originally owned the land but now were forced to work as tenants.⁴⁹ The owner and his vineyard do not represent

48. Evans 1995. While Rowlandson (1996: 207-9 and especially 266-79) does not discuss our synoptic parable, her analysis of landowners and tenants in Roman Egypt provides further confirmation of the picture presented by Evans, including discussion of absentee landlords, problems with tenant debts, and the fact that lessees often did not do the work themselves but were independent entrepreneurs with some social status.

49. Hester 1992; Herzog 1994. See also Patterson (1993: 238-39) for a similar reading of the parable in Thomas.

God and his people but a human despot or the ruling elite and the abuse of peasant farmers. For Herzog, who views the parables against the backdrop of the twentieth-century Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, even the creation of a vineyard would disturb the hearers, for it would mean the displacement of the original owners, probably through the foreclosure of loans.⁵⁰ By killing the son the tenants reclaim their rightful ownership. For Hester the purpose of the parable was to expose systems of group and class relations with respect to the theme of land and inheritance, themes that resonate in Herzog's interpretation, but to which he adds the view that the parable codifies the futility of violence.

Only a couple of comments can or need to be made in response. These readings sound politically correct, but they are a usurpation of the parable. They ignore completely the context of the metaphors and imagery within the OT and Judaism,⁵¹ and they show no bridge between their suggestion and Jesus' message. How is one to know that Jesus (or the evangelists) addressed the plight of tenant farmers? Further, as both Evans and Rowlandson show, it is a gratuitous assumption to presume that the tenants were peasants.⁵²

One further sociocultural approach must be mentioned. J. A. Overman interpreted Matthew's version of the parable in the context of the Roman control of Palestine.⁵³ He viewed Matthew as addressing two questions of theodicy: why Jesus was killed and why Jerusalem was destroyed. The answer in both cases is that the leaders of Israel had failed. Corrupt leaders like the ones who killed Jesus have brought destruction on the land, and now God will give the kingdom to tenants who will pay their fruits *to the Romans* in a timely fashion. However, Matthew never explicitly ties the destruction of Jerusalem to the death of Jesus. This parable does not speak of the destruction of Jerusalem but of the destruction of the leaders, as Overman himself argued. In the Parable of the Wedding Feast (Matt 22:1-14), which *may* allude to the destruction of Jerusalem, the son does not die. The lament over Jerusalem (Matt 23:37-39) is connected to the rejection of all God's messengers, not just the son. Further, Matthew is not concerned with paying fruits to Rome. He is concerned with paying fruits to God. It is not the foreign king who is provoked in this parable but the divine King—God.

50. Herzog 1994: 102-4.

51. See, e.g., Culbertson (1988: 263; and 1995: 220-21), who asserted that it is virtually impossible to imagine Jesus using the image of the vineyard other than as a representation of Israel.

52. Evans 1995: 390; Rowlandson 1996: 209, 269.

53. Overman 1995.

THE SON

The role and significance of the son in the parable continue to be heavily debated. Presuppositions are probably more at work here than anywhere. Is the son a self-reference by Jesus,⁵⁴ without referent at all,⁵⁵ a symbol of forgiveness and goodness,⁵⁶ a christological allegorizing by the early Church,⁵⁷ a reference to John the Baptist,⁵⁸ an allusion to the conflict between Ishmael and Isaac,⁵⁹ or possibly a reference even to Isaiah?⁶⁰ On the one hand, the son is not a major character in the story; the owner and the tenants are the primary characters. On the other hand, the son is not without significance, for his murder is the climax causing the final action of the story. If the stone citation is added because of the wordplay between בן and אבן ,⁶¹ then of course the position of the son is enhanced.

The attempts to downplay the significance of the son in the story are not convincing.⁶² If the concern were merely the clash between a landowner and tenants or a story emphasizing the patience of God in continually sending messengers, the story could have omitted the son and spoken only of the sending of servants until the owner took action. The entrance of the son creates a turning point, and the refusal to acknowledge this fact is guided more by ideological concerns than parable interpretation. Further, Milavec's argument that neither Mark nor Matthew intended the son to refer to Jesus does not convince.⁶³ As Milavec himself recognized, both Gospels present Jesus as

54. Bayer 1986: 109; Blomberg 1990: 250-51; Charlesworth 1988; Feldmeier 1994: 7-9; Gundry 1993: 686, 691; Kimball 1993; Kingsbury 1986; Lambrecht 1991: 114-15; Stein 1992: 491-492; Wright 1996: 178-79, 497, 501, 565-66; Young 1995: 215-22.

55. Milavec 1989a: 100-104; 1989b: 301-4; 1990: 32-33. Note the contrast between Milavec (1989b: 302), who said that Mark does not focus on Jesus as heir, and Tolbert (1989: 231-70) who labeled her second division of Mark (11:1-16:8) "Jesus, the Heir of the Vineyard."

56. Petzholdt 1984: 41 and 44.

57. Mell 1994: 114-15. Obviously this position is chosen by many others not included in this survey of recent research.

58. Stern 1989: 57-65; 1991, 192-96. This position was offered by Gray 1920.

59. Levenson 1993: 228. He also found allusions to the Jacob story and the Joseph story.

60. Aus 1996.

61. Snodgrass 1983: 63-65 and 113-18. This wordplay is accepted now by numerous others. See, e.g., Evans 1995: 403-4; Wright 1996: 497-501; cf. Stern 1989: 66-67; 1991: 195-96.

62. The comment of Duplantier (1989: 268) that reference to a historical person stops the work of the parable outright is not true, as a glance at Nathan's parable in 2 Sam 12:1-7 shows. Nor is it true that explaining a parable kills a parable. Parables are not self-interpreting devices. See the critique of this language by Stern (1989: 49-59).

63. Milavec 1989a: 99-104; 1989b: 301-4; 1990: 32-33.

son/Son of God and as the beloved son.⁶⁴ Certainly the evangelists intended readers to know that Jesus is the one to whom reference is made.

The suggestion that the son refers to John the Baptist has in its favor that the context preceding the parable (the question of authority and, in Matthew, the Parable of the Two Sons) is about John the Baptist. But the hypothesis fails very quickly. The parable is against the Jewish leaders, but they are not the ones who murdered John the Baptist. D. Stern admitted this but argued that Mark condemned them for doing so. He further argued that the stone quotation was a kind of peroration for the whole parable—about which he is correct, but he saw the quotation as pointing to the eventual vindication of John by God.⁶⁵ No evidence exists that John was ever referred to as son or that there was any concern about his vindication. This interpretation would give John the Baptist a status and role unparalleled elsewhere. Jesus' ministry was closely associated with John's, and it is not necessary to denigrate John's role. However, he was one who prepared the way; the climax came with the work of Jesus (see Matt 11:7-15). Surprisingly, Stern did see the parable as ironically pointing to Jesus, even though he thought that we cannot know whether Jesus identified John's death with his own predicament.⁶⁶

The suggestion that the son alludes to Isaac or refers to Isaiah is based on rabbinic exegetical traditions. Questions of procedure and dating make these suggestions very unlikely. As with the suggestion of John the Baptist, when the son is interpreted as referring to some figure other than Jesus, questions still arise as to whether Jesus saw his own fate paralleled in this earlier figure. This is especially the case with Isaiah, the righteous martyr. Even when someone else is suggested, the relevance of the story for Jesus will not go away.

The choices that remain are that the son is a self-reference by Jesus or a christological allegorization by the Church. A decision should not be made merely on prior assumptions about Jesus, for the parable itself is a claim for such a self-reference. This claim at least needs to be analyzed.

U. Mell assigned the parable to a hellenistic Jewish Christian for several reasons: the use of the LXX; the rejection of Israel implied in

64. See especially Matt 3:17, 11:27, 16:16, 17:5; Mark 1:11, 5:7, and 9:7.

65. Note the difficulty Boadt (1989: 170) had when he conceded that the son refers to John the Baptist. As he admitted, Stern's understanding of Ps 118:23 as the *nimshal* does not make sense if it refers to John, and not even a Jewish reader "could miss the resonance of Jesus' own title as that son. . . ." Note further that while Stern recognizes the wordplay between בן and הבונים , he did not mention the wordplay between בן and בן , which certainly he recognized. Was this to avoid an identification with Jesus?

66. Stern 1991: 194-95.

12:9; his scepticism about a prediction of death by Jesus; and the view that no Jew would recognize "son" as a messianic claim. These points do not have the significance given them. That the LXX is used in the various accounts is of no significance, for one would expect wording to be assimilated to the LXX in the course of translation and transmission. As we saw above, this passage is not about the rejection of Israel but a condemnation of Jewish *leaders*. That Jesus did not contemplate the possibility of an untimely death would be astounding, given the death of John the Baptist and the opposition he often encountered.⁶⁷

The assertion that no Jew would recognize the word "son" as a messianic claim is possibly the most important part of the discussion. This assertion was made long ago by W. G. Kümmel,⁶⁸ but especially since the discovery of the Qumran scrolls has been shown to be incorrect. J. Charlesworth lists fifteen texts from early Judaism that show that Jews roughly contemporaneous with Jesus did use the technical term "son" or "Son of God."⁶⁹ The title was *not* necessarily messianic. It was used of "paradigmatic holy individuals, including the long-awaited Messiah, in God's drama of salvation."⁷⁰ The real question is what content "son" carried in the parable. In rabbinic parables of an owner, a vineyard, and a son, the son does not point to the Messiah but to Jacob or Israel. In Wis 2:10-20 the son of God is a righteous person who is being mocked and condemned to a shameful death—surprisingly close to the Gospel accounts. In 4Q *Florilegium* the reference is to the Messiah.⁷¹ On hearing a parable that included mention of the son of a vineyard owner, Jewish listeners would only know that the reference was to a positive figure, a godly person who enjoyed intimacy with God. To reject this parable because it is understood in terms of Nicean christology is unjust. The only questions are whether Jesus saw himself enjoying a special intimacy with the Father and whether he saw himself as having a special mission to and on behalf of Israel, both of which should be answered affirmatively. The parable is an indirect self-reference by Jesus and must be included in "history of Jesus" research.⁷²

67. See the discussion in Bayer 1986.

68. Kümmel 1957.

69. Charlesworth 1988: 149-52.

70. *Ibid.*, 152.

71. See also 1QSa 2:11-22, the debate about 4QpsDan Aa, and *Pss. Sol.* 17:23-31.

72. Note that this parable is one of three reasons why Charlesworth (1988) argued that we can know something about who Jesus thought he was. This same argument about Jesus' self-understanding is carried further on the basis of this parable in Charlesworth 1992. J. Kingsbury (1986: 643, 646, and 652) argued that this parable is the first public claim of Jesus' sonship and the source of the high priest's question in Matt 26:63.

Two additional factors relative to the son deserve mention. First, the fact that the son is thrown out of the vineyard before being killed in the accounts of Matthew and Luke is often interpreted as an attempt to assimilate the story to the actual events of Jesus' death outside the city of Jerusalem. This seemingly logical deduction encounters enormous difficulty on closer analysis. Neither Matthew nor Luke mentions that Jesus was crucified outside the city; this information comes from John 19:17-20 and Heb 13:12.⁷³ Further, to conclude that "outside the vineyard" equals "outside Jerusalem," one must assume that the vineyard metaphor changes from Israel to Jerusalem.⁷⁴ R. Gundry argues that the intent is that the son is ejected from his inheritance.⁷⁵ In any case, once again Christian theological associations that do not belong to the original have been laid on the parable.

Second, the fact that Matthew, unlike Mark and Luke, does not label the son as "the beloved son" remains problematic, especially for the presuppositions usually employed. No convincing explanation for the omission has been offered. D. Hagner only expressed surprise that Matthew omitted "beloved."⁷⁶ Davies and Allison say that perhaps Matthew wanted to preserve "beloved" for the baptism and transfiguration accounts (although he adds it in 12:18 in an OT quotation),⁷⁷ and I. Jones suggests that the omission occurred at a pre-Matthean stage.⁷⁸ The omission is one of the strongest reasons for arguing that Matthew may have preserved an earlier account of the parable.⁷⁹

THE STONE QUOTATION

Quite possibly the most determinative issue for interpreting the parable is one's treatment of the stone quotation. Often little attention is

73. See Giblin (1985: 69), who also pointed out that Luke speaks of the crucifixion as something that happened in Jerusalem. See 13:33 and 24:18.

74. Note Stein (1992: 493), who must conclude the vineyard is both Israel and Jerusalem, and Charlesworth (1988), who has the vineyard standing for Israel on p. 140 and for Jerusalem on p. 141. The image does shift in the parable but not toward a reference to Jerusalem.

75. Gundry 1993: 687. Alternatively, the difference between the readings may result from issues of purity and desecration. See Snodgrass 1983: 60-61.

76. Hagner 1995: 618.

77. Davies and Allison 1997: 3.182 n. 48.

78. Jones 1995: 381-82. Young (1989: 285-86) argued that the inclusion of "beloved" was necessary to the plot of the story to show there were no other heirs. I do not find Petzholdt's argument (1984: 40-41) that Matthew is less christological and more eschatological convincing.

79. Snodgrass 1983: 56-71. Note that Lambrecht (1991: 117-18), even though he viewed Matthew as dependent on Mark, thought Matthew was better structured and reduced the number of missions to their original number of three. Petzholdt (1984: 40) speculated about the possibility of a separate tradition, and Milavec (1989: 101-2) reflected on Matthew's account being the least allegorical.

given to the quotation, for it is assumed to be a later Christian addition to point to the resurrection. Recent treatments of the parable show that many still advocate this explanation.⁸⁰ This position has in its favor the use of the quotation in Acts 4:11 and 1 Pet 2:7. Further, no logical connection seems obvious, for the imagery of the parable is agricultural, but the imagery of the quotation is architectural.⁸¹ Also, no other parable of Jesus ends in a quotation, which in itself is a two-edged sword. If the Church did not add OT quotations to other parables, maybe it did not add this one.

Some scholars suggest that Jesus may have used Ps 118:22 in another context,⁸² especially because of its rejection-exaltation motif and because of its accusation of the "builders" (note also its use in some forms of the passion predictions and the use of Psalm 118 in the lament over Jerusalem). But if Jesus could use the psalm elsewhere, its place at the end of a parable by Jesus is conceivable. This is true *if* the connection can be shown to be meaningful in other respects.

Without question the quotation goes beyond the parable. The parable story ends in destruction, but the quotation is about reversal, about God's creating something marvelous out of what human leaders rejected. It is *not* true, however, that the quotation presents an unacceptable shift of imagery. The intermingling of the agricultural and architectural metaphors is not unusual in Jewish literature. Most important of several examples is the vineyard song of Isaiah 5 (to which this parable alludes) which concludes with the explanation "For the vineyard of Yahweh of hosts is the house of Israel."⁸³

At the heart of the question about the place of the quotation is the issue of the relation of *meshalim* to their *nimshalim*, of the parable narratives to their applications or explanations. Too often NT scholars have ignored such explanations as later additions, but the effectiveness of a parable often depends upon its *nimshal*. In fact, David would never have known Nathan's parable was against him without the explanatory *nimshal* (2 Sam 12:1-7). Of particular interest is the comment of David Stern that from a rabbinic perspective the quotation of Ps 118:22 may be part of the parable and that one may not rule out the possibility that Jesus used scripture in the *nimshal* or seized upon

80. See, e.g., Childs, Culbertson, Evans, Feldmeier, Harnisch, Herzog, Lambrecht, Mann, Marcus, Mell, Morrice, Scott, and Trimaille.

81. E.g., Culbertson 1988: 267; 1995: 225-26; Feldmeier 1994: 14.

82. Mann 1986: 466; Nolland 1993: 949.

83. See also 2 Sam 7:10-17; Jer 2:21-26, 12:7-10, 18:9, 31:27-28; 1QS 8:5; 1 Cor 3:9; Eph 2:21-22 with 4:16; and 1 Pet 2:5. Culbertson (1995: 225) stated that it is illogical to attach a *nimshal* about a building to a *meshal* about a vineyard, even though on p. 220 he had argued for a strongly established association between a vineyard and the house of Israel. Of interest is the comment by Stern (1991: 18) that rabbis intentionally planted inconsistencies between the *meshal's* narrative and its *nimshal*. However, I do not think that this is the case with the parable under consideration.

a verse as the specific occasion for his parable. In his estimation the Psalm quotation fits perfectly with reading the parable as a blame *mashal* attacking the Jewish leaders for their treatment of John the Baptist.⁸⁴ We have already commented on the inappropriateness of interpreting the son as a reference to John the Baptist, but Stern's assessment of the role of the quotation is correct and does not depend on his interpretation of the son. Quite clearly the quotation functions as a *nimshal* for the parable, regardless of which choice one makes about the reference of the son. The only questions are whether this *nimshal* functions convincingly and whether it was attached from the first or only added later.

Two keys open the way to answering these questions. The first is the three-way wordplay between בן, אבן, and הבונים ("son," "stone," and "the builders"). The wordplay between the first two was particularly common (see, e.g., Matt 3:9/Luke 3:8).⁸⁵ The more that scholars are attuned to the Jewish background of the NT, the more likely they are to recognize the validity and significance of the wordplay.⁸⁶ "Builders" was a traditional, metaphorical reference to Israel's leaders. The quotation says with scriptural authority what the parable says: the stone (son) has been rejected by the builders (the religious leaders). The quotation moves beyond the parable to include the expectation of vindication, similar to the lament over Jerusalem which also concludes with a note of hope expressed through Ps 118:26.

The second key in determining whether the quotation was originally attached to the parable has to do with how and when the intent of the parable was perceived. The problem with most readers is that they know the story too well. It is taken as a christological allegory, but certainly none of the original hearers heard it that way. We have

84. Stern 1989: 66-67. Compare with Stern (1991: 197), where he suggested that this parable may be one of the earliest testimonies to the inherently rhetorical use of scriptural exegesis in a narrative parable. Du Plessis (1991: 137-40) showed how the quotation functions with the parable from the standpoint of speech-act theory, although he did not deal with the question of the origin of the quotation.

85. On the wordplay, see Snodgrass (1983: 113-18). On the three-way wordplay see also Stern (1989: 66-67; 1991: 195-96) and Young (1995: 319). Recognition of the wordplay necessitates that the attachment of the quotation at least had to occur in a Semitic milieu. See Marcus 1992: 112; Mell 1994: 157. However, Marcus's understanding of the quotation to mean that now God fights against Israel (p. 116) goes too far.

86. In addition to those referred to in the previous note, see Bayer (1986: 105), Cornette (1985: 47), Gundry (1994: 689), Kim (1987: 135-38), Kimball (1993: 89), Milavec (1989b: 307), Trimaille (1989: 253), although he deemphasized the wordplay, since it would not have been present in Greek, and Culbertson (1995: 226), who missed the significance of the wordplay and for some reason said that the wordplay is in Aramaic and that the Hebrew does not offer the same opportunities for double entendre. The wordplay is easiest in Hebrew but would be sustained in Aramaic.

filled in the punch line before we know the story. How would a Jew, particularly a Jewish leader, have understood the parable? At what point would he know that the parable was directed at him and become angry? No Jewish leader would willingly identify with the tenants in the story; he would have to be forced to see the identification. To ask the question another way, how can one move in Matthew's narrative from the judgment the hearers themselves pronounce in 21:41 to the anger they have and the desire to seize Jesus?⁸⁷ Stern is correct to reject the lofty rhetoric of Christian interpreters who view the parables as self-interpreting.⁸⁸ What allows the intent to dawn on the hearer? The quotation is the key to understanding. Without it, the identity of the tenants and, therefore, the intent of the parable is unknown.

Psalm 118 was an important psalm with eschatological overtones in first-century Judaism, but exactly when an explicitly messianic interpretation was attached is unknown. Several of the studies of the parable provide helpful background information on this topic.⁸⁹ At a later period Ps 118:22 was associated with the rejection of David by the "builders" (i.e., the story of Samuel and David's father, 1 Sam 16:6-13), but while it is tempting to assume that this interpretation was present in the first century, the evidence will not support the conclusion. Psalm 151 in the LXX and Qumran Scrolls describes the account of David's anointing but does not allude to Psalm 118.⁹⁰ The Jewish background here may be tantalizing but is not early enough to establish a specifically messianic understanding of the psalm.

Regardless of our lack of precise information on the interpretation of Psalm 118, in my estimation the quotation was originally part of the parable and pointed the parable against the Jewish leaders. The quotation is the interpretive solution.

THE MEANING OF THE PARABLE

As is obvious, recent research has offered a bewildering array of possibilities for understanding the meaning of the parable. The necessity one sees of dampening certain theological ideas (such as christology, judgment, or anti-Semitism) or of emphasizing other ideas (such as mercy and goodness) often predetermines one's conclusions about

87. Note Feldmeier (1994: 8), who drew attention to the shift between praise in Mark 12:11 and the desire to kill in 12:12.

88. Stern 1989: 49-50; cf. Stern 1991: 86-93.

89. See especially Culbertson 1995: 239-52; and Young 1989: 293-94.

90. Contra Culbertson (1995: 241), who thought Psalm 151 was a midrash on Ps 118:21-29. It is instead a midrash on 1 Sam 16:1-13. See J. A. Sanders 1965: 56.

meaning. A second determinative factor is which aspect of the story one chooses as the focus. Is this a story about God? about Israel? about the son? about the human psyche? or about the character of discipleship? These options are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and while some clearly are not the focus, some should be combined. The issue is what delicate balance provides the framework so that the parable is allowed to do its task without a load of freight being assigned to it or its inherent meaning being deleted. Possibly a list of positions taken by recent research will be helpful:

1. The parable has a dual purpose of polemic and persuasion. It is a story of the divine pathos and shows that the longsuffering God can still judge, but there is also fruit expected under new tenants.⁹¹
2. Quite similar is the suggestion the parable is about the divine commitment to his people and the unbelieving response of rejection. It shows that God is still guardian of his vineyard, and there will be a restored people who bear fruit.⁹²
3. The wicked tenants represent Gentiles or Jews who have rejected Judaism. The parable shows that God has a tenacious sense of ownership toward his vineyard and will make sure it bears fruit. The message is a message of comfort to Jewish people in a time of upheaval. Failure to repent does not exclude anyone from covenanted relationship with God.⁹³
4. Similar to #3 is the suggestion that the parable makes no claims for Jesus or his movement; it expresses God's unfailing predilection for Israel and is a caution to the Church.⁹⁴
5. The son represents a sign (not a historical person) between the first contract, a tenant contract, and the second contract, a gift contract. The parable is not against the tenants but to them⁹⁵ (by implication the vineyard is given to the tenants).
6. Similar to #5 is the suggestion that possibly the parable should be interpreted without reference to judgment. If so the hearer is

91. Brawley (1995), who described the story both as a story of Israel and a story of God.

92. Childs 1992, 345. I find it surprising that Childs downplayed the christological significance of the parable. See Nolland (1993), who said that the absence of the owner has to do with a sense of remoteness and the powerlessness of God. For him the parable says any thought about God's powerlessness is a delusion.

93. Culbertson (1988: 266-70; 1995: 225), who also complained about laity who resist such preaching.

94. Milavec 1989a, 1989b, 1990.

95. Duplantier 1989.

pushed to consider whether the parable expects a final extravagant act. Possibly the narrative ended with the owner giving the vineyard to the tenants.⁹⁶

7. The parable is an original judgment parable of Jesus that makes clear the consequences of rejecting him, the last messenger. After Easter the parable was understood as prophecy and assimilated to the events and allegorized.⁹⁷
8. The parable is from Jesus, and Ps 118:22 belonged to it originally. The elements of the story have metaphorical representation: the good man is every person; the vineyard is the human mind that each must tend; the wicked tenants are negative beliefs, habits, and attitudes; the servants are divine ideas that the ego rejects; the killing of the son is the rejection of the soul's true heir, the indwelling Christ, the true cornerstone of the soul. In a metaphoric sense the wicked tenants are cast out.⁹⁸
9. The parable is about the takeover of peasant land by a rich creditor and the revolt of those wronged. The parable codifies the futility of violence under these circumstances.⁹⁹
10. The parable is directed against the Jewish leaders, and the son is a reference to John the Baptist¹⁰⁰ or to Isaiah.¹⁰¹
11. The parable originally was a story of the prudent grasping of one's immoral choice. Later it was allegorized by the addition of Ps 118:22 and allusions to Isaiah 5 into a salvation history of the Church. Mark's account reflects a Christian community that feared Jewish revolutionaries after 66 AD and was understood to say that these "purgers" would be purged and the inheritance would be given to a new people that prominently included Gentiles.¹⁰²
12. The parable was created by hellenistic Jewish Christians and reflects several layers of dealing with the theology of the rejection of Israel. The parable develops (through the psalm quotation)

96. Harnisch 1989. The attempt to avoid judgment occurs frequently. R. Girard (1987) presupposed that violence can never be blamed on God and therefore chose the rendering of the parable in Matthew because there the judgment is expressed by the hearers, not Jesus.

97. Feldmeier 1994.

98. Winterhalter with Fisk 1993: 112-17.

99. Herzog 1994: 98-113. The approach of Hester (1992) is similar.

100. Stern 1989; 1995: 193-95; Mann 1986.

101. Aus 1996.

102. Marcus 1992: 117-19. Cf. Morrice 1987. Both followed Crossan 1973.

from a total rejection of Israel to "a post-mortal rescue" so that a basis exists for missionary preaching to Israel.¹⁰³

13. The parable is not a pre-Easter self-reference of Jesus. Rather it shows the loyalty and goodness of God, but it also makes plain that scorned salvation is a judgment that seizes.¹⁰⁴
14. The parable allows for the kingdom to fail and the inheritance to be in doubt. The kingdom is an object of tragedy. The owner's fate may be that of the son.¹⁰⁵
15. The parable is a counterattack by Jesus directed against the Temple authorities/the Sanhedrin. The quotation and the parable, which belonged together from the first, are christologically significant because of the oblique portrayal of Jesus' sonship and his expectation of vindication.¹⁰⁶
16. This is a parable from Jesus which tells the story of Israel with a new twist and points to the present moment as the moment of crisis, for God will judge his wicked tenants. This is Israel's story in miniature and points to Jesus as Messiah and rejected Son.¹⁰⁷

Such diverse views cannot be synthesized, even if some of the positions are not mutually exclusive. In my opinion three factors lead to failure in understanding this parable: (1) ignoring its OT and Jewish context; (2) the desire to avoid any thought of judgment; (3) the desire to avoid any connection to Jesus. Awareness of the OT and Jewish background necessitates seeing this parable as a juridical parable. It is told as an accusation against Jewish leaders, almost certainly the Temple leadership. The threat of judgment inherent in the parable cannot be ignored. Nor can one (in my estimation) ignore the significance of the parable for understanding Jesus. The parable is an implicit self-reference by Jesus. At the same time, while the parable is important for christological discussions, christology is not the reason it was told. The parable and quotation imply the importance of Jesus' own role, but the specifics of that role and what content should be assigned to an image such as "son" will have to be determined by

103. Mell 1994: especially 114-64.

104. Petzholdt 1984.

105. Scott 1989: especially 253.

106. Gundry 1993: 682-91; Evans 1995: 405-6. Cf. Kim 1987; Kimball 1993; Young 1989, 1995; Brooke 1995.

107. Wright 1992: 74-76; 1996: 178-79, 232, 497-501, 565-66. Some disparity exists in the two volumes of Wright's work. In the earlier volume he argued that the role of the son in the parable is limited in that he represents only the failure of the sequence. He is the last and most poignant failed messenger. In the second volume the parable indicates Jesus' awareness of his role as Messiah and rejected son.

other texts. The primary concern of the parable is its accusation against the Jewish *leaders* for their insensitivity to what God intended for Israel and what he intended with the ministry of Jesus.

REFLECTIONS

Various issues treated in the recent research on this parable have not been discussed. Too many details and possible nuances exist for all of them to be chronicled. This overview, however, should provide a sense of the issues and landscape.

At the beginning and the end of our study, it is the text that remains. Our explanations are commentary, waiting to be assessed themselves on the next reading of the story. Hopefully, our explanations elucidate the text rather than attempt to recreate it. Without question, the Gospel texts have been shaped by tradition and by the evangelists for convenience and out of conviction. At the same time, some other text, such as a reconstructed *Urtext*, is not and cannot be the focus of our study.¹⁰⁸ The only text we have is the text in the Gospels.

No one reads a text *tabula rasa*; all of us bring to our reading a sense of reality by which we understand the parables (and other texts). If we think we have given up on a theological understanding, we merely provide a sociological or ideological replacement. Far from being more objective than Jülicher, Dodd, and Jeremias, we have become much more subjective in our approaches.

Part of the problem is that, even when we resist allegorizing, we want parables to be totally functioning theologies so that each aspect of the narrative addresses something. We want parables "to stand on all fours." The question is, however, how this parable or any parable functions. How does/did the parable accomplish its purpose? We may ask legitimate questions raised by the parable that the parable does not address, but this would be a reasoning process separate from actually interpreting the parable. Any valid interpretation of the parable must stay in the context of first-century Judaism and its scripture and within the framework of the conflict between Jesus and the Temple authorities. Within these perimeters the parable and its quotation are a powerful indictment of the Jewish leaders and an indirect indication of Jesus' own role. That the parable created the desire to seize him is not hard to imagine.

108. Contra Parker (1996: 82-105), who argues for reconstructing what the evangelists ("in good faith") falsified. His desire to "invent suitable incidents" in which the parables were told is not convincing either at the level of his argument for reconstruction or for his reconstructions of specific parables. He argues the Parable of the Wicked Tenants was told in order to counter a Sadducean "lust for ownership" of Israel.

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