

Searing Light

The Parables for Preachers

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Published November 2008 by the author on the Web

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my son Douglas
who tells me it has a great title.

It is also dedicated to my good friend Paul Brown
who by his own nature reminds me
that learning becomes valuable
only when it has a use.

Thanks

My especial thanks to John Rowe
for making things possible
by criticising and correcting all I write.

The Parables

	Mk	Mt.	Lk.	Th.
1 The Place for a Doctor	2.17	9.12	5.31	
2 The Wedding Guests	2.19	9.15	5.34	104
3 The Patch on the Garment	2.21	9.16	5.36	47d
4 New Wine in Old Wineskins	2.22	9.17	5.37	47c
5 The Divided kingdom	3.24	12.25	11.17	
6 The Strong Man's House	3.27	12.29	11.21	35
7 The Sower	4.3	13.3	8.5	9
8 The Lamp	4.21	5.15	8.16/11.33	33
9 The Growing seed	4.26			(21c)
10 The Mustard Seed	4.31	13.31	13.19	20
11 Food and Excrement	7.15			
12 The Children and the Pet Dogs	7.27	15.26		
13 Salt	9.50	5.13	14.34	
14 The Rebellious Tenants	12.1	21.33	20.9	65
15 The Budding Fig Tree	13.28	24.32	21.29	
16 The Night Porter	13.34		12.36	
17 The Litigant		5.25	12.58	
18 The Eye		6.22	11.34	(24)
19 The Servant of Two Masters		6.24	16.13	47a
20 Looking for Fruit		7.16	6.44	45a
21 Judging Fruit Trees		7.17/12.33	6.43	43
22 Two House Builders		7.24	6.48	
23 Children in the Market Place		11.16	7.32	
24 The Rescued Ox		12.11	13.15/14.5	
25 Leaven		13.33	13.21	96
26 Blind Guides		15.14	6.39	34
27 The Lost Sheep		18.12	15.4	107
28 The Banquet		22.2	14.16	64
29 The Unclean Cup and Plate		23.25		89
30 The Body and the Vultures		24.28	17.37	
31 Waiting for the Burglar		24.43	12.39	21b/103
32 The Servant Left in Charge		24.45	12.42	
33 The Master's Capital		25.14	19.12	(41)
34 The Town on a Hill		5.14		32
35 Weeds Among the Wheat		13.24		57
36 Buried Treasure		13.44		109
37 The Pearl		13.45		76
38 The Drag-net		13.47		8
39 The Unforgiving Servant		18.23		
40 The Labourers' Wages		20.1		
41 Two Sons		21.28		
42 The Torch-Bearers		25.1		(75)

43 Sheep and Goats	25.32		
44 New and Old Wine		5.39	47b
45 Two Debtors		7.41	
46 The Samaritan		10.30	
47 The Insistent Neighbour		11. 5	
48 The Rich Farmer		12.16	63/(72)
49 The Barren Fig Tree		13. 6	
50 The Locked Door		13.25	
51 Precedence at Table		14. 8	
52 The Tower Builder		14.28	
53 A King Going to War		14.31	
54 The Lost Coin		15. 8	
55 The Prodigal Son		15.11	
56 The Indestructible Steward		16. 1	
57 The Rich Man and Lazarus		16.19	
58 The Master and his Servant		17. 7	
59 The Widow and the Judge		18. 2	
60 Two Men in the Temple		18.10	
61 Children in the Field			21a
62 Children and their Garments			37
63 The Woman and then Broken Jar			97
64 The Assassin			985

More Than Parables

65 The Father's Gift	7.9	11.11	
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Compacted Parables

66 The Narrow Door	7.13	13.24	
67 The Master Called Beelzebub	10:25b		
68 Treasure from the Storehouse	12.35	6.45	45b
69 The Uprooted Plant	15.13		40
70 The Ploughman who Looks Back		9.62	
71 The Kindled Fire		12.49	10

Introduction

Speaking in parables is not something we twentieth-century westerners do. Though we sometimes make a point by telling a story, we simply don't use parables in our social exchanges today. This is not to say that parable-making has ceased completely. There are parts of the world where people still use them - though the art is dying and will probably soon disappear. The following is an example of a parable told in modern times. I reconstructed it from an article in the Guardian newspaper of the 7th. of February 1980

1980 was a difficult year for Pakistan. In the first place people were becoming increasingly restive under General Zia il-Haq's oppressive rule and then Russia had suddenly moved into Afghanistan, threatening the western frontier. In Islamabad, the capital, a Pakistani tribesman was asked by a journalist if he thought that this new Russian threat meant that the ordinary people would forget their differences with General Zia and rally round the government. Irritated by the attitude of this well-fed professional from the West and his glaring lack of appreciation of the situation of ordinary Pakistanis, the tribesman sought to show him up by telling this story:

"A man was leading his heavily laden donkey along a mountain path when suddenly he saw bandits approaching. The man shouted to his donkey 'Run! Run!' The donkey turned to him and said 'Whoever is my master I will be just as heavily laden as I am now. You run!'"

Unfortunately, being culturally blind to the art the journalist missed the point - not of the parable itself, but of its reflection on himself. He saw it simply as a quaint bit of local colour, useful for the next article for his readers at home.

Since our culture makes it difficult for us to appreciate parables intuitively, if we want to find out how they work we must adopt, in the first instance, a more analytical approach.

The Parable Mechanism.

A parable is designed to illuminate a subject matter by offering a comparison. In parables a likeness to a situation in life is established. This likeness encapsulates a self-evident truth, or what I term a 'logic'.

Whosoever studies the Law and does not repeat it (i.e. teach it to others) is like unto a man who sows but does not reap.

Here the special appeal is to something that is evident; to the avowal that a certain practice - reaping what one has taken the trouble to sow - is evidently sensible or, alternatively, that the negative of it - failing to reap what one has taken the trouble to sow - is evidently foolish. A man who sows but does not reap is put forward as an absurd figure and it is the self-evidence of this that identifies the illustration as parabolic.

The 'logic', which in this particular case can be identified as the foolishness of starting a job but failing to complete it, is the crucial feature of the parable; it is the thing that impresses itself on you when the parable presents itself. As soon as you twig a parable you sense the impact of its 'logic'; however, it is sometimes quite hard to identify

accurately what this is, so let's practice with a few more examples from the Jewish Rabbis of the second century:

How is it with the vine? At first it is trodden under foot and then it is served up on the table of the kings; even so is it with Israel; they are despised in this world, but will be highly praised in the world to come.

Here the 'logic' that illuminates Israel's predicament is our awareness that what appears to be abominable treatment can turn out to be the necessary training for a wonderful destiny. The reason why this 'logic' affects us so strongly - delivers such a thrust - is because it appeals to our experience. It is because we are already aware that in one domain - the making of wine - harsh treatment is necessary if one is to arrive at a desirable goal, that we can transfer this shared *common experience* to another domain - that of Israel's future glorification.

We can see this same reliance on common experience in the following parable:

Don't judge a scholar by his age/ Look not at the vessel, but at what it contains, Many a new vessel is full of old wine and many an old vessel has not even wine in it.

We have learnt from life that the exterior look is no guarantee of the inner contents. The parable concretises this common experience by calling to mind the way in which one can easily be fooled by outward appearances when searching for a good drink. It then deliciously uses this image of an empty jar of vintage wine to deliver the illuminating 'logic' that age and experience are no guarantee of inner worth.

There is one danger in identifying the characteristic feature of parable by using the term 'logic'. This may give the impression that parables appeal to reason, which would be altogether wrong. Because parables rely on peoples' everyday experiences they deal not in ideas understood only by the few, but in common sense. This 'logic' is intuitional rather than rational, which is why I put the word in inverted commas.

A man should always be pliant. How is it with the reed? All the winds come and blow against it, and it sways to and fro with them. When the winds have lulled, the reed resumes its normal position. The cedar, however, does not remain in its place. As soon as the south wind blows, it uproots it and overcomes it.

The intuitional 'logic' here, as I see it, is that it is better to pride oneself in being small and supple than in being huge and unbending.

You may think that in saying this I am reading more into the parable than I properly ought since there is nothing said in it about pride. *Such a criticism highlights an important feature of many recorded parables, which is that they are often unbalanced: the illustration being given in full but the matter it illustrates being treated in a very cursory manner.*

In this case the Rabbi is content simply to indicate his subject matter by the introductory phrase 'A man should always be pliant'. We are therefore left to imagine what has occurred to cause him to deliver this parable. My guess is that one of his disciples has

demonstrated his admiration for the strong unyielding attitude of some powerful person as over against the weak self-critical attitude of some underling. It is from this reconstruction that I get the notion of pride. I maintain that *in many cases such a reconstruction is necessary if one is to get a proper taste of the parable mechanism at work. However, it is important to recognise what one is doing and not to mistake one's reconstruction for historical fact.*

The Parables in the Gospels.

It has always been thought necessary to *interpret* the parables of Jesus, which is strange, for like a good joke a parable should need no interpretation; as a source of illumination it should need no illumination itself. But the fact is that the parables as they stand in the gospels often seem to make things as clear as mud. Because of this state of affairs people have claimed over the years that Jesus' stories *were intentionally enigmatic*: were designed to obscure in some way what they revealed.

Here are some of the scenarios suggested -

- * that Jesus was sending out coded messages comprehensible only to his followers but confusing to his enemies;
- * that the stories were really riddles in which Jesus veiled what he was saying so as to tease peoples' minds into active thought;
- * that Jesus was careful to obscure his truths in stories because he did not wish to force people to see things as he did, but wanted to help them make their own way towards the light;
- * that the parables were in fact great works of art which broke fresh ground in human understanding, requiring people to see things in a quite new and unaccustomed way.

All the above scenarios depend on the premise that *Jesus intended to be enigmatic*. But what if he meant his stories, like the above parables, to be simply illuminating? My thesis is that Jesus intended his parables to be crystal clear:

- * To address people who were confused;
- * To help people who were trapped on the horns of a dilemma;
- * To offer healing to people whose attitudes were all screwed up.

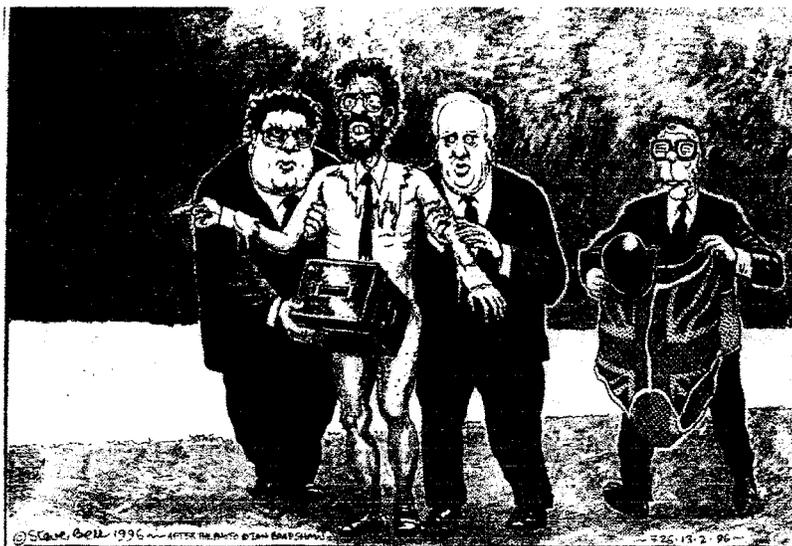
One interesting feature of this change of perspective is that it enables us to make good sense of the tradition's claim that the parables were in large part responsible for the hostility that led to Jesus' crucifixion. It has recently become fashionable to argue that no one would have put Jesus to death simply for the things he said and that we should therefore look either to the fear of the movement he was creating or else to some overtly provocative act - his entry into Jerusalem or his overthrowing of the moneychangers' tables - to explain what happened to him. Given the way in which the parables have generally been interpreted one can sympathize with such a reaction.

However, Christians have always understood, even if unclearly, that Jesus was crucified for being who he was and not for doing anything outrageous. As St. John puts it people could not bear his disturbing light. So if Jesus chose to shed his healing light by using parables it stands to reason that everyone whom he targeted, including his friends, would have been upset by their unbearable revelations. Of course in the case of those who had status in the community their resentment would have been proportionately greater, making it all the more likely that they would try to do something about the parablemaker.

This means that in my parable reconstructions it will be necessary to demonstrate the painfulness of the insights they produced. This is not to say that every parable will have to be seen as directly contributing to the hostility that resulted in Jesus' crucifixion. In each case one will suppose the extent of the hurt and anger to have been proportional to the seriousness of the flawed attitude in question. In cases where the defect was slight the hurt caused by the exposure will have been slight. Similarly the personal circumstances of the target will also have played a part, a friend or a humble person being less likely to be moved to anger and retaliation than a stranger or person of some standing in the community.

If we accept the premise that Jesus' parables were at their telling crystal clear, how is it that they later became so muddled that it became necessary to interpret them? At the outset it has to be taken into account that parables are, by their nature, extremely difficult to preserve (a point seldom if ever raised by commentators). Of course the story itself can be remembered and written down even by a child but recounting the story is the easy part of the exercise.

Let me demonstrate what I mean by using a means of communication we are perfectly familiar with, the political cartoon. As an event-based illustration it shares the same characteristics as the parable though, of course, it is a pictorial illustration, whereas a parable is a verbal one.



The sense of this cartoon, taken from the Guardian newspaper on the day on which I write, is perfectly obvious to me since Steve Bell drew it as a comment on today's political situation, with which I am, like everyone else, perfectly familiar. However, in a few weeks, and certainly by the time this book gets published, the circumstances from which it arises will either have been pushed into the back of peoples' minds or else completely forgotten. Consequently the chances of your twigging it are pretty small.

You will understand the picture of course: a bearded man who has lost his trousers is being offered a ballot box and a pair of outsized underpants to cover his embarrassment. You may even recognise who the gentlemen are but the political awareness offered by the cartoon will almost certainly evade you, which is a pity, for to me it is so fresh and evocative it makes me want to laugh and cry at the same time.

Now if I had the job of preserving this cartoon for posterity, or even of explaining it satisfactorily to you, I would have my work cut out. In the first instance I would have to write a page or two about the political background, which is the Irish question, for even if you are still aware of the significance of this background there will certainly come a time, in the not too distant future I hope, when people will have forgotten it. I would then have to write another couple of pages about the immediate incident that triggered the cartoon: the explosion of the IRA bomb near London's Canary Wharf on Friday the 9th. February 1996 and the diverse reactions of the political parties and governments to this event. Finally, as the icing on the cake, I would then have to tell you something of the cartoonist Steve Bell, about the significance of underpants in his work and of the way in which this particular cartoon echoes a famous photograph in which two policemen were snapped arresting a streaker and using a helmet to cover his private parts.

If you can appreciate the difficulties in explaining a political cartoon to a foreigner you are close to understanding the predicament of the early church when it came to preserving Jesus' parables, for they were presented with an almost identical problem. The basic fact about parables and cartoons, as event-based illustrations, is that they are phenomenally difficult to explain to someone who was not fortunate enough to be present when the event they comment upon took place, since a full awareness of the event, including its background and cultural significance, is intrinsically necessary to a proper appreciation of the illustration - the story or picture - itself. The context of such a cartoon or story gives it its meaning, and therefore removed from that context it loses its force. Consequently, though it is the simplest thing in the world to preserve a cartoon or remember a parable story, little is achieved thereby. This explains why people seldom collect old cartoons nowadays or remembered parables in the ancient world - there are in fact only two in the whole of the Jewish bible. Though a parable or cartoon at its conception, may have been quite brilliantly illuminating, under normal circumstances as soon as it is delivered it is simply left to die.

The fact that the early Church went to considerable pains to preserve Jesus' parables constitutes therefore an important exception to the rule. It can only mean that Jesus made his mark very specifically as a parable-maker. However, the early Church's clear determination at all costs to preserve Jesus' parables could not make up for the fact

that nobody had followed Jesus about recording the events that gave rise to his stories or the questions and attitudes he was addressing. Consequently we find the oral tradition studiously preserving a massive body of original sayings of Jesus in the form of contextless stories - stories which to the outside observer were as devoid of meaning as a volume of political cartoons from a bygone age. In this way they simply passed on the problem to the next generation i.e. to the evangelists.

It is well accepted now that the Gospels were constructed from earlier written sources, themselves based on oral traditions. We can tell this was the case by cross-referencing. This shows that Matthew and Luke not only used Mark as a source but also another written work (or maybe works), generally known as 'Q', consisting of sayings of Jesus. We can also tell that they must both have had other sources as well, for they each include material only found in their respective works.

Some of the material they had to hand would have been in the form of stories about the birth and early years of Jesus. They would have used these to introduce their works. Another lot of material would have been in the form of passion narratives, which they naturally used for the final climax. Thus far the construction of their works was pretty straightforward. Problems only really arose when it came to filling the gap between.

For this they had some useful building blocks to work with. For example their sources contained stories of notable events such as Jesus' contacts with his cousin John and his reactions to the politics of Herod. They also had other similar event-type stories concerning local issues: Jesus' miracles, his confrontations with the authorities, his tours throughout the region and his commissions to his disciples.

However, this event-type material accounted for only a fraction of what remained to hand. The bulk of this would have been in the form of 'sayings of Jesus' such as we find in the Gospel of Thomas (discovered recently in Egypt) and 'Q'. A limited number of these were aphorisms of the type now found in the Sermon on the Mount. However, most were contextless parables: stories that had been recorded without any indication as to how they were originally used.

Many of the parable stories even as they stand in Mark and Thomas are referred to no specific issue. Furthermore a close study and cross referencing of the texts shows that in only a handful of instances at most can any real case be made for a parable having been recorded along with its original context.

If the evangelists - like their 'forbears' in the oral tradition - chose, most fortunately for us, to include this enigmatic parabolic material in their works, against the dictates of a certain common sense, it was not only because they believed anything Jesus had said was fundamentally important but because it formed by far the major part of their 'sayings' material. Had they taken the logical path and discounted it they would have had few sayings of Jesus left to work with.

In other words the sheer bulk of the parabolic material was a cause of embarrassment to the evangelists. We have to see a major part of their creative effort as spent in finding

ways of fitting all these apparently enigmatic stories sensibly into their works - no small task, you can be sure.

The Evangelists' Reconstructions.

Any illustration that has become detached from the event that gave rise to it is perceived as enigmatic. It looks as if it was intended to illuminate something but one knows not what! Both Mark and Thomas made use of this feature in their general approach to the parables. They avoided the embarrassment of more extensive reconstruction work by taking the line of least resistance - claiming that Jesus *meant* his stories to be mysterious and opaque.

To this end both evangelists indicated from the outset that the reader would be required to search for the import of Jesus' stories:

And he said to them "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?" (there follows the parabolic interpretation). [Mk 4:13]

These are the hidden logia which the living Jesus spoke and Didymos Judas Thomas wrote. And he said: He who finds the inner meaning of these sayings will not taste death. [Th. 11]

But it was not enough simply to leave people to their own devices. They needed to be pointed in the 'right' direction. Mark influences his readers by the position he gave each story in his overall narrative. It is noticeable that he gathers his parables into two groups, one at the beginning of his work where he dealt with the strife caused by Jesus' opening ministry and the other towards the end where he was concerned with the closing crisis. Thomas had no narrative so the only direction he was able to provide was the general 'gnostic' ideological colouring of the work as a whole, which one assumes was backed up by the particular community for which he was writing.

A second reconstruction approach used by the evangelists was to make sense of some parables by knitting them together with selected bits of event-material. For example Matthew linked the parable The Rescued Ox/Sheep with Jesus' healing of the man with the withered hand in the synagogue (12:11) whereas Luke attached the same story to Jesus' healing of the man with dropsy in the house of the Pharisee (14:5).

Since there were many more parables than events it is hardly surprising the evangelists were tempted into tying up several parables with the same incidents despite the inevitable confusion this caused. For example, when describing the accusations made against Jesus that he employed demonic powers in his exorcisms, Mark inserted not just the parable The Divided Kingdom but also the story of The Strong Man's House, presumably because he thought both stories were concerned in some way with the exorcism business. Whether his instincts were correct or not, what he didn't seem to realize was that while the first parable appeared perfectly apt in the given circumstances the second didn't and therefore spoilt the effect of the first.

In fact the evangelists were able to slot even more parables into their works by realizing that they could be viewed as twins of other parables which had already been found a good home. Thus, for example, The New Wine in Old Wineskins could be tagged on to The Patch on the Garments, and The Mustard Seed could be treated as an adjunct to the story of The Growing Seed. From a modern reconstructionist's point of view this was an absolute disaster because these stories, which cast different lights, create confusion when read together.

This doubling up and twinning of stories may appear a curiously offhand way to treat Jesus' parables. However, it is important to recognize it for what it really was: a tactic for preserving valuable material which would otherwise have been lost. In other words it would be a mistake to conclude that the evangelists were so naive as to believe Jesus actually told parables in series or constructed them in pairs. Such an idea presumably never entered their heads. Probably all they were concerned about was to find a proper place for the many stories in their sources.

There was one type of local event which afforded the evangelists an excellent opportunity to place a good few stories and that was Jesus' habit of withdrawing to secluded spots to teach his disciples. Though it was apparently well known that such events took place, there would have been no records of what Jesus had actually said on specific occasions. However, the evangelists had these collections of sayings looking for a good home so it is hardly surprising they found them and the sermon-events tailor-made for one another.

Once again we have to understand what is happening here. The fact that Matthew included eleven parables in the Sermon on the Mount does not necessarily mean he believed Jesus was in the habit of punctuating his discourses with stories. It probably only indicates on the one hand his conviction that such discourses took place and on the other his need to find room for his sayings material. This is just as well for, as the story of the donkey shows, parables act as conversation-stoppers and would be quite out of place in a sermon. Their aim is to halt people in their tracks and to get them to think about their attitudes - not at all a suitable tactic to employ in a general discourse.

Allegorization

The commonest approach to the parables adopted by the evangelists was to make sense of the stories by allegorizing them. Given the enormous difficulties of reporting parables, especially in those days, it seems likely that allegorizing the story would have been the usual way of explaining a parable *post eventum*.

To understand the technique let us take as an example the Pakistani tribesman's story of the donkey. Let us suppose that someone had wanted to explain this parable afterwards to a stranger, and been unable to give a full scale reconstruction of the event. It is likely she would have first told the story and then indicated the situation it

referred to by pointing out the parallels - that the man leading the donkey was General Zia, the donkey itself the ordinary Pakistan people and the bandits the Russian army gathering at Pakistan's borders.

Once having made these connections it would have been the easiest thing in the world to avoid the need for explanations altogether by simply changing the story in ways that made these parallels self-evident. For example President Zia could easily have been indicated by making the man a general, and the Russians by turning the bandits into a great bear. Thus with a few simple changes the meaning of the parable might have been made evident in the story itself.

For all its elegance it has to be admitted that this allegorization process involves an unfortunate reduction in the general impact of the parable. We have lost all sight of the journalist and the way in which the story targeted his attitude. Furthermore the story itself has become somewhat less than naturalistic, thereby blunting its thrust. But at least its basic point has been preserved, which is better than nothing at all .. or is it? In any case, in first century Palestine this sort of thing was often the best that could be done for the money!

Since this was in all probability the normal way in which parables were reported it is perfectly possible that some of Jesus' stories were allegorized in this way even before they came into the hands of the evangelists. However, the parables in the Gospel of Thomas appear to have been allegorized very sparingly, if at all, which suggests that most of the allegorizations we find in the Gospels are due to the evangelists themselves. This means, of course, that we are not dealing with eyewitnesses' allegorizations but with allegorizations produced by people who had little if any knowledge at all of the original sense of the stories. This is another way of saying that the allegorizations we find in the Bible are reconstructions involving guess-work. They are constructed in much the same way as eyewitness allegorizations, only here the parallels are worked out imaginatively.

Mark actually mapped out his allegorical approach for his readers' benefit in relation to the parable of The Sower (4.3), attributing the allegorical explanation to Jesus, of course. It is just as well that he did for the parallels he comes up with in the case of this particular story are so complicated that it is unlikely any of his readers would have worked them out for themselves (Matthew has employed the same tactic as regards the parable of The Weeds Among the Wheat (13.24) for the very same reason).

Fortunately, with the remaining parables, in which readers are left to find the parallels on their own, the allegorizations are made fairly self evident in the way in which the evangelist in question recounts the story. In the first place the evangelists in the main use a very limited number of parallels: kings and masters symbolize God, the king's son Jesus himself, enemies the devil, servants the early Christians and growing plants the Kingdom. Then again, the general subject of most allegorized parables is the Second Coming since it was an expectation that completely filled the lives and thoughts of the early Church. For this reason banquets and weddings can generally be taken to symbolize the great feast that will be held at Jesus' return, i.e. the *parousia*, and exclusions from these occasions stand for judgements against the wicked.

The Masking of the Parable Maker

When it came to dealing with Jesus' stories the evangelists had to be right in thinking their first priority was to find some way of preserving them. However, though with a little thought and imagination I can understand why they proceeded to treat them in the way they did, I have to hold them responsible, albeit involuntarily, for projecting a false image of the parable-maker which has dogged Christianity ever since. For the Synoptic Gospels certainly lend credence to the idea that Jesus was a sort of Guru who went around teaching people words of wisdom half hidden in enigmatic stories. It is fortunately not the full picture for behind this sermonizing image one can still detect another figure, that, I believe, of the real Jesus: of a man who used brilliantly illuminating stories to offer healing to a community riven by twisted attitudes.

So though one can sympathize with the evangelists in their predicament and applaud their determination to preserve Jesus' parables, we have to hold them responsible in their reconstruction work of masking the parablemaker by falsifying what he had been about. In fact Jesus' parables were not, as Thomas claimed, 'hidden sayings' that forced people to search out their meaning if they wanted to become true disciples. Nor were they coded messages - deceiving communications intended for outsiders - as Mark (and Matthew and Luke following him) tried to make out.

"To you has been give the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven. "
14.11-121

I don't want to get involved in the evangelists' visions of the parablemaker since I believe they came into being by default rather than by design. Suffice it to say that on the one hand the early Church judged Thomas' gnostic view to be heretical and on the other hand that we find it hard to take Mark's 'deceiving messages for outsiders' view seriously since Mark himself and the other synoptic writers contradict it at numerous points in their Gospels. Indeed it is clear that Jesus did not aim his parables at *outsiders*, as Mark would have it, but at twisted attitudes *wherever they appeared*. In fact we can tell from their handling of the material that all three synoptic writers must have had a slightly different understanding of what Jesus as a parablemaker was doing but none of them bother to try and present us with a consistent and believable picture. Indeed it seems clear that their preoccupation was not to present the true face of the parablemaker but rather to give a convincing account of who he was – the god-of-the-marginal's faithful servant which is what the expression 'Son of God' in fact means- and thereby preserve as much as was possible of what he had said and done.

The trouble is that for some of us today it is difficult to accept who Jesus was simply on the evangelists' say so. If we are to come to know who Jesus was for ourselves we need to have a clear path to the historical figure and to the real face of Jesus the parablemaker. In this sense we are obliged to try and get back behind the evangelists since they (and those before them in the tradition) were responsible for masking this face - with the best intentions of course.

The work of historians throughout the last century was an attempt to do just that. Their efforts did not go entirely unrewarded since we certainly now know a lot more about the social, geographical and historical situation in first century Palestine than we used to. However, it has to be said that in the main these historians were not responsible so much for removing the masks wherewith the evangelists had covered the face of the historical Jesus as they were for inventing a whole range of new ones. Thus at the beginning of the century we were presented with Jesus the great teacher who used parables as pedagogical tools to impart general moral and religious principles to simple peasants. Then in the thirties we had Jesus the riddler who told strange and vivid stories to arrest people's attention while keeping them in sufficient doubt about his precise intentions as to tease their minds into active thought. Then in the second half of the century we had Jesus the religious genius who in his parables created great works of art that provided new and undreamed-of spiritual vistas for those who took the trouble to comprehend them. Then towards the end of the century we had a conservative revamping of the evangelists' allegorical mask in which Jesus was seen as the one who creates stories as miniature novelettes which communicate their message only gradually, thus leaving people with the space to make their own personal commitment.

All these masks had in common one fact, which is that they saw parables as essentially tricky or difficult, requiring time, study, careful thought and effort to understand. As such they were essentially products of the twentieth century academic mind. This is hardly surprising considering that twentieth century New Testament study was dominated by university academics. Such people inevitably see the world as made up on the one hand of leaders who teach and create and on the other of followers who learn and admire. Consequently it is perfectly natural that they should have provided Jesus with a variety of masks that put him clearly on *their* side of this great divide.

However, what our unmasking of the parablemaker now demonstrates is that Jesus was no teacher or artist who approached his fellow creatures from a position of superiority but on the contrary a person without status who met the people around him strictly on a level. For this is what our new attitude-straightening understanding of parable-making shows. Here there is no long, difficult, mindbending process of learning, where all the advantage is with the clever and learned, but rather a sudden, shocking confrontation with a crystal clear reflection of someone's twistedness, followed by a moment of decision. Here all the advantage is with the poor and outcast - those with the least face to lose. In this moment of decision the choice is either to swallow one's pride and be healed or else to harden one's heart. Such an approach was of course bound to worry the people at the top of society even as it fascinated and intrigued those at the bottom.

The Task Left to Us by the Evangelists.

This leaves us with a tricky problem. It is simply not enough to hypothesize that Jesus used stories in certain forgotten circumstances to make people's twisted attitudes devastatingly clear, and then to go on to explain how it was that the early Church involuntarily turned such stories into enigmatic wisdom teachings. It clearly behoves us

to demonstrate our chosen portrait of Jesus as parable-maker by imaginatively reconstructing the stories ourselves so as to show, as best we can, how they might have come across originally.

In the first instance this will often, though not inevitably, involve deconstructing the evangelists' work, i.e. abstracting a story from the surrounding material, identifying the `logic' and using this to restore it as far as possible to its original state, by freeing it from the allegorical accretions.

Once this has been done we shall then have to set about reconstructing the parable, by supplying this refurbished story with an appropriate event against which it can be read. Of course we shall in the first instance consider those offered by the evangelists themselves. However; where these cannot be made to tie in with the story's `logic' we shall put our confidence in the story-teller and go looking for an adequate event elsewhere.

When carrying out this reconstruction work there will be an important principle to respect which is that one must not come up with something unattested by the gospel material itself. In other words we are not involved in a sort of archaeological dig: hoping to discover something completely new about Jesus. Consequently, in the first instance we will go looking for events in the material within the Gospels. If we are forced to search wider we must still make certain that the Gospel records control the endeavour.

To many people this imaginative reconstruction exercise may seem a dangerous step to take so let's just remind ourselves of the limits of the exercise. We are not seeking to rewrite the Gospels. We do not want people to take our reconstructions too seriously. We don't pretend that they can be anything other than, at best, convincing possibilities. In fact all we are hoping to do by putting them forward is to fill out this image of the parable-maker as the one who provided our dark world with his searing yet healing light.

What I Am, and Am Not, Saying.

When the reader has completed reading the following studies, which are my analyses and imaginative reconstructions of every extant parable of Jesus, it will be the most natural thing in the world for him or her to think that while some of them are perhaps quite convincing others are inevitably less so. At this point the reader will very likely begin to question my basic thesis: that parables are designed to illuminate a subject matter by offering a comparison, and begin to wonder whether it is not the case that while some of Jesus' parables may fit into this overall scheme others may not and does this not mean that there are probably more types of parable than I have allowed for?

While firmly denying that this is the case I would like the reader to be aware of my equal conviction that had we been fortunate enough to know more about the events that gave rise to Jesus' parables we would certainly find a richness in their makeup and a breadth in their variety that would make these imaginative reconstructions, the fruits of my poor imagination, seem narrow indeed. Consequently I am far from believing that I

have written the last word on the subject. Indeed I will be disappointed if others do not take up my basic approach and, with a greater knowledge of first century Palestine and a better intuitive imagination, produce richer and more plausible reconstructions than I have been able to. My claim is not that I can match the genius of the original story-teller and his extraordinary understanding of the multifarious ways in which the people around him were screwing up life's possibilities. So I do not pretend to be able to produce a completely convincing reconstruction of his parables. My claims are more modest and they are these:

- I have isolated the parabolic mechanism, an understanding of which enables anyone now to distinguish a true parable from any other speech form - for example an allegory - and to determine precisely how it functions.
- I can demonstrate the cogency of this analytical procedure in the case of every parable of Jesus (which is why I have insisted on identifying and examining all the parables that occur in our two main sources, the Gospel of Thomas and the Synoptic Gospels).

Let me restate my essential thesis thus:

- Parables are *not* allegories, examples, riddles, coded messages, non-referential works of art, fables ... (the list is endless) but on the contrary straightforward comparisons designed to make some matter painfully clear.

- Parables are illustrations and therefore work on the principle that one thing is like another.

- Parables are distinguished from their nearest relative in the illustration family, the complex simile, in possessing a self-authenticating 'logic' amenable to ordinary commonsense.

It is the viability of this thesis alone that I have sought to demonstrate in these studies and it is on this count alone that I seek to be judged. The fruits of my imagination are what I am - quite ordinary. But this discovery, I believe, is something else!

Attitude-Straightening Interpretations as an Anticlimax.

One final word about my attitude-straightening interpretations. In the Synoptic tradition a number of Jesus' parables are understood as his veiled way of claiming to be the central turning point of history and therefore as majestic, if hidden, pronouncements on the ultimate significance of life:

I am the sower of God's word [Pb. 7]

I am the one who has defeated Satan [Pb. 6]

I am the bridegroom everyone has been waiting for [Pb. 2]

I am the bringer of the New Order (Pbs. 3,4)

I am the buried treasure, the priceless pearl [Pbs. 36,37]

I am God's son who is to be rejected yet vindicated [Pb. 14]

I am the master who will return with judgement [Pbs. 32, 33]
I am the shepherd who will separate the sheep from the goats (Pb. 43]

Because of this many Christians are bound to find any attitude-changing interpretations of these particular parables something of an anticlimax. So I would like to make it clear that while convinced that the evangelists misconstrued what Jesus was doing with these parables I share their conviction about who Jesus was. In other words I am happy to accept their parabolic interpretations as *their confessions of faith* but at the same time must insist that Jesus *never* used parabolic stories to make claims for himself, veiled or otherwise. Indeed, had Jesus gone about staging such claims in this way I am convinced few balanced people would have followed him. If therefore the evangelists not only followed him but also made large claims on his behalf it seems to me it must have been because they *experienced* him as the one who straightened people out or, in his own terms, 'manifested the Kingdom' by purging and so transforming society; healing peoples' attitudes as well as their bodies and minds. In this respect it seems to me important to remember the lesson Elijah learnt about how the Kingdom appears: It does not come, as the hierarchical world expects, with great pomp heralded by storms and earthquakes but in a still small voice (1Kings 19:11ff). John the Baptist was guilty of overlooking the extraordinary nature of Jesus' miracles because he expected something quite different: the thunder and lightning associated with the deployment of hierarchical power. We should be careful not to fall into the same error concerning his parables. Do not make the mistake of dismissing the interpretations furnished by the attitude-straightening approach because they appear humble when compared with the portentous claims furnished by the evangelists' allegories. To do so would be to dismiss the still small voice which, after Elijah's relative indifference towards the spectacular display of earthly power taking place before him, caused him to hurriedly cover his face.

Preface to the Studies.

Since I intend these studies for workaday preachers and interested lay people the reader will not encounter in them any reference by name to the work of scholarly authorities on the parables. I have already published a more technical work - '*Painfully Clear; The Parables of Jesus*' - and students who wish to see how I situate my ideas within the field of modern parable studies are advised to turn to its pages.

However, when attempting to reconstruct a parable of Jesus one is inevitably aware of other people's interpretations. Indeed I have often found it more natural to build my reconstructions on a critical examination of the 'usual' way of understanding the story in question. Students of the parables will probably recognise that in most instances I am in fact referring to the work either of C. H. Dodd or J. Jeremias. This is hardly surprising since they were the pioneers of modern parable reconstruction (Indeed to my mind little of any consequence as regards the reconstruction of parables has been produced by biblical scholarship since their time). But the fact is that it is not terribly important where one starts. Indeed, with a Bible study group I would probably ask for ideas and work from them.

There is something to be said for reading the studies in order, since that was how they were written. However, some readers will want to use the book as a reference work. To make this possible I have provided one or two cross-references where this seemed necessary.

There will be frequent references in the studies to *common experience* and '*logic*', *allegorization*, and *parousia*. The meanings of these terms are explained in the introduction on pages 1-3, 8-9, and the last paragraph of page 9, respectively.

The last six studies are slightly different from the rest in that they concern parables in which the illustration and the real-life subject it refers to are purposely confused. Normally an illustrator will keep subject matter and illustration quite separate but in these parables, as with metaphors, the parable-maker has mixed them together. They are, as I call them, 'compacted parables'. The compaction gives the illustration a less quizzical and more directed tone, as if the speaker were reminding the hearers of a lesson already learned.

It will be noticed that I end each study with a dotted 'tear-away' line, underneath which I have indicated the parable's 'logic' in the form of an interrogative analogy. This is for easy reference: a way of succinctly demonstrating *my* understanding of the parable. However, I have put it under a tear-away line because I believe that people should be left with Jesus' story and not with my interpretation. That said, it is important for all of us to attempt to formulate a parable's analogy for ourselves since it is the only way of checking how we have understood it. The point of insisting that such an analogy should be in the form of a question is simply that parables, being illustrations, are intrinsically undogmatic.

I have assumed that the reader will have in his or her possession a modern translation of the Bible. My own scripture references are to the *Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Collins, NY etc, 1973, Second Edition*. However, since it would be a bit much to expect every reader to have a translation of the Gospel of Thomas and Eusebius' comment on the lost Gospel of the Nazarenes, I have included the relevant texts at the end of the book (pp. 129-133).

1 The Place for a Doctor

Mk 2.17

Mt. 9.12

Lk. 5.31

Th.

This happens to be one of the few parables the evangelists associated with an actual incident, which means that we can see at once how they understood it. A number of theologians have accused Jesus of undermining the Law by dining out with renegade Jews and criminals. Jesus answers them with this story based on the common experience of *professional association*. The 'logic' is that there is nothing surprising in finding a doctor in the company of those who need his skill.

In the given context the story reveals an unreasonableness in Jesus' critics. As experts in God's law they should expect to find someone who claims to speak for God in the company of those who most need his word.

Thus far we can accept the evangelists' reconstructions without demur. However, it would appear they were uncertain that the readers would fully appreciate Jesus' intentions for they have put a further explanatory phrase into his mouth:

"I came not to call the righteous but sinners".

This allegorization with its crude equating of the healthy with the righteous, the sick with sinners and the doctor with Jesus has the unfortunate effect of suggesting that Jesus was *only* interested in people socially beyond the pale, which is absurd. In any case Jesus was not here answering a question about who qualified for discipleship but getting his critics to see what lay behind their criticism - something seriously amiss with their attitudes.

Modern attempts to come to terms with the parable are often little better than that of the evangelists. People try to soften its impact by replacing Jesus' *table-fellowship with sinners* with our own efforts to *aid the poor*. But of course 'sinners' - usually tax gatherers and prostitutes, in the Gospels - were seldom if ever described as poor. Their problem was not lack of money but the hatred and ostracism of the community.

To appreciate the impact of the parable you have to think yourself into the position of Jesus' critics, which shouldn't be too difficult since most of us share their attitudes. Like us they were good, honest folk who took their social obligations seriously. Because they loved justice, honesty, and integrity and fully appreciated the difficulty of achieving such goals they were appalled when certain individuals flagrantly disregarded them for personal profit. Of course it was right to love your neighbour and aid the poor but those

who flagrantly flouted the Law - the social code on which such principles were based - were not just a danger to themselves but to everyone else; the rubbish dump was the only place for them!

What is so shocking about Jesus' parable is that it makes the listener see that what is required of those who love the Law is not to ostracize sinners, which is easy, but actually to seek them out - something that goes entirely against the grain.

Analogy:	As you expect to find a doctor among the sick	So, isn't it natural that you should see one who loves the Law in the company of sinners?
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2 The Wedding Guests

Mk 2.19 Mt. 9.15 Lk. 5.34 Th104

To appreciate the question put to Jesus, and his reply, we have to understand his critics' view of fasting. Originally, fasting was a natural response to the awareness of guilt: an expression of an individual's recognition of, and deep sorrow for, some wrong he or she had done. In other words it was an act of repentance (as Thomas' version of the incident makes clear). In Israel, an individual's sin was understood as having implications for the whole community, since it was the community and not the individual which had been placed in a covenantal relationship with God. This is why special days were set aside on which everyone fasted together.

However, human nature being what it is, the thinking underlying the practice of fasting subtly changed over the years. From being a mark of repentance, it became instead a mark of pride: pride in one's piety and pride in belonging to God's righteous community. In this way, something which began as a healthy response to the awareness of guilt became an unhealthy, though secretly enjoyable, display of self-righteousness. Thus we hear the Pharisee in Two Men in the Temple [Pb. 60] proudly define himself as a righteous Israelite by saying:

"I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get." [Lk 18.12]

We have to see the question put to Jesus as coming out of this disingenuous attitude. The Pharisees weren't accusing the disciples of lacking penitence. They were upset by what they saw as a show of disloyalty to the community and a cavalier attitude to the Law. How could Jesus claim his followers were pious members of a righteous Israel if he didn't require them to behave like other good Jews?

According to the evangelists Jesus gives his critics an answer but couches it in different terms. He takes it as read that fasting is a sign of sorrow, not of righteousness. "Aren't you absurd" he says in effect, "to suggest that people brim full of joy (having just been released for the imprisonment of their sins) should wear long faces and put ashes in their hair. Do *you* fast when you are guests at a wedding?" (Wedding guests were released

from the Law of fasting during the seven days of marriage festivities, for this very reason).

Unfortunately it would seem that the evangelists were concerned that their readers might not understand the sense of Jesus' reply. Instead of leaving well alone they attempted to explain the parable by allegorizing the story. They did this by adding the suggestion that at some point in the marriage festivities the bridegroom would be taken away from the assembled guests. This equating of the bridegroom with Jesus, and the 'taking away' with the crucifixion/ resurrection event, and the guests with their readers has to be the work of the early Church. The implication that it was right for people to resume the practice of fasting after Jesus' death would have made perfect sense to the readers of the Gospels but would have been irrelevant as concerning the behaviour of the disciples. Of course, from our point of view the allegorization is disastrous since it undermines the strength of Jesus' comparison. When was the last time that you went to a wedding at which the bridegroom was kidnapped?

I have to admit I am embarrassed by one aspect of this saying: as the evangelists report it, it is not truly parabolic since there is no gap between the story and the subject-matter addressed. Jesus is asked a question about fasting and replies with a 'story' about fasting. It could be that Jesus made his remark about wedding guests in a completely different context. However, since it makes good sense where it stands I have preferred to live with the embarrassment.

Analogy

As it would be emotionally dishonest for a guest to fast during the celebration of a wedding

So, isn't it disingenuous of you to suggest that forgiven sinners should pretend to be mortified?

3

The Patch on the Garment

Mk 2.21

Mt. 9.16

Lk. 5.36

Th. 47

It appears the evangelists understood this story as Jesus' announcement that in him the world had arrived at a New Age; the 'old garment' generally being taken by scholars as a symbolic reference to the old world order. The evangelists achieved this interpretation by using what I call the *clue-symbol* approach. In this the interpreter 'identifies' a symbolic reference in the story and then uses this as a key to open up the parable as a whole. Unfortunately the technique has serious flaws. In the first place the 'identification' of the clue symbol is an arbitrary process for who is to say the evangelists were right in taking the old garment as a symbol for the old world order? Then again, reading the story symbolically ruins the parable mechanism. It short-circuits the 'logic' which clearly has to do with something foolish in the way a repair is effected. The announcement that Jesus has brought in the new age may be a challenging claim which people are free to accept or reject as they choose but such an announcement makes no use of this 'logic' in any way.

Furthermore it is clear the purpose of such a 'logic' is not to make a take-it-or-leave-it declaration but rather to offer a comparison that invites discovery.

This story of a patched garment appears so short and straightforward that you wouldn't anticipate any difficulties in nailing down its 'logic'. However, I found it quite difficult to identify the subject. Mark and Matthew seem to think it is the old garment. Thomas believes it is the new garment. Luke, by talking about the new garment from which the patch is torn, highlights both the old and the new. My first inclination was to avoid the difficulty by arguing that the subject is neither the patch nor the garment, but rather their incompatibility. However, such an understanding would not have been possible in first-century Palestine since it demands the use of an abstract notion with which people would not have been familiar.

What we have to determine is whether Jesus expected his hearers to fix their attention on a treasured item of clothing which would have been ruined if badly repaired or whether he wished them to concentrate on the fate of a valuable piece of cloth that would be wasted if used on a worthless old garment. Luke seems to have introduced the idea of the new garment because he thought the balance in Mark was incorrect. For him, the contrast had to be between old and new, not old and unshrunk, perhaps because he was convinced the parable was about the old and new ages. However, his correction weakened the effect of the story by making the proposed action preposterous. No one would even think of cutting a piece of cloth from a new garment to mend an old one.

Thomas told the same story as Mark and Matthew, but the other way round. His version can hardly be original, since what he proposes is a perfectly valid practice: it's quite feasible to mend a new garment with a piece of old cloth - the patch won't tear away when the new garment shrinks.

What about the saying, which I take to be the original, in Mark and Matthew? Well, as the story is essentially about mending, it is most unlikely that its subject is the new patch, for then the question would have been: 'On what sort of garment should the patch be used?' and this would be putting the cart before the horse. No, I believe the subject of the story is some valuable item of clothing that has become the worse for wear, the quandary being 'How should one treat it?' Viewed in this light the common experience upon which the story is built is *a showing up*, the 'logic' being that you do no favour to a cherished old garment by mending it with something brand new.

All three evangelists invite their readers to interpret the saying in the light of the fasting background of The Wedding Guests [Pb. 2]. This seems fair enough if we take fasting as standing generally for the religious practices of first-century Judaism. People with strict traditional upbringings must have wondered why it wasn't possible for Jesus to introduce the kind of changes they thought he was after, and with which they sometimes thought they agreed, without disturbing the habits and traditions they loved. Most Jews would have felt defensive about their traditions. They were old and worn maybe but that was part of their attraction. Yet here was Jesus going about behaving as if they had suddenly become unnecessary. Couldn't he make room for them in his new order? After all, had they not been responsible for preparing people for what Jesus himself had to say? Perhaps on one occasion Jesus replied to such a criticism with this parable.

Analogy: As you ruin the appearance of your treasured old garment when you mend it with a new patch

So, wouldn't I simply be exposing the deficiencies of our traditional practices if I tried to mend them with my Gospel?

4 New Wine in Old Wineskins

Mk 2.22 Mt. 9.17 Lk. 5.37 Th. 47

As with Pb.3 it appears the evangelists understand this story as Jesus' announcement of the New Age brought in by his coming - the new wine signifying the new world order. But as I point out in discussing The Patch on the Garment this clue-symbol approach simply won't do since it bypasses the story's 'logic'.

And this is not the only confusion the evangelists have introduced on this occasion. They have also decided to treat this and the former parable as twins, that is, as stories which, though based on completely different elements, are assumed to make the identical point: that Jesus' presence introduced the New Age. But why am I so certain these parables aren't twins? Quite simply because a close examination reveals that they have distinctly different 'logics'. This means that if Jesus had used them on the same occasion to reinforce each other he would have caused confusion instead. Don't, however, take my word for it. Look for yourselves. Thomas presents what amounts to two stories in one. But we must discount his reversed version ("nor is old wine put into a new wineskin, lest it spoil it") for the simple reason that it's not an accurate observation: old wine will not, as far as I am aware, spoil a new wineskin or, for that matter, a new wineskin old wine! It would seem that he has introduced this observation because he wants to make the point that you cannot put the Law and the Prophets into the Gospel. Hence, his reference to the wineskin in the singular.

So, taking as the original the version common to the three evangelists and Thomas, what is the story's subject? Is it the old wineskin or the new wine? From the way it is phrased - with the emphasis on the loss of the wine - I am inclined to the latter. If it were about the skins it would surely have been put thus:

No one fills old wineskins with new wine; for if he does the skins will burst and be ruined; but old skins are for old wine.

With the wine as the subject of the story the common experience upon which it is based is *bad practice*, the 'logic' being that putting new wine into old skins is tantamount to throwing it away - like putting an expensive new engine into a clapped-out old car. I think you will agree that all this is miles away from the impact associated with The Patch on the Garment.

The evangelists tell us the parable was about Jesus' response to people who criticized him for putting his gospel above Jewish tradition, and I have no reason to suppose they were wrong. Jesus would therefore be implying that for him to act as if the gospel was merely a reformulation of Jewish tradition would be to render it useless for bringing in the kingdom. As he put it on another occasion, the gospel was the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets [Mt. 5.17]. To pretend that it was simply a re-statement of them was to deny its uniqueness, a uniqueness which made all the difference, in bringing hope where there was none before.

What would Jesus have been doing to call forth this criticism? The evangelists suggest that it was Jesus' failure to instruct his disciples to fast. However, there are other instances in the Gospels that you may find more apt:

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. And they watched him, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him....[Mk 3.1ff]

I can imagine the same people arguing the matter of Sabbath healings with Jesus on some other occasion. They would have told him that they had no objection to his healing people - quite the contrary - but he should be careful to operate within the Law. There were important reasons for refraining from work on the Sabbath and not to do so inevitably undermined what the Law stood for. After all, either you agreed to live by the Law or you didn't. Surely he wanted what he was doing to be within the Law?

Analogy:

As putting new wine
into old wineskins
is tantamount to
throwing it away

So, if I were to act as if the
Gospel could be contained within
the Law would I not, in effect,
be nullifying its power?

5

The Divided Kingdom

Mk 3.24 Mt. 12.25 Lk.11.17 Th.

This is one of the few instances in which I believe the evangelists have correctly identified the 'logic' and successfully reconstructed the parable. For all three evangelists the background to the parable is Jesus' exorcisms. Mark also includes a little story about Jesus' family intervening to protect him from the strife he seemed to be creating. However, its hard to see how this connects either with the given background or with the critical comment which all three evangelists say sparked off the parable. It would seem to be an intrusion: an entirely separate incident (to which Jesus' reaction is given in Mk 3.33-35).

In the ancient Jewish world, sickness tended to be considered as a consequence of sin. It therefore came within the religious authorities' domain. They were responsible for diagnosing the complaint, deciding what should be done about it and, in the event of a cure, certifying the individual clean. This was not, however, the complete picture. In Israel there was never a clear divide between religious and political authority. Liberation

from oppression and liberation from disease were seen as going hand in hand. This explains the belief, held by some, in a coming Messiah who would free the community from foreign oppression and would be recognized by the healing he performed.

One can understand that the scribes from Jerusalem were worried about the activities of this provincial miracle-worker whom some were hailing as the Messiah. The situation in Galilee was always volatile and the last thing the leaders of the community wanted was an uprising led by someone else, which could only jeopardize their position if he won or, as was more likely, lost. However, there was more to the scribe's hostility than this. Jesus' activities had touched a raw nerve. They saw him as an upstart, interfering in their preserves. Even worse, he was achieving results they could not match and people were going about saying that he showed real authority, unlike themselves! It was injured pride that caused them to accuse Jesus of using devilish powers to effect his exorcisms.

Moving on to the story we find that there are three variants:

- 1). A kingdom divided against itself (Mk, Mt, Lk)
- 2). A city divided against itself (Mt.)
- 3). A house divided against itself (Mk, Mt.)

I call these variants, rather than twins, because though they produce identical 'logics' they hardly amount to separable stories. Since they constitute variations of the same story, used together they reinforce one another rather than causing interference, as you can tell from this modern reformulation of the hypothetical episode:

Jesus turned to the scribes and said "Gentlemen, please answer me this question. What will happen to a kingdom that is at war with itself?" "It will fall", one of them replied. "And what will happen to a city that is divided against itself?" Jesus continued. "The same thing," was the reply. "Quite right," said Jesus, "so if the devil goes about casting out devils, what will be the result?"

The common experience underlying these variants is *internal solidarity*, their shared 'logic' being that when the internal solidarity of a social entity is undermined the whole edifice crumbles - so the impact of the parable would have been to confront Jesus' opponents with the full exposure of their bad faith, since they are clearly only out to get him.

Analogy:	As a kingdom that wishes to remain strong does not fight against itself	So, were I myself evil would I seek to remedy evil situations?
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6 The Strong Man's House

Mk 3.27 Mt. 12.29 Lk. 11.21 Th. 35

According to the evangelists Jesus uses this parable to announce his defeat of the powers of evil. He effectively asserts that by casting out demons he has proved himself greater than Satan. However, as I have previously pointed out, parables unlike allegories do not make assertions. Furthermore as I read the story the ‘logic’ is not about the defeat of the strong man but about the vital necessity of rendering him *hors de combat* before robbing him. In other words the common experience is *priorities*, the ‘logic’ being that in some cases in order to achieve one thing it is necessary to concentrate on achieving something else first.

How might Jesus have used the parable? Would it have made sense in Mark’s context of a hostile exchange with the scribes about the proper judgement to be passed on his exorcisms? To make this connection work we would have to assume Jesus was seeking to draw attention to the fact that he was only able to exorcise people with impunity because he had already disarmed Satan - presumably by rejecting his temptations in the wilderness. However, even if one considers this an appropriate point, it can hardly be made to stand up since Jesus would not have expected his opponents to credit him with such an achievement merely on his say-so.

Consequently we shall have to abandon Mark’s setting and view the story simply in the context of Jesus’ opening campaign: his journeys about the country calling on people to prepare for the kingdom. It is not unnatural to suppose that while this was going on some of the disciples were impatient to set up, and reap the benefits of, the new kingdom everyone was talking about. People were standing around waiting to be organized, so why didn’t Jesus give the word? What was the problem? Why the delay? Could the parable have been Jesus’ answer to these urgent questions: his way of getting people to see that the schemes they were so anxious to implement would only serve to make them more vulnerable to the very ideological forces they were seeking to subvert; that in trying prematurely to organize people they would inevitably slip into the same trap as that into which the scribes and Pharisees had long ago fallen?

Analogy:	As you won’t succeed in robbing a strong man unless you first immobilize him	So, is it not courting disaster to start organizing the kingdom without first dealing with the corrupting forces influencing you?
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7 **The Sower**

Mk 4.3 Mt. 13.3 Lk 8.5 Th. 9

In all the accounts except Thomas this parable is accompanied by a line by line allegorical explanation which makes it clear the early Church viewed it as Jesus’ answer to the criticism that much of his work had proved a failure. As an early Church explanation it has to be taken seriously but it can’t have been original to Jesus for two

reasons. First, being allegorical it states an opinion which cuts across the parabolic nature of the story with its illustrative 'logic' that invites discovery. Second, if the allegorical explanation was original to the parable it is most unlikely Thomas would have cut it out.

As for the story itself there is little sign of outside interference save perhaps a slight tendency to exaggerate the figures. The suggestion that a single seed could multiply itself a hundredfold makes one suspect the early Church was using its parousia spectacles and reading the harvest as the last judgement. Such a reading, however, makes nonsense of the story for two reasons.

1) At the critical moment around which Jesus' story centres - the time of sowing - the farmer doesn't even know for sure that there will be a harvest: there may be a war, a drought, or an outbreak of disease, yet this uncertainty does not, indeed cannot be allowed to alter the way in which he does the job. The harvest has no relevance to Jesus' story except insofar as it represents the maximizing-of-production viewpoint from which the farmer works - the objective he has in mind as he goes about sowing his field.

2) By reformulating the story, using different modes of production, it's possible to show that the idea of 'harvest' isn't essential to the 'logic'. Thus, I might tell of a carpenter making a window-frame, who wastes the wood that has to be sawn off, wastes more when planing the surface flat and more still when sandpapering the whole thing down in preparation for painting. Or I might tell of a woman baking a cake, wasting some of the mixture on the sides of the bowl, wasting more that sticks to the oven grill and more still that remains as crumbs on the kitchen table.

In fact, reading the harvest as the last judgement ruins the story's 'logic' by concentrating attention on the time-lapse between sowing and reaping. Baking a cake may take a matter of hours, making a window-frame a matter of days; whereas producing grain takes several months. Yet in terms of the 'logic' this difference is irrelevant for the farmer actually operates no differently in this connection from the carpenter or cook: for him the production process, however long, is all of a piece - and everything he does is governed by this fact. By contrast the anxious bystander has no thought for the overall process. His vision is often blinkered, his thinking dominated by the wastage at that moment. It is this difference of perception, not the time-lapse, upon which all three stories focus.

The common experience on which these triplet stories are built is *the inevitable waste in many production processes*. The two I put forward myself were based on my own experience. I remember as a small boy being preoccupied by the waste that occurred when mother baked a cake, and I remember the same feeling as a young man when I watched carpenters at work, my concern being significantly heightened by the knowledge that it was my job at the time to clear it up! Jesus had to select for his parable a mode of production that would call to mind the same experience in his hearers. Hence his choice of the sower. The 'logic' of all three stories is that a skilled worker ignores the inevitable waste in the production process since he knows that the emergence of the finished product will show it to have been essentially unthreatening.

So, how was the story used? Well, I believe the evangelists got it essentially right despite their allegorizations (but a preacher or teacher must be careful not to imply that Jesus was

responsible for the meanings given by the evangelists to the various kinds of inevitable wastage). There must have been many disciples who were disturbed by Jesus' failures. A not insignificant number of people would have rejected what he was saying, and there were probably defections as well. Did this not leave Jesus open to the charge that there was something wrong with the way he was doing things?

Analogy:	As a farmer does not despair because some seed is wasted	So, why should I despair because some reject me?
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8 The Lamp

Mk 4.21 Mt. 5.15 Lk. (a)8.16 Th. 33
(b)11.33

The evangelists' interpretations of this parable are so contradictory that some say it is impossible to determine what Jesus meant by it. They are too easily discouraged. It is clear, wouldn't you say, that the common experience alluded to is *the need to illuminate a subject matter if one is to properly address it*, the 'logic' of the story being the folly of placing a lamp which you have yourself just lit in a position where it sheds no light on what you are doing? If the lamp had been lit by someone else then of course it would by no means, necessarily, be foolish to douse it. If you were a thief you might well want to extinguish a light someone had left burning so that people couldn't witness your nefarious deeds. However, the way this story is formulated shows that its author was not concerned to condemn a wicked act but to mock a foolish one.

How might Jesus have used the parable? Suppose the background was the disciples' anxiety at his public exposure of the tortuous attitudes of the leaders of the community. Could it be that, fearing the inevitable backlash, some of his friends suggested that he would be wise to modify his tactics? If so, this parable could have been Jesus' quizzical reply.

Analogy:	As it is pointless to light a lamp and then place it where it sheds no light	So, wouldn't it be pointless for me to set my campaign in motion only to cut it short because people complain about what I bring to light?
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9 The Growing Seed

Mk 4.26 Mt. Lk. Th. 21c

Some commentators have seen this parable as Jesus' reply to people who accused him of being culpably inactive: his way of telling them that it was not our business to bring in the kingdom but that men and women should wait patiently and leave everything to God. However, the idea that humanity's role is to be passive in this regard is quite unbiblical. What, after all, did it mean to be a 'fisher of men' [Mk 1.17], if not to participate in the kingdom enterprise? Furthermore the only way to extract the notion of passivity from this story is to conveniently forget who sowed the seed.

Admittedly the text does contain a problem. The story in Mark behaves a bit like a see-saw. In the beginning, all attention is on what the man does and does not do. Then, suddenly, there's a tilt and we find ourselves concerned with a totally different issue: the contrast between the inactivity of the farmer during the period of growth and his activity during the harvest. But there is a simple explanation for this. Thomas records the saying about reaping the ripened grain with the sickle but not the parable itself so almost certainly the two were originally independent. This means that Mark has added the *harvest saying* to show his readers that the parable is to be understood in the light of the early Church's belief that the Son of Man would soon return to *gather* the peoples of the world to a last judgement. The evangelists included this so-called 'parousia motif' wherever possible and stories about plant growth, like this one, proved just the ticket.

I can only suppose Mark didn't realize that by introducing the harvest theme into Jesus' story he was obscuring the common experience on which it was based: the *enabling relationship*. Enabling is an important idea in the Jewish bible. In one of the great Mesopotamian myths man is the priest-administrator who is put in charge of creation by the gods, his job being to manage things and see that his bosses' daily needs are met. Genesis 2 offers an important corrective to this understanding: It maintains that man is God's gardener. As such his role is not to manage creation but simply to enable it to be fruitful in its own right. As I see it Jesus' story has a similar 'logic', built on the common experience that *in agriculture man's role is as an enabler*, but with strictly limited responsibility.

How might such a parable have been used by Jesus? There is ample evidence that the disciples developed misplaced managerial attitudes towards Jesus' movement [Mk 6.35f, 9.38, 10.13, 10.35-37, Mt. 15.23]. They were worried things weren't developing in the right way, indeed appeared out of control [Mk 8.32, 14.10]. Many of us will recognize a similar tendency within ourselves. Whenever our concern for a proper outcome to an issue becomes overpowering we tend to over-step our proper responsibilities and display this attitude. Did Jesus answer his disciples, on one such occasion, with the parable of The Growing Seed?

Analogy: As the farmer
 however indispensable
 has a strictly limited
 responsibility

So, aren't you in danger of
exceeding your responsibility
for bringing in the kingdom?

Mk 4.31 Mt. 13.31 Lk. 13.19 Th. 20

This story is about the achievement of a transformation. However, I have to say that I find Mark's emphasis on the smallness of the seed relative to the full-grown shrub rather narrow. The change in size alone scarcely does credit to what is described. Perhaps constant repetition within the early Church had the effect of flattening the analogy in much the same way that our saying about the acorn and the oak tree has been reduced to a platitude about size. I grew up in a garden containing several oak trees. One autumn day my older sister informed me that all of them had started off as one of the paltry nuts that were, even as we spoke, falling about our heads. I remember holding up an acorn against the backdrop of those spectacular monsters and being astonished to roots of my being. At such moments, characteristic of childhood, the wonder that overcomes us is not due to the change in size so much as to the total metamorphosis we perceive.

This *spectacular metamorphosis* is the common experience on which this story is built, the 'logic' being that an insignificant, dead-looking seed should not be disparaged, for it is capable of developing into a massive complex of living vegetation.

How might Jesus have used this parable? As the story is about a recognizable achievement, people have supposed that it was Jesus' response to criticism about his apparent lack of achievement in convincing his own people, the Jews. The temptation has always been for the Church to understand this parable in the light of the spectacular success story Christianity would later become; as Jesus' way of telling people not be put off by the insignificant beginnings of his movement. The trouble with this interpretation is not only that it is based on hindsight but also that it conflicts with the way in which Jesus handled the same question on a different occasion.

John the Baptist shared Jesus' conviction that there was a need for a spectacular change in the way people behaved. But he seems to have come to a point where he was forced to write off what Jesus was doing as inadequate to the occasion. Languishing in prison he was clearly expecting some world-shattering event that would affect the way in which every Israelite behaved. In his disappointment he sent some of his followers to Jesus to find out what he was up to [Mt. 11.1ff, Lk. 7.17ff]. The interesting thing is that Jesus' response was not that the great event he had in mind was already on its way and shouldn't be underestimated because it was as yet in its infancy. Quite the contrary. He directed John's attention to the numerous extraordinary *completed* transformations already to be seen in the forgotten, marginalized people surrounding him: the blind receiving their sight, the dead being raised, and the poor hearing the good news [Lk. 7.18-23]. In other words he criticized John for having expectations that blinkered him to what was actually happening. Hence his final rejoinder:

"Blessed is he who takes no offence at me."

Since the common experience of Jesus' story is clearly *a spectacular achievement brought out of an inauspicious beginning*, I suggest he was probably pointing to these

very same transformations. Perhaps someone, in exasperation, had told him that he was wasting his time with such unpromising material and that he would do better to turn his attention to people with real influence. The story could have been his reply.

Analogy:	As the seed is transformed from lifeless insignificance to a mass of flowering vegetation	So, haven't all these apparent 'nobodies' likewise been amazingly transformed?
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11 Food and Excrement

Mk 7.15 Mt. Lk. Th.

This is surely one of the most interesting of Jesus' parables. In the first place it comes down to us without the presence of a single firm story element, which is something of a record - no mention of food or eating on the one hand or toiletry procedures on the other! Indeed one might wonder how it is possible to reconstruct such a parable. We have come to appreciate that most if not all of Jesus' parables have lost their referents' that is, the living situations to which Jesus addressed them, and we have tried to find possible ways of imaginatively reconstructing them but a parable that has lost its story as well is something else! Yet the situation is far from hopeless since what we find in Mark is the parable story perfectly preserved in negative - rather like those fossils one sometimes finds on the sea shore in which the form of an ancient shell has been preserved as an imprint.

In fact what Mark presents us with is not the story but its application - the right hand side of the analogy as it were. He does this, one can only suppose, because the early Church could not quite bring itself to admit publicly that one of Jesus' famous parables was based on the subject of shit! I can just imagine how Jesus would have laughed at their prudishness. The early Church's obvious distaste for the story's subject matter makes it perhaps *the only parable that we can with absolute certainty ascribe to Jesus*. In spite of his mistreatment of the story Mark makes no effort to disguise what he has done for he goes on to make quite clear what the subject matter of the parable is by openly talking about food and the stomach though even here the word excrement never appears!

Of course these very explanations are a bit of a giveaway themselves. In the first place none of Jesus' parable could possibly have needed an explanation. Second, within them the evangelist ties himself seriously in knots. He starts by splitting the structure into two halves based on the 'going in' and 'going out' processes. He then uses the 'going in' process to justify Jesus' anti-kosher policy on the principle that it is not what 'goes in' that defiles. Since he has been talking about food in connection with the 'going in' process one would naturally expect him to talk about excrement as regards the 'going out' process. Not at all, instead he talks of evil thoughts and fornication and the like. Mark can do all of this only because he has the stuff written down in front of him. This

enables him to pick the whole construction into little pieces and deal with each separately and even in a quite contradictory manner. As a piece of verbal communication Mark's construct would have been a hopeless confusion, causing Jesus to be dismissed as a lunatic. But of course Mark wasn't primarily interested in Jesus' parable as a piece of verbal communication. For him it was an intrinsically precious saying that had to be provided with a suitable explanation. So he did his best and we can only thank him for it.

However, we are interested in Jesus as a parable maker so we are obliged to undo Mark's work and start by reconstructing the story. It must have gone something like this:

A man is not defiled by the food he eats but by the faeces he shits.

The common experience of this story is clearly *defilement*, the 'logic' being that this defilement is a consequence of what we give out not take in. Mark's guess is that Jesus used this parable to help people understand the general principle that one is defiled by the evil things one does - which I suppose is all well and good if rather banal. However, it doesn't take into account the first half of the story. Jesus' intention must surely have been to bring to someone's awareness that they were wrong in supposing a defilement came about by something they took in since it was clearly caused on the contrary by something they were giving out. But what was the something?

The notion of defilement brings to my mind the fastidious contempt which good folk have always had, and indeed still do, for the world of 'sinners'. We know Jesus was heavily criticized for mixing with sinners. I can't help thinking the reason was that it was assumed that consorting with such persons and enjoying their company inevitably meant one became contaminated by them. It was surely against this particular attitude that the parable was targeted. Perhaps on one occasion some critic said to him quite openly that he was mad if he thought he could be with such people without becoming contaminated and Jesus replied with his Food and Excrement parable.

Analogy

As a man is defiled
by the faeces he shits
rather than by the
food he eats

So, aren't we contaminated
by what we ourselves do
rather than by what we
take in from others?

12

The Children and the Pet Dogs

Mk 7.27 & 28 Mt. 15.26 & 27 Lk. Th.

Perhaps the first thing that should be said about these parables (for there are two, one given by Jesus, and the other by the Syrophenician woman in reply) is that they are rare examples in the Gospels of what I call 'learner parables'. The Rabbis of the first and second centuries CE commonly used learner parables to introduce disciples to new ideas. They only rarely employed attitude-straightening parables though this was the sort most commonly used by Jesus. However, here we have an exception; neither Jesus nor the

Syrophoenician woman appear to have been concerned with the other's attitude. Rather both seem anxious to make the other aware of their respective situations. I know some feminist scholars would not agree with this conclusion. They claim the woman was drawing Jesus' attention to a flaw in his approach and argue that he, for his part, was big enough to learn from her criticism. However, it is forcing the text to understand the Syrophoenician woman's reply as a criticism of Jesus' attitude. Indeed she seems to accept his standpoint completely, only she dares to go further and it is this step that makes all the difference.

It has to be said that Jesus' parabolic response to the Syrophoenician woman's supplication appears cruelly dismissive to us. Perhaps this is because we are not used to dealing with parabolic utterances. There is plenty of evidence Jesus saw his life and work as bringing the Mosaic tradition to its fulfilment so he would naturally have seen his business as being with 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel' rather than with humanity in general - difficult as that may appear to people like ourselves who are used to thinking of him in a universal light. So it is understandable that the woman's plea for help placed Jesus in a difficult position. His words to her were an imaginative way of getting her to appreciate his predicament. By pointing out that you don't treat family pets as if they are children, he brings to her attention the common experience of *discrimination*. "Would it be right," he asks her "for me to give you that which has been destined specifically for the Jews?"

Mark attempts to explain this saying, which he knew would present problems to his readers, by adding the introductory words "Let the children first be fed". In doing this he tries to make it clear that from the point of view of the early Christians it was only as a result of Jesus' death and the shattering of the old pattern that Gentiles became free to take their place in the new Israel - the Church. However this notion of 'priority' has no place in the parable itself. There is no hint that, if the woman waits patiently, her time will come. Indeed the woman in her reply does not take such an idea into consideration. Her counter is not a moral one - that even as a foreigner she surely has subsidiary rights - but a strategic one, that as a neighbour of the Jews she is fortunately placed.

To think oneself into the woman's position, it is useful to compare her situation with that described in 2 Kings 5, which also tells of a foreigner - Naaman, commander of the Syrian army - requesting help from an Israelite prophet. Of course, Naaman's predicament was very different from that of the Syrophoenician woman; yet his story does underline the most important and contentious aspect of going abroad for help: because every community had its own god and its own healers, seeking outside help was considered apostasy - a tacit avowal that the foreign god and foreign community were superior to your own.

While Jesus' initial response to the woman's entreaty was remarkable for the way in which it made her aware of his predicament, he would surely have been the first to admit that it paled in comparison with her reply. In it she shows she understands that being a foreigner she is not part of his concern to 'feed the children' and that she accepts her position is inferior to that of everyone within the Jewish community (an admission that the great Naaman makes only *after* he is cured!). But that is not the half of it. Having acknowledged that she can have no possible claim on Jesus, she nonetheless points out

that, while she hasn't the good fortune to be an Israelite, the mere fact that she lives in a neighbouring community has its own benefits, for it has brought him her way.

In other words, as much as Jesus in his parable brings to the woman's attention the common experience of *discrimination*, she in hers brings to his attention the common experience or *opportunity*, the thrust of her story's 'logic' being that in spite of their lowly status the family pets find themselves ideally placed to seize on what accidentally falls from the children's table. Matthew writes that on hearing her reply, Jesus saluted the woman's great faith. What he appreciated in her was not a religious attitude but her refusal to give up on life and so descend to the level of bribes, manipulative games, or moral blackmail. Although worried to distraction by her child's situation, she continued to behave simply and straightforwardly, with eyes wide open to the opportunities presented by life. Thus she exemplifies the kind of behaviour Jesus recommends in such parables as The Insistent Neighbour [Pb. 47], The Widow and the Judge [Pb. 59] and Children and their Garments [Pb. 62]. The attitude behind this behaviour - which Jesus describes as faith - though truly remarkable is really no more than the natural, healthy, indeed child-like way of making the most of life. It is an attitude we adults find all too difficult to adopt because we see it as inherently demeaning. We prefer to clothe ourselves in our sophistication and go about pretending we are in charge; playing manipulative games with life and with each other.

Jesus' parable:

Analogy:	As the food at table is meant for the children, not for the family pets	So, would it be right for me to give you that which is meant for the Jews?
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The Syrophenician Woman's Parable in Reply:

Analogy:	As the family pets under the table are well placed to take advantage of what the children accidentally let fall	So, having the good fortune to live next to the Jews, am I not justified in taking advantage of the fact that an accident of fate has brought you here across the frontier?
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13

Salt

Mk9.50 Mt. 5.13 Lk 14.34 Th.

There is a slight problem with this parable since there is a possible ambiguity in the way in which Luke presents the story. Whereas Mark and Matthew make it plain that it is the salt which is to be 'flavoured',

"If salt loses its salinity with what shall it (the salt) be salted?"

it is possible to understand Luke as suggesting that the cook is still concerned with the taste of his food:

“If salt loses its salinity with what shall it (the food) be salted?”

(This difference is not reflected in most English translations, which generally take all three versions as referring to the salt.) In this variant version of Luke’s story the answer to the question has to be “some fresh condiment”. This would have conveniently solved the problem about the meaning since in the theology of the New Testament God has found Israel wanting and so has replaced her by the Church. The ‘convenience’ should make us just a little bit wary of accepting it. However, my real reason for setting this form of the story aside is that it constitutes such a miserable parable. Salt does not lose its salinity. Consequently, basing the story on such a dubious hypothetical situation means that the parable as a whole lacks punch. It would have been so much better if some condiment had been chosen that *did* tend to lose its vitality:

“What do you do when your pepper gets damp?”

But doesn’t the same criticism also apply to Mark’s and Matthew’s version? The answer is no because here the impact does not depend on the reality of the comparison but on its Alice-in-Wonderland reasoning. This story *deliberately* leads us into a bizarre world where not only savourless salt exists but where cooks attempt to recover the taste - perhaps by salting the salt with yet more salt? The result is an added emphasis on the rigid reasoning, the net effect being quite stunning. It’s truly hard to imagine a more useless commodity than tasteless salt, the fact that there is no such thing being altogether beside the point. However, later Jewish teachers fixed on the story’s built-in improbability when trying to counter its criticism. Thus when Rabbi Joshua (circa CE 90) was asked the question “If salt becomes savourless, with what will it be salted?” he replied “with the after-birth of a mule”. When his questioner objected that a mule cannot have an after-birth he countered with the remark that neither can salt become savourless!

If Mark’s story - as splendid as Luke’s is miserable - is the original, to what does it refer? The evangelist himself suggests it was addressed to disciples in danger of losing some vital attitude (faith?) but this can hardly be so since the parable would scarcely have encouraged them to carry on! Rabbi Joshua saw it as directed against Israel and he was surely right. So we have to see it as a retort to someone like himself who was convinced that, come what may, Israel could never become so useless that God would abandon her.

Analogy: As there would be nothing quite as useless to a cook as salt that has lost its seasoning property

So, is there anything left of value to God in an Israel that has abandoned the extraordinary destiny he gave her?

Of all the parables in the synoptic gospels this is the one that appears most indelibly allegorized. As in Isaiah's song [Is 5.1-7], the vineyard is Israel, and the owner God. There are, however, several further symbolic elements that can be identified. The tenants are the Jewish leaders, the servants sent to collect the rent are the prophets Israel rejected and the son is, of course, Jesus himself, whom the Jewish leaders were to dispatch in a very similar fashion.

The question is can we hope to recover a parabolic story from such a heavily allegorized piece of work without emptying it of all its substance? The answer is that it is not difficult to de-allegorize the story or to work out its 'logic' or even to imaginatively recreate the kind of situation in which Jesus might have employed it, for in these respects this parable is not different from any other. But we all recognize in fact a special problem here and it lies in ourselves; in our enormous religious attachment to the allegorization. As regards our ability to deal with this problem a person can only speak for him or her self but I would like to offer a word of encouragement. I don't see myself as throwing away the allegorical version of the parable but simply as understanding it in a new manner. Before, I thought I had to see it as something Jesus himself created to speak of his inevitable fate. Now I see what it really is: the early Church's confession of faith as it worshipfully pondered what it remembered him as saying. There is nothing very new in this. After all I have already come to much the same conclusion about the birth stories which I long ago ceased to read as if they were a journalistic account of what happened one night in first-century Palestine. That move didn't involve my losing the stories. I lost an innocence perhaps but the stories are as powerful for me as they ever were, perhaps even more so seeing that now I am closer to being alongside those who wrote them. Before, they were stories they told me from afar. Now, it's almost as if I'm sharing their view!

The story of the rebellious tenants reflects the nationalistic-peasant / absentee-landlord situation in Galilee. Large estates in Palestine were held by foreigners and this would have been a matter of resentment for the local people, who had never really given up the nationalistic struggle. The pattern of most tenant/landlord disputes is a kind of poker game to decide who has the strongest nerve. Technically, the last word lies with the law. However, if it is to be enforced, everything hinges on whether the injured party is prepared to stand up and exercise his or her will. Today, if the landlord is a timid old lady, the tenants may well feel that they can disregard her.... until a letter from her lawyer appears on their doormat!

In this particular story the tenants have one advantage: the landlord is absent. As long as he operates from a distance he remains but a threat. The tenants are effectively in charge on the ground, as they prove by meting out their own 'justice' upon successive rent-collectors. Only the local authorities have the power of coercion, so everything depends on the landlord taking up his case with them in person. In the story, one senses this weakness in the landlord's position. So why doesn't he make the journey sooner? Perhaps

he feels he has more important things to do. We should bear in mind how protracted and dangerous long journeys were in those days. If we take into account the stories we have of people being robbed, shipwrecked or for other reasons dying on the way, it isn't difficult to imagine the landlord hesitating to make such a journey and the tenants taking advantage of this fact. Indeed the tenants' actions in the beginning have the air of well calculated risk. It is only when they kill the landlord's son that we sense a corner has been turned. From this moment on we know their game is up. Now the landlord is bound to attempt the hazardous journey and - if he makes it - the tenants are all dead men.

To properly understand the thrust of the story's 'logic' we must now try to determine the reason for the tenants' crazy action. It occurred to me they might have revolted because they felt the landlord was exploiting them. Tenant farmers have often become rebellious throughout history for this very reason. However, there are problems with this interpretation. If Jesus had meant the story to be taken in this way he would have made it clear from the beginning that the owner was a bad landlord. This he does not do. Indeed, according to Thomas the landlord is a 'good' man (although admittedly no undue weight should be given to this phrase which was probably added to clear God of the stigma attached to absentee-landlords!)

Having abandoned this workers' view of the story I was forced to consider whether the tenants were motivated by greed. This approach provides the management view of the story (the understanding most commentators adopt but to which I am naturally averse!). However, although it cannot be denied that the tenants betray a distorted attitude, it is as simplistic to explain their actions by saying they were bad men as it is to justify their actions by saying that it was the landlord who was bad. I think the truth is that in keeping with his other parables Jesus was simply describing types of people as he found them. Thus he draws a picture of an absentee landlord behaving in a way an absentee landlord would. The man is neither good nor bad: just an absentee landlord. This is one of the characteristic strengths of Jesus' story-telling. He doesn't make his point by labelling his characters 'good', 'bad' or anything else, but allows them to be seen for what they are through the natural working out of the story. So let's forget about labels and, instead, ask ourselves what it is about being a tenant that puts people on edge?

Once this question is asked everything falls into place. What many of us find intolerable about the position of tenant is that although we are happy to have the use of a thing we feel uneasy when we don't *own* it. There is something very strong within us that tells us that only when something is finally *ours* will we be freed from the disagreeable sensation of being dependent on someone else, of being as it were juvenile and not altogether responsible. In short, as much as we find the position of ownership self-enhancing, we find the position of tenant demeaning. People on a mortgage will understand this. They long for the day when the house is fully paid up, not just because it will make their financial situation easier but because the house will then be well and truly theirs. As I see it, what really upset those tenants when they saw the rent collector arriving wasn't that they would have to give up some of their hard-earned produce, but that his presence reminded them that they did not own the vineyard, and were dependent for their livelihood on the landlord's good will. In their own eyes they were belittled by their position. So, when they murdered the heir it was not because they were greedy and

wanted to have all the produce for themselves, but because it was the only way they could see themselves gaining possession and all that that entailed in terms of self esteem.

So clearly *desire for ownership* is the common experience at the heart of this story, the thrust of its 'logic' being that it was the tenants' overweening desire for possession which drove them to commit the ultimate folly. In what circumstances might Jesus have used this parable? The evangelists all claim he was targeting the temple authorities and I can find no good reason to disagree with them even though we cannot accept their allegorization. We know that some of the temple priests took an active part in the disastrous Jewish revolt some thirty years later. So could it be that one of the high priests had expressed the opinion that God had destined the Sadducees, not the Romans, to be the masters in Israel and the parable was Jesus' reply? Was Jesus perhaps aware that some political madness was being contemplated?

Analogy: As the tenants were led to commit a disastrous act of folly by their all too powerful desire to own the vineyard

So, are you Sadducees not in danger of calling down disaster upon yourselves in your lust for 'ownership' of Israel and your frustration with Roman domination?

15

The Budding Fig Tree

Mk 13.28 Mt. 24.32 Lk. 21.29 Th.

All the evangelists view this parable through parousia spectacles. For them the budding fig tree is a sign of the coming 'harvest' with its joy and judgement. But of course all this we shall have to set aside as we concentrate exclusively on the 'logic' of the story.

As I see it the common experience upon which the parable is based is that of a *natural precursor*, the 'logic' being that the signs of summer's approach are simply the early manifestations of summer itself. This puts me in mind of the incident in which the Pharisees and Sadducees asked Jesus to perform a miracle as a sign of the heavenly authority of his gospel. Jesus answered by pointing out to them that the only signs that can possibly be associated with the kingdom are the material precursors of the kingdom's coming:

"When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather; for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times... [Mt. 16.2f]

Perhaps we can get some idea of how Jesus' hearers might have experienced this parable by imagining it to have been his reply to this question posed by his disciples concerning the coming time of crisis:

As he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately, “tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign when these things are all to be accomplished?” [Mk 13.3f]

In this context the parable becomes Jesus’ correction of the disciples’ misguided notion that, because they have the good fortune to be with him, they are in a position to acquire secret knowledge, which will in turn make them privileged people. It is Jesus’ way of making them aware that the signs they will have to look out for are the down-to-earth indicators that anyone with his eyes open is in a position to read; not esoteric messages but indications of social unrest, of uprisings, of imperial repression and so on.

Analogy: As when the fig-tree starts sprouting buds everyone can see that summer is near

So, should you not look out for the material indicators - available to anyone whose eyes are open - of what is about to happen?

16

The Night Porter

Mk13.34

Mt.

Lk.12.36

Th.

This is a story about a servant who has to stay awake so that his master, out for a late night party no doubt, can be sure there will be someone to let him in when he comes home in the early hours of the morning. Bearing this in mind it becomes clear the evangelists have embroidered the events to indicate to their readers that the story should be understood in terms of the Church’s all-important parousia doctrine.

For example Mark implies the Church’s thinly disguised impatience for the second coming by sending the master away on ‘a journey’, thus making a nonsense of the story since a servant could hardly be expected to stay awake for such a length of time. On the other hand, in flagrant defiance of the reality of the situation, Luke has *all* the servants wait up for the master’s return so as to indicate once again the expectant *Church* to the reader. Again, Luke introduces the absolutely mind-blowing idea of the returning master cooking his servants a meal, so as to suggest the great parousia feast. In fact the evangelists have so heavily abused the story that it is difficult now to keep the results of their extravagant allegorizations at bay. Perhaps it would be best therefore if I freshened things up by offering you a completely new version of the story from my own experience.

I was 14 and at boarding school, living in a dormitory with thirty other boys. It was customary for a junior to be given the task of waking everyone in the morning and calling out the time, so that groups of us - in reverse order of seniority - could make it to the bathroom in good time and in due order. This routine was bliss for the seniors, but an alarming experience for the young timekeeper. The responsibility of getting everyone up for breakfast rested on his shoulders, there being no back-up to wake him should he fail to do so on his own. I don’t suppose anyone ever forgot his first experience in the job.

You sense the same tension in Jesus' parable of the night porter. An easy job, you might think, but with a big responsibility. The common experience on which the story is based is *being on your own*, while the 'logic' is that the night porter has no one but himself to rely on.

Not many of us relish situations of sole responsibility especially when it comes to the sort of demands Jesus puts upon people. In such predicaments there is something within which tells us to fly away to the safety of the crowd where we will have the comfort of knowing that, if we are no better, then we are at any rate no worse than the rest of humanity and, of course, that we are most certainly a lot better than those criminal elements whom we all find beneath our collective contempt.

Analogy:	As the night porter, having no one but himself to rely on, is forced to be self-sufficient	So, can you really expect to avoid responsibility by hiding in the crowd?
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17 **The Litigant**

Mk Mt. 5.25 Lk. 12.58 Th.

If the remark at the end of the parable - about 'paying the last penny' - is original then we are dealing here with a case of debt. However, the story itself (which in both Gospels takes the form of an instruction) does not indicate that this is the case. One can understand the early Christians wanting to see the story as one of debt since it would have made it easy to integrate the parable within their parousia theology. They liked to teach that since people knew perfectly well what sort of judgement would be given on the last day they would do well to pay their debts to God now, before it was too late.

Notwithstanding all this, we are clearly presented with a choice. Either one person is dragging another unwillingly to court because of the latter's refusal to pay a debt or two people are going willingly to court to settle a dispute over a business transaction in which the legal niceties are not clear. One important thing to bear in mind when deciding which alternative fits best is that in the case of unpaid debts the court's verdict is a foregone conclusion. With disputes, on the other hand, it is uncertain right up to the last moment. In stories about debt the question is: "Will I manage to stay out of court?" In stories about disputes it is: "On whose side will the judge come down?"

For a number of reasons I believe Jesus' story cannot be about debt:

- 1) Because for the early Church the debtor symbolized the sinner, the debt aspect gives the parable an unattractive moralistic aspect quite uncharacteristic of Jesus.

2) If Jesus had wanted his audience to understand that the case was one of debt he would have supplied this information at the outset and not tucked it away at the end.

3) Jewish law did not imprison people for debt and there is no evidence that the story is about a foreign situation.

Furthermore the story as it stands contains a number of nonsenses that can only be explained by supposing that the debt aspect has been added by an editor. For example let us suppose that you are a debtor and that you are going to court. This can only mean that you can't pay, because, if you could you would, since (according to this story) you will certainly stay in prison till you do. However, this story urges you *to settle before it is too late* which in the circumstances can only be a stupid thing to say. Of course the comment about settling would be perfectly sensible if the case were not one of debt.

Then again the story suggests that you are on your way to court when you are urged to make an effort to settle with your accuser *lest he drag you to the judge ...* Here is further nonsense since you are already in the process of being dragged to the judge, there being no way in which you would have gone willingly! Remove this line, forget about the debt business and the story once again makes perfect sense.

Then again the story as it stands lacks tension, since it is clear from the outset that the case is going to court and, as it is one of debt, what the outcome will be. This means that either it is not one of Jesus' or else that someone has been mucking about with it. Jesus was a fine storyteller and a parable of his would certainly have contained a proper tension.

As I explained earlier, if one wants to write about debt it is natural to generate the necessary tension by emphasizing the avoidance aspect. Such a story would look something like this:

If you owe a neighbour a sum of money be sure to pay it off as quickly as you can, otherwise his patience will eventually wear out and he will drag you before the magistrate and ...

In the story as it appears in the Gospels, there is no trace of this "will I manage to stay out of court?" tension.

All in all, the debt idea causes nothing but problems and should never have been introduced. What we have here is a dispute: you and your opponent are determined upon arbitration because both of you are convinced that the other is in the wrong. This is why neither of you is dragging his heels; why neither of you sees the advisability of settling the matter between yourselves; and why each of you is blind to the danger facing yourself as much as it threatens the other.

In most courtroom dramas both parties think justice is on their side, the only important question being: "Which way will the judgement go?". This story is no different. You have an important dispute with your opponent and believe yourself to be in the right. You are eager to have the matter settled. This story has nothing to say about the justice of your

case; all it does is remind you that *judgements are unpredictable and can go either way*. This is the common experience on which it is built, the ‘logic’ being that it pays to settle if you can; otherwise things may turn out very badly for you.

What, then, is the attitude being targeted? The story makes it clear. We all know what it is like to be involved in a dispute where both parties are convinced they are in the right and neither is prepared to give way; and we all know how distressing such situations are. For the individuals concerned, one way out is to get an impartial authority to judge between them. In other words the parable targets the natural desire to avoid the pain and effort required in resolving disputes.

In what circumstances might Jesus have used such a parable? We know of an occasion when a man asked Jesus to judge between himself and his elder brother in a matter of inheritance [Lk 12.13-14]. Jesus is said to have rebuked the man. Perhaps he did so by telling him this parable (although Luke writes that he chose another, The Rich Farmer [Pb. 48], designed to evoke the shock of a completely different awareness). In fact Luke gives us this present parable at the end of the same chapter and, to introduce it, has Jesus again question the wisdom of arbitration. Whatever prompted Jesus to tell this parable, I can’t help thinking that people must, on many occasions, have wished he would adjudicate in their disputes. Was this his way of getting them to take responsibility for their relationships with others, rather than rely on someone like him to smooth things over for them?

Analogy: As the result of a court case is unpredictable and the judge may well not find in your favour

So, is it wise of you to ask me to judge between you? Wouldn’t you do better to reach a mutual agreement without my involvement?

18

The Eye

Mk

Mt. 6.22

Lk. 11.34

Th. 24

This parable is slightly complicated by the fact that it contains a metaphor - the eye is the lamp - as an illustration within an illustration. However, if you find this situation confusing you can easily rephrase the story leaving it out:

The eye is the organ that brings light into the body. So, if the eye is sound, all the other organs are filled with light...

Indeed, had Palestinian houses not been windowless one can well imagine Jesus substituting window for lamp: the former is undoubtedly the more effective way of illuminating a room. We today certainly see it as a better illustration. Properly understood the sole purpose of the metaphor is to direct attention to the ‘light-bringing’ function of

the eye. Having made this clear the parable goes on to achieve its 'logic' quite independently.

Matthew in his postscript makes the point that if the inner light in you is corrupted then your soul is indeed in darkness. This is a misleading piece of editorial work, since it draws attention away from the story's concern with the soundness of the eye.

Both evangelists try to make sense of the story by allegorizing its contents rather than by seeing it as a parable addressed to some lost incident. Instead of braving the need to reconstruct the parable by working out the 'logic' and then making an imaginative leap and connecting this with the sort of things Jesus was doing in his ministry they attempt to squeeze a meaning from the illustration itself. In this way they destroy the parable as a likeness that invites discovery and instead present it as a flat and somewhat banal teaching to the effect that one should make sure to retain one's inner spiritual light. This interpretation is unsatisfactory therefore on two counts. First it wrongly envisages the story as a vehicle for delivering a straightforward teaching instead of as an illustration provoking awareness. Second it betrays the story's 'logic' which has to do with the soundness or otherwise of the organ transmitting the light and instead centres attention on the presence or absence of the light itself. Someone should have pointed out to them that the story is essentially about the eye, not about the light.

I suggest we set aside the evangelists' interpretations and stick with the story - which is all about the eye in relation to the rest of the body. Jesus here reminds his listeners of the crucial role the eye plays in the body - if it is not sound, the whole body will suffer. Accordingly, the common experience upon which the story is built is that of *the key role*, the 'logic' being that if the eye is diseased then the whole body will become blind.

It is with the indispensable aid of this 'logic' that one has to make the imaginative leap. The idea of the eye illuminating the body strongly suggests to me the way in which spiritual and ideological leaders bring, or should bring, understanding and commitment to the communities they serve. Perhaps some admirer of the Pharisees among his followers had become upset by the way Jesus repeatedly denounced their attitudes and behaviour - out of all proportion, as she saw it, to their actual sin. And perhaps she had felt moved to ask him why he deemed it necessary to attack them so relentlessly. It is important for us to remember that the Pharisees were generally much respected. Could it be that Jesus used this parable as a means of getting such a critic to see that leaders who are ideologically unsound need to be criticized strongly precisely because, through their influential positions, they adversely affect the whole community?

Analogy: As the health of the eye
 is crucial to the whole
 body, due to its key
 role

So, since the Pharisees have a key role
in our community is it surprising I pay
particular attention to their ideological
health?

to if you're looking for figs and grapes. Then again the parable's conjunction with an entirely separate story about Judging Fruit Trees [Pb. 21] has led to the idea that its concern is rather with distinguishing between 'useful' and 'useless' shrubs. This is clearly a mistake. Consider the following food-gathering sayings:

Do you look for mushrooms in high summer?
Do you look for figs on thistles?
Do you look for grapes on thorns?

The common experience on which these sayings are based is *connections*. The first saying relies for its effect on our awareness, through experience, that mushrooms appear in the autumn. Similarly, experience tells us that figs are found on a specific type of tree and grapes on a specific creeper. Such information is invaluable in the food-gathering business; it's a great deal easier to find mushrooms when you know their growing season, and to find wild grapes when you know what a vine looks like and where it grows.

The question, then, is how and against what background might Jesus have used this parable? Matthew connects it with the saying about being wary of false prophets, and Luke sandwiches it between remarks concerning a disciple's relations with his master (vv. 40,46). Both contexts seem to suggest that the parable has to do with looking for the right person to follow: for them, Jesus is the 'tree'. However, this doesn't conform with the basic characteristic of the food-gathering business, which is the search for something to eat: the fruit itself, not the tree that produces it. And this is what the story is all about. Jesus is here clearly encouraging someone to rely on her experience when searching for what she wants, and discouraging her from looking in a stupid place.

Imagine that a peddler (considered an outcast by devout Jews because of his 'dishonest' trade) has recently died, leaving his wife and five children with no means of support. His widow approaches a prominent member of the synagogue for help but is met with a brush off. She tells Jesus how crushed she feels at being treated in this way by an honoured member of the community but he replies with this parable.

Analogy: As you don't expect to
find grapes on thorn trees
or figs on thistles

So, perhaps you should ask
yourself whether you have gone
to the wrong sort of person for
sympathy?

21

Judging Fruit Trees

Mk

Mt. (a) 7.17 Lk. 6.43
(b)12.33

Th. 43

Because of the way in which the evangelists have allegorized this story it is now very difficult for us not to read it moralistically, as a condemnation of the 'bad' tree for not

doing its job. However, to do so is a cardinal error. This isn't an allegory in which a bad tree represents a bad person, but a true parable based on a peasant's attitude to his crop.

I am reminded of an incident that took place shortly after I got married. I was introduced to my wife's uncle, who lives in Normandy. Like most Normandy peasants he has a small orchard behind his cottage. As he showed me round I was anxious - too anxious - to find something complimentary to say. Indicating an obviously virile tree I congratulated him on possessing such a splendid specimen. He replied somewhat dryly that the tree I so much admired had never produced a decent crop since it was planted. Pointing out a curiously misshapen object in the corner he proceeded to reminisce with my wife on the abundance of wonderful apples it had produced each year. It was a little while before I regained my composure! I don't believe for a moment that my uncle-in-law was 'having a go' at my attitude. I suppose he was simply reacting to my remark in the way that was natural to him. Nonetheless, his words delivered a considerable impact, rather like the one, I believe, that Jesus' story would have had on his target.

The common experience upon which this story is built is *misleading appearances*, the 'logic' being that you should not allow yourself to be influenced by what a fruit tree looks like, since all that really counts is what it produces. As one of the Rabbis later said "The worth of a tree depends on its fruit".

How might the story have been used? When Matthew reports the saying a second time he associates it with the incident in which the Pharisees accuse Jesus of using an evil power to cast out demons. The fact that he is obliged to alter the wording of the story to make it fit suggests that originally Jesus was not the subject of the parable. Thomas would have us believe Jesus aimed the story both against the disciples and, indirectly, against 'the Jews' (a curious anachronism) because they were all proving incapable of judging who he was from the things he said.

This is an interesting interpretation, yet it uses the story in what I see as its weaker, 'positive' mode, i.e.: "It's common sense to see that healthy fruit proves a tree". Matthew on the other hand, the first time he gives the saying, remains more faithful to the original by setting out the story in its stronger, 'negative' mode. In the added phrase (v.19f) he focuses attention on the apparently good tree which, because it produces no fruit, merits only incineration. I think Jesus probably aimed his parable at someone who was enthusing about the great spiritual qualities of some eminent person whom Jesus happened to know hardly deserved such an accolade.

Analogy;	As you judge a tree not by how it looks but by the crop it produces	So, should you not judge a man by <i>your</i> experience of his goodness rather than by <i>his</i> appearance of goodness?
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22

Two House Builders

Mk

Mt. 7.24

Lk. 6.48

Th.

The great difficulty with this parable is to make the story's emphasis on 'foundations' square with the 'hearing and doing' interpretation. Indeed, the more I see people trying to make it work the more I realize it simply can't be done. My first inclination was to argue that the evangelists had inappropriately added the 'hearing and doing' saying to Jesus' original story. However, my problem was then to account for the fact that Rabbi Elisha ben Abuya, at the beginning of the second century, also included it in his version of the same parable:

A Jew, who has much knowledge of the Law and many good works, is like a man who lays stone foundations for his house and builds thereon with sun-dried bricks. Though floods may come, the house is not affected because its foundations are sound. But the man who has much knowledge of the law and no good works is like a man who lays foundations of sun-dried bricks, and builds thereon with stone. If only a small flood comes, the house collapses because the foundations are not sound.

Rabbi Elisha would hardly have been influenced by an interpretation stemming from the evangelists so I conclude that both he and Jesus were working from a common source and that the 'hearing and doing' motif *was* original.

I then came across Rabbi ben Azariah's parable of the two trees, which also contains this 'hearing and doing' motif. The first tree, which gets blown down because it has many branches and few roots, is likened to a man whose wisdom exceeds his works; the second tree, which stands firm because it has few branches and many roots, to a man whose works exceed his wisdom. This story is clearly about putting on a show. The tree with many branches and few roots is seen as making its effort in a display above ground whereas the tree with few branches and many roots has, as it were, invested most of its energy underground where this is most effective even if invisible.

It suddenly dawned on me that this 'putting on a show' could also be the common experience of Rabbi Elisha's parable, which would explain why both parables share the same 'hearing and doing' motif. In Elisha's version of The Two House Builders there is a question where to place the limited stock of cut stones. One man decides to put these above ground where they will be seen and admired, constructing his foundations instead out of sun-dried bricks (see Is. 9.10). The other, having no care for appearances, chooses to use the cut stones for his foundations. So here too the emphasis of the story could properly be seen as that of making an investment in secret where it will have most effect, rather than creating a great show.

So I then asked myself whether the common experience of Jesus' parable could also be this emphasis on show rather than sound foundations. It is true that as Matthew and Luke present the story this does not come across, and one would never have posed the question had not the Rabbis' parables also survived. The only possible trace (and even this is not unambiguous) is Luke's point that the wise builder 'dug deep' in order to lay his foundations on rock. I conclude that very early in the development of the tradition, Christians began to see the story as being about sound foundations, and once this step had been taken all references to the show aspect fell away as distractions.

With the common experience redefined as *putting on a show*, there is no difficulty in connecting Jesus' parable with the 'doing rather than just hearing' interpretation given by the evangelists since the 'logic' of the story is then clearly seen to be that it is not acquiring knowledge that is important but what you do with it. It makes people feel differently from others if they set aside time to study the way of holiness. This makes it easy for them to fall into the trap of believing that it is the wisdom they acquire which makes them holy, which explains why they so often become ostentatious about their studies, hoping that others will notice what they are doing and give them credit.

The Rabbis were well aware of this danger and anxious to make their students realize that it was not the show of scholarship that brought holiness but rather a discrete though effective carrying out of the Law. Perhaps Jesus believed one of his disciples was making too much of the learning and wisdom he was acquiring and so told him this parable on some occasion when the defect had become obvious.

Analysis: As the housebuilder should have cared nothing about show but should have invested his money where it was most effective

So, shouldn't you cease to be so preoccupied with becoming a scholar and instead make a real difference by changing your life?

23

The Children in the Marketplace

Mk

Mt. 11.16

Lk.7.32

Th.

It seems the children are playing at weddings and funerals; the traditional wedding round-dance was performed by the men and the funeral dirge by the women. However, the exact nature of the dispute is unclear. Is it between the girls and the boys as to which game to play or is it amongst the children in general as to the roles they are to have: musicians or dancers? At first sight the suggestion seems to be that the players are whining that the dancers are refusing to fall in with their wishes. This has caused some commentators to envisage the children who perform the strenuous role in the limelight as John and Jesus, and the carping spectator children as their Jewish critics. This may have been the way in which the evangelists intended their readers to understand the story. However, there are two fundamental objections. First the story itself does not justify a distinction between the dancers as the central performers and the musicians as mere bystanders. Second this distinction depends on the story's assumed reference to Jesus and John although in parables the story is supposed to enlighten its reference, not the other way round.

We really have to be firm and set aside the evangelists' allegorical references to John the aesthete and Jesus the *bon viveur* and allow the story to speak for itself (after all, if at the end of the day the references turn out to be appropriate we can always bring them back). Probably we should not try and read too much into the story. It is, after all, just a quick sketch of a group of children in a marketplace, bickering as children so often do, the

common experience being their *sheer negativity*, and the ‘logic’ being that such negativity inevitably undermines both the game and their enjoyment of it.

I can see Jesus using this story to highlight the negativity of his contemporaries’ attitudes towards him, expressed on some particular occasion. In his eyes they were forever throwing away the enormous possibilities of the situation in order to conduct silly squabbles with him - for example by making out that he or his disciples had infringed the Law or by asking him to take sides in some fractious theological debate.

Analogy:	As children spoil their games by their endless arguments	So, does not this generation throw away undreamed-of possibilities by its negative attitudes towards me?.
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24

The Rescued Ox

Mk	Mt. 12.11	Lk. 13.15 /14.5	Th.
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We are presented here with two parable stories, that of the loosed animal and that of the rescued animal, connected by the evangelists with three incidents: the healing of the man with the withered hand, the healing of the woman with ‘the spirit of infirmity’ and the healing of the man with dropsy. Since rescuing an animal and giving it a drink are quite different actions it may seem strange to treat the stories as constituting one and the same parable. However, in the way in which I understand them they do in fact function in an identical manner. So here we have a case of true twins (c.f. Pbs. 3 & 4 pp. 16-19).

It is clear that Luke has artificially tied one story to the incident of the woman with the spirit of infirmity: the link is strained and makes for a rather weak comparison. Untying an animal you yourself have previously tied up is scarcely analogous to loosing someone from the bonds of Satan. In fact the rescue of a trapped animal also functions rather badly as an analogy for a healing. There are signs that the evangelists understood this, for their central argument lies elsewhere.

Though there is an obvious uncertainty about the connections of the stories with the particular incidents described I see no reason why the parable could not have originally been used in the context of a Sabbath day healing. As far as healing someone on the Sabbath was concerned the lawyers of the time (scribes) were agreed that it was only permissible if the patient’s life was in danger. However, when it came to rescuing a trapped animal scribal opinions differed. Some said it was legitimate to bring the animal food, others that you could help it make its own escape by throwing down objects on which it could stand, others that you could leave it till the Sabbath was over.

At bottom both evangelists understand Jesus as arguing that his healings were legitimate exceptions to the rule about not working on the Sabbath. Consequently for them the

stories are not really parabolic illustrations but recognised exceptional cases and they justify Jesus' Sabbath day healings by reasoning from the lesser to the greater, using the 'if such and such, then how much more ...' argument. However, given what we know about scribal opinion in Jesus' day it is doubtful if such reasoning would have been persuasive since the cases put forward would most certainly not have been accepted as recognised exceptions to the rule. In fact the stories are quite unconvincing when seen as exposures of scribal hypocrisy. In any case, to my mind it is inconceivable Jesus would have become involved in arguments about exceptional cases, where everything depends on where you draw the line: Would it be right to rescue a chicken on the Sabbath ... a sheep ... an ox ... a man? Characteristically he ignored such debates and went straight to the ideological heart of the matter.

Since we are dealing with Sabbath observances it will be well if we remind ourselves of what this was about. The principle is set out in Exodus 20.8-11 and repeated in 23.12:

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.”

“Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; that your ox and your ass may have rest, and the son of your bondmaid, and the alien, may be refreshed.”

Clearly these texts (as well as the equally interesting one about the sabbatical year [Exodus 23.10f]) are concerned with setting a limit on the time used for gainful employment. The condition that the rule applied also to farm animals, slaves and foreigners makes it abundantly plain that rest from economic activity is the issue.

Jesus' stories strikingly reveal that common sense (if not scribal dogma) makes a clear distinction between furthering one's economic interests and answering the calls of life. They insist that no one in his right mind would consider rescuing an ox or giving it a drink to be gainful employment.

Seen in conjunction with Jesus' Sabbath day healings these stories have the effect of unmasking the attitude of those who would criticize him. There is not the slightest indication that people approached Jesus as a professional healer, so to accuse him of working on the Sabbath was simply bogus.

Analogy:	As no one in his right mind would consider it gainful employment, to rescue an animal or to give it a drink	So, how come you consider it an infringement of the Sabbath if I heal someone who is sick?
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25

Leaven

Mk Mt. 13.33 Lk.13.21 Th. 96

It has been calculated that the amount of flour used by the woman in the story would be enough to produce bread for over a hundred people. I am immediately persuaded this feature is editorial since it distracts attention from what the story as a whole - its 'logic' - is saying. Numbers tend to become exaggerated in any story. Here, presumably, the evangelists' point was to indicate that the followers of Jesus were going to transform 'the whole world'.

On which aspect of bread-making did Jesus intend his audience to focus? There appear to be four possibilities:

- 1). *Relative quantities* (of leaven and dough or finished bread). This is the aspect emphasised by the evangelists, and - if they are right - it makes the saying a twin of the parable of The Mustard Seed, as they both imply by putting them together [Pb. 10].
- 2). *Enabling* (the woman as just the enabling partner in the bread-making process), as in the parable of The Growing Seed [Pb. 9].
- 3). *The catalytic aspect* (of the working of the leaven): its importance being not for what it is in itself but for its effect on the whole dough. If this line of argument is right the parable is a twin of that of Salt [Pb. 13].
- 4). *The 'magical' aspect* (of the transformation of the dough) as is suggested by the 'hiding' of the leaven within the dough.

We must carefully consider each line of thought, for everything depends on which we select.

First the idea of *relative quantities*: Though it has strong backers, this alternative has to be ruled out on the grounds that, for the onlooker, the natural comparison is not between the morsel of leaven and the finished bread, but between the unrisen and the risen dough, and while there is a certain contrast here it is hardly spectacular. This becomes especially clear on comparison with the parable of The Mustard Seed.

Next the *enabling* idea: In the parable of The Growing Seed, because of the time it takes for a grain of wheat to germinate and grow to maturity, there is a natural emphasis in the story upon the period in which the human agent is inactive. However, even though the Near Eastern method of bread-making - in which a morsel of dough left over from the last baking is used for leavening - is somewhat slower than our European use of fast-acting yeast, it still only takes a matter of hours, perhaps overnight. So, although the process of bread-making could be used to highlight the enabling idea, a proficient storyteller would hardly have employed it since it doesn't automatically give rise to such an association in people's minds.

What about the *catalytic* aspect? The emphasis in the story on the fact that the whole dough had risen seems to suggest such an effect, and it is certainly possible to use the leaven analogy to illustrate it: like salt, a small lump of leaven has little food value on its

own but its effect on dough (like salt's effect on food) is dramatic. However, while the term 'catalytic effect' precisely defines the remarkable process whereby salt enhances the flavour of food, it is not the aspect which naturally attracts attention in the preparation of dough for baking. Again, the reason for this is the time-scale. For the catalytic effect to be highlighted it has to take place virtually instantaneously: the cook tastes the soup and finds it insipid, puts in a teaspoon of salt and at once all the flavour floods out.

Finally we have the 'magical' aspect. I think it is this feature of the way leaven works that most naturally strikes the observer. Try to imagine yourself present naively, like a little boy watching his mother making bread. He sees her mix a small lump of dough kept from the last baking into the mass of her new dough, and then leave it in some warm place covered with a cloth. Coming back with her in the morning, he sees her remove the cloth and reveal the transformation: as if by magic the whole has swollen to twice its former size. "Mummy, look what's happened!" Here, once again, it is the time factor that is crucial to the observer's appreciation of the common experience on which the story is built. Timing, after all, is the essence of the magician's art: while the amateur performs his tricks either too rapidly or too slowly, the master magician draws his audience irresistibly to the climax of his trick without overdoing any aspect or losing the peoples' attention. In the case of the leaven working in the dough, the process is slow enough not to allow the onlooker to see what is happening (especially if everything is covered with a cloth), yet fast enough for the 'trick' to work. This is what makes it natural to describe the leaven as being 'hidden' in the dough until - hey presto! all is revealed. Wouldn't any mother, given an audience of small children, instinctively play up the magic of what has happened?

What sort of defective attitude was Jesus targeting? The common experience at the heart of the story is an *inexplicable transformation*: at first nothing has happened, then you find something has ... you know not how ... the 'logic' being that it is not yours to know how the transformation takes place. This makes me think the subject matter was the arrival of the Kingdom and that Jesus used the parable as a response to some indication that the disciples wanted to understand the process in order to control it. In this case what he would have wanted was to get them to see that whenever you witness the development of a Kingdom of God society you can never be certain how it took place. There are no blue-prints for the Kingdom and one must operate expecting and hoping to be surprised.

Analogy:	As there is 'magic' in the way leaven works in the dough	So, is there not something inexplicable about the transformations that bring in the kingdom?
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26

Blind Guides

Mk

Mt. 15.14

Lk. 6.39

Th. 34

Jesus generally drew his parables from real life which meant that unlike some stories current at the time they don't feature talking animals and plants, or supernatural happenings. However, this does not mean, as some suppose, that they are always rigidly realistic. This story (like Pb. 13) is a case in point. A sighted person leading a blind one was a familiar scene. But Jesus has taken this image and created a story whose power stems not from a straightforward appeal to life but from a fanciful blend of experience and absurd invention.

This talk of absurdity may suggest to some people that the saying is an allegorical statement rather than a parabolic comparison since the absurd is a constituent element of nearly all allegories. However, this is not the case, as I can demonstrate by contrasting it with something a later Rabbi said:

“When the shepherd is angry with his sheep he sets a blind ram to lead them.”

This saying is clearly allegorical. Shepherds don't as a matter of fact choose which ram should lead their flocks and the sense of the logion clearly depends on seeing the shepherd as God, the flock as Israel, and the ram as the leader God has chosen for his people. Here the story clearly plays a subordinate role. It is there to be used even to the point of being rendered materially absurd while the all-important business - the statement about how God operates - happens 'on its back'. In sharp contrast, in Jesus' saying the absurdity of the blind guide is the crux of the comparison, the whole object of the exercise being to compare the absurdly modified reality in the story with some absurd attitude which has just raised its head.

In other words absurdity can be present in both allegories *and* parables and the distinction is not in its presence or absence but rather in its role. In allegory one uses a story to manufacture a way of expressing something that is intrinsically difficult to express. In the process the story is almost always strained beyond its limits and deformed. The absurdity in allegory is therefore an unintentional by-product of the overall process. In parable however, absurdity where it exists is quite intentional. It is an integral part of the comparison that is being proposed and therefore an indispensable part of the story's revelatory purpose.

What is it that makes Jesus' contrived picture so effective? Is it simply the foolishness of a blind person offering himself as a guide? No, for something more important is implied: the consent of those led. In other words both parties conspire to create this farcical situation, which means that Jesus must have had in his sights some form of collusion. Matthew records the parable as Jesus' response to a remark that the Pharisees had been offended by something he had said. Nowadays New Testament scholars claim the evangelists were over inclined to view opponents of Jesus as Pharisees. For my money this is a rather pettifogging criticism since the precise affiliations of such people is relatively unimportant. What is clear is that Jesus offended many of those who considered themselves to be leaders of the community - whether they were strictly speaking Pharisees or not. Of course on this particular occasion he was probably not targeting these so-called leaders themselves but rather followers who went along with their disastrous pretensions.

Analogy:	As a blind man invites disaster by consenting to be led by a blind guide	So, do you not invite disaster by following such benighted leaders?
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27

The Lost Sheep

Mk Mt. 18.12 Lk .15.4 Th. 107

People often transfer to this parable aspects that only properly belong to its so-called twin, The Lost Coin [Pb. 54]. For example they talk about the shepherd's extravagant concern for his lost sheep. However, no one would have thought the behaviour of the shepherd extravagant, and the loss of one sheep, even from a flock of a hundred, would certainly not have been considered a small matter. These ideas originate in Luke's companion parable of The Lost Coin and are out of place in this story.

Even the evangelists are not guiltless in this matter. The element of rejoicing (present in Matthew and Luke though absent in Thomas) has no real place in this story. It too belongs with The Lost Coin and was only smuggled in here to make this parable conform with the evangelists' chosen interpretation: God's enthusiastic welcome of the repentant sinner. Notice that while Matthew is fairly restrained when introducing the aspect of rejoicing, Luke gets completely carried away. While it would be natural for a shepherd to be pleased at finding his animal, and for his fellow shepherds to congratulate him, none of them would have made a song and dance about something that was all part of the job. This said, the main reason for believing that the rejoicing element was added later is that it distracts attention from the story's common experience - that *problem cases call for special treatment*.

To appreciate the story's 'logic' one has to bear in mind that for a shepherd his sheep are his livelihood. The thrust therefore is that good management dictates that, having assured himself that the rest of his flock is safe (no shepherd would simply abandon his animals), he must concentrate exclusively on the sheep that is lost. Some will find this hard to swallow because it goes against the traditional interpretation: love triumphing over all vicissitudes (a sentimental understanding of the relationship between a shepherd and his sheep). So here is the same 'logic' achieved by Rabbi Judah in an unspoiled parable:

“a driver had charge of twelve kine laden with wine; when one of them entered the shop of an idolater, the driver left the eleven and followed after the one. Then said they to him, ‘Why doest thou leave the eleven and follow after the one?’ And he replied; ‘These are in the open street, and I have no fear that the wine will become ritually unfit for use.’”

Indubitably, the thrust of this story (its 'logic') is the driver's sound managerial sense in abandoning the wine carried by the eleven kine in order to rescue that carried by the twelfth which was in imminent danger! Doubtless he was pleased when he eventually retrieved his errant charge with its valuable cargo, and certainly bystanders who understood his achievement would have congratulated him. However, for the purpose of

the parable Rabbi Judah rightly passes over such considerations for though they improve the story as a story they ruin it as a parable.

If the idea of rejoicing wasn't original to the story, why did the evangelists write it in? Well, although we sometimes forget it, rejoicing was as central to the early Church's parousia message as was the theme of judgement. This is why meals and harvests in Jesus' parables, as they have come down to us, tend to take on a festive air. So once again we have a case of the evangelists steering their readers in the direction of Jesus' second coming.

But how might the parable have been used originally? Luke was probably right to link it with the accusation that Jesus was associating too freely with sinners. But perhaps we can be a little more specific. The story concerns the proper role of management in a time of crisis. So maybe we should envisage a group of honest well-wishers chiding Jesus for abandoning them in order to go off and deal with the needs of some worthless wretch who had stupidly got himself into some unnecessary trouble.

Analogy: As it makes good economic sense for the shepherd to leave his flock and give himself entirely to the business of rescuing the animal in need

So, does it not make sense for me to respond to the needs of someone in great difficulty, even though it should mean temporarily leaving people like yourselves?

28

The Banquet

Mk

Mt. 22.2

Lk.14.16

Th. 64

The evangelists have edited this story so heavily it takes a steady nerve to peel off all the accretions. Matthew has based his expansions on the idea that the dinner is a parousia feast. He has made the host a king - signifying God - and the dinner a marriage feast for his son - signifying the joyful banquet which will be held when Jesus returns. As a result of the changes the reader is likely to guess that the first invited guests signify the Jews who rejected Jesus. Matthew encourages this understanding, first by having the king's servants (the prophets) murdered by these guests and then by telling how the king sent an expeditionary force to crush them (the Romans' destruction of Jerusalem). The reader naturally takes the second lot of guests to be the Christians. Matthew affirms this by describing them as a morally mixed bunch of marginals (the bad and good from off the streets). In order to bring his greatly expanded story to a head Matthew has finally added the bit about the guest who got into the banquet without a wedding garment. It is only now that the poor reader can see the point to which he has been building: Only Christians who demonstrate a proper repentance (wear the right clothes) can expect to be acquitted at the Last Judgement.

The following story from Rabban Yohannan ben Zakkai (circa CE 80) suggests that Matthew borrowed this last expansion from the Rabbis:

A king invited his servants to a banquet, but did not fix a time. The prudent ones among them adorned themselves and sat at the door of the palace, for they said "Is anything lacking in a royal palace?" The fools among them went to work, for they said "Can there be a banquet without preparations?" Suddenly the King summoned his servants: The prudent ones went in adorned, but the foolish ones went in soiled. The king rejoiced at the prudent, but was angry with the fools. He said, "Let those who adorned themselves for the banquet sit and eat and drink, but those who did not adorn themselves for the banquet are to stand and watch."

Luke too has embroidered the story, though less than Matthew. He has likewise based his interpretation on the clue symbol, viz. the banquet = the parousia feast. We can see his hand in the threefold division of the guests. The first - the Jews - are locked out which is surprising since they showed not the slightest sign of ever wanting to get in! The second are the Jewish Christians (the maimed, blind and lame from the streets and lanes of the city) and the third are the Gentile Christians (from the highways and hedges).

If we remove all the allegorical touches from the work of both evangelists we end up with something like Thomas' version of the story - though even he added a backhand comment against the mercantile profession! However, we are not yet out of the wood since one central feature of the story remains obscure: Why did all the first invited guest turn down the invitation? It has recently been discovered that Jesus based his parable of the Banquet on the popular story of a rich tax-gatherer, Bar Ma'jan. This Bar Ma'jan was a worthless fellow who had done only one good deed in his entire life: he had arranged a banquet for the city councillors, to which they never came. As a result, he had given orders for the poor to be invited in their stead so that the food would not be wasted. This discovery has at last made it obvious why the first guests refused the invitation. If the host was a tax-gatherer then of course high-class people would have refused to eat with him. The host's subsequent action also takes a new meaning for of course the wealthy Bar Ma'jan, after such a public slap in the face, would try and turn the tables on those who spurned him as a social outcast. Making up the numbers by inviting people who would not be too proud to come was by any standards an astute response.

But why did the early Church remove Bar Ma'jan from the picture. The reason is pretty clear: their interpretation of the parable depended on seeing the host as God and this made things very difficult if he was also a tax-collector. So out went Bar Ma'jan, but unfortunately the 'logic' of the story went with him!

What we get when we give Bar Ma'jan back his rightful place is a typical 'escape artist' story, in which the thrust is developed from the unexpected way a triumph is gained from what looked like certain defeat. How do we respond? We don't acclaim the hero's action because we find it morally praiseworthy; rather we raise our hats to the pluck and cleverness ('chutzpah') that produced this exceptional win against the odds. We find ourselves applauding this intensely human act of defiance: the man's stubborn determination to remain himself rather than play the proffered role of humiliated sinner.

It is difficult for us to accept this scenario because Christian tradition has taught us to see the point of the story as the host's decision to drop his powerful friends in order to

identify with the poor and outcast. However, such an interpretation is really quite untenable. Bar Ma'jan never turned his back on his neighbours, it was they who rejected him. Furthermore he clearly had no thoughts, one way or another, about the poor and outcast; for the purpose of his 'escape' they were simply pawns in his war with society. In the original Bar Ma'jan story, the poor featured solely as the means whereby the rich tax-collector was able to do the one good deed in his life, even if only by accident - 'that the food should not be wasted'. Clearly, there is no question here of his showing any kind of solidarity with the poor and, as tax-collectors were not renowned for such sentiments, no one would have read it into the story.

In Jesus' version the only difference (in this respect) is that the poor, instead of simply ensuring that the food is disposed of in an appropriate manner, now become the means by which the tax-collector escapes the trap set for him by his tormentors. There is no indication in the texts that the host feels any sympathy with the poor and if any element of solidarity is implied it is most naturally explained as arising from the evangelists' conviction that the host is God and the newly invited guests the Church. In other words if we think we see the notion of 'solidarity with the poor' in this parable it is not because Jesus intended it but because the door to it was opened by the evangelists' allegorization, and we read it back into the story. We are encouraged to do this because we assume such a solution to the host's problem would naturally have suggested itself to Jesus since he taught that salvation for the rich lay only in this direction. But this is certainly not the way Jesus' audience would have reacted. They would have known the host was a tax-collector and would rightly have scoffed at the idea that he was motivated by such a concern. They would have seen Jesus' story as glorifying a well known characteristic of tax-collectors: their inherent toughness in the face of public condemnation and their dogged determination not to give in to what they saw as the smug self-righteousness of their many detractors. This form of *self love* is the common experience on which the story is built, the 'logic' being that the tax-gatherer would clearly have been foolish to give in and crawl away, his tail between his legs.

What is the attitude Jesus was addressing with this parable? We worthy folk tend to believe that the way forward for sinners is for them to eat humble pie. If they wish to be welcomed back into society - our society - they must agree to grovel, not just before God, but before us all. Yet this in reality is just a trap. It is an invitation for the sinners to sacrifice their healthy self-love so that we can go on justifying our fiction of 'the righteous society'. I believe this parable was designed to target not the attitude of some pious 'Pharisee' - as we might in the first instance have supposed - but that of a sinner on the receiving end of the strictures of such an upright member of society. Probably she was in grave danger of caving in to public opinion and sacrificing the only thing she had left of any worth - her self-love.

Analogy: As the tax-collector was clearly right to refuse the proffered role of the worthless outcast

So, shouldn't you refuse to be written off and instead find some way of affirming yourself?

As it appears in Matthew this saying is a compacted parable since the comparative ‘story’ element - about whether a person should concentrate on cleaning the inside or the outside of a cup or a plate - is intentionally confused with the subject matter under discussion - which is about whether people should concentrate on purifying their thoughts or their deeds. However, there are three reasons for believing that this was not how the parable originally worked.

1) Jesus may well have believed that only by purifying your inner thoughts can you bring about a purification of your deeds; however, he would hardly have used the dish-washing comparison to illuminate such a truth since, contrary to what is claimed in the saying, washing the inside of a vessel does nothing to further its outer cleanliness.

2) Matthew’s construct relies on an inherent confusion between two completely different things: washing the inside of a vessel - for reasons of hygiene - and washing its exterior - to bring about ritual cleansing. Consequently it lacks all logical persuasiveness for while a Pharisee would certainly have admitted that his ritual washing did nothing to improve his domestic hygiene he would hardly have found the point persuasive since hygiene had never been the object of ritual purification.

3) Thomas’ version of the saying while being itself utterly opaque is neither couched in the form of a compacted parable nor makes any allusion to the ritual purification business on which Matthew’s version depends.

So we shall have to forget about the Pharisees and their ritual purifications and instead concentrate on the ‘logic’ of the story which in both versions is clearly to do with the different reasons why one washes the inside and the outside of a vessel. Now, I put it to you that while a person washes the inside of a vessel for reasons of hygiene one restricts oneself to washing a vessel’s exterior because one is concerned only with how it will appear to others. This would seem to indicate that Jesus’ story-comparison about how a person does the washing up was designed to highlight a piece of behaviour which demonstrated a shallow concern for appearances masquerading as a desire for real purity. Jesus says in effect to someone “You are like a foolish housewife who makes certain her utensils are spotlessly clean and shiny on the outside while paying not the slightest attention to the encrusted dirt on the inside!”

The common experience on which this story is built is *cleanliness as opposed to the appearance of cleanliness* (which in a sense has always been obvious), the ‘logic’ being that you should concentrate your cleaning exercise on areas dirtied by usage and not on those parts which most show.

Analogy: As it is ridiculous to concentrate on cleaning the outside of a cup or a plate simply because these are the areas that show.

So, isn't it foolish to concentrate on appearing on the outside to be pure while leaving your inner impurities quite untouched?

30 The Body and the Vultures

[Note. 'eagles', as in RSV, is a mistranslation of the Aramaic word 'nisra' which was used for both species.]

Mk Mt. 24.28 Lk 17.37 Th.

According to the evangelists Jesus used this parable to indicate that the parousia would be foreshadowed by appropriate warnings. Thus as the gathering of vultures reveals to the attentive observer the presence of a nearby carcass so there will inevitably be appropriate signs to give warning of the approaching parousia. Even if we had not learned to be suspicious of the evangelists' parousia references there would be good reasons to object to this strained comparison, in which a spacial conjunction is used to illustrate a temporal one. In this respect The Budding Fig Tree [Pb. 15] would have constituted a far more convincing analogy. In any case we must in our usual way set aside such matters and allow the story to speak for itself.

The main difficulty is to determine the precise significance of the word 'body'. One could downplay it: reading the term as simply this particular bird's food. In this case the 'logic' would be that if you want to find a somewhat elusive bird you should start by looking for what it feeds on. However, this way of reading the story hardly gives sufficient credit to the special feeding habits of the vulture. Had Jesus wished to create the above thrust he would surely have chosen a more straightforward illustration, such as looking for a lion by first locating where the deer have collected.

Alternatively one could play up the 'body' element in the story; reading it as an individual who has endured the ultimate distress. In this case the 'logic' would be that where you find distress there you will also discover those who capitalize on it. It seems to me this interpretation reads more into the body than is permissible. My guess is that we should read the body simply as a death understood in a matter of fact, unemotional way. If I am right then what would the 'logic' be? It has been suggested that Jesus was highlighting the fact that where there is a death there you will find people ready to exploit it - like professional mourners, or relatives eager for pickings. However, had this been the intention surely he would have said something like this:

See the vultures are gathering to feed on the body!

By turning things the other way round Jesus seems to imply that the body and not the vultures was somehow in control of the proceedings. He downgrades the vultures as if to emphasize that one should not be afraid of the gathering of such creatures, since their

(i.e. geographically) the brigands will break in' or it can equally well be read: 'Fortunate is the man who knows *when ...*' (i.e. at what time during the night this incident would take place). To my mind the second alternative makes much better sense. It seems to me perfectly evident the householder would only be interested in the question of timing if he had good cause to fear he would be burgled. In other words *he must already have received some sort of a warning*.

Anyone who has been in this position will readily appreciate the householder's dilemma. He knows his cowardly would-be assailant is waiting to catch him off his guard. He thinks to himself "If only I knew when he will be coming for I could then catch him at it". But even as he imagines such an encounter he knows full well the thief will plan his operation so as to be as certain as he can that he will not be caught. In short, the householder experiences an acute sense of *vulnerability*: the common experience on which Jesus' story is built.

Of course you may take the view that if you were going to be robbed you would be only too pleased to be absent when it happened, the furthest thing from your mind being the desire to catch the thief red-handed. Understandably, you may be afraid of such an encounter. However, the householder in Jesus' story isn't afraid. So, to appreciate the parable you have to imagine a situation in which you wouldn't be afraid to confront the thief. Perhaps you are visiting someone in a high-rise flat and have to leave your bicycle unattended near to where a group of seven-year-olds are playing. You're in a hurry and have forgotten your padlock and chain. They look at you ... and they look at the bicycle. You look at them and suspect you know what they have in mind to do the moment you disappear up those stairs. In such a situation, you'd probably experience not only a strong desire to catch them at it, but also a galling realization that they will only steal your bike when they know you are helpless to do anything about it.

"If the householder had known the time the thief was coming he would not have let his house be burgled!" is like saying that it would be somewhat unusual for a burglar to let you know when he was going to strike! Both formulations highlight the common experience of the *vulnerability* of even the strongest to such sly and cowardly acts. The burglar can watch, wait and choose his moment but we can't always be on our guard. What then is the story's 'logic'? Well it stands to reason that if the householder can't possibly know at what time his house is going to be burgled he must either try to be permanently on his guard by staying up all night every night - which (in spite of the evangelists' recommendations) is patently absurd - or he can admit he is only human and, having taken all reasonable precautions, go to bed and get a good night's sleep!

In what circumstances might Jesus have used this parable? It is clear that his disciples were acutely aware that he had made many enemies [Mk 3.6, Mt. 22.15, Lk. 13.31], enemies who could only be waiting for a suitable opportunity to strike. Some of the disciples may have been reduced to a state of permanent alarm. Could Jesus have used this parable to help them out of their dilemma?

expectations of his employer. The evidence to support this can be found in the story itself.

1) Had Jesus meant to focus attention on the moral culpability of the third servant he would have made it clear not only that the master instructed him to trade with the money left in his keeping but that the man had accepted the responsibility. Only in such circumstances could the listener be expected to condemn his subsequent inaction. Matthew's version simply says the master entrusted his property to his servants ... to each according to his ability. In Luke, it is true, the master does instruct the servants to trade with the money each received but it is clear he has made the change since there is no way Matthew would have left out such a significant detail. In neither story are the servants' reactions recorded.

2) Whatever conclusion Jesus' hearers may have come to regarding the expectations of the master, they would certainly have been satisfied that the third servant had fulfilled his moral obligations as regards the money that had been committed to his trust. According to Jewish law you could guard someone's money, without liability in case of theft, if you buried it safely. However, if you treated it casually by merely tying it up in a cloth you became responsible for making good its loss. The third servant's action in burying the money, along with his speech on his master's return, makes it abundantly plain he had taken pains to do everything that was right. All attempts to blacken the third servant's character (Matthew, by having him clapped into prison; Luke, by altering the story so that he hides the money carelessly in a napkin; the Gospel of the Nazarenes [see p. 125], by having him use the money for his personal enjoyment) founder on the fact that when you set out the story moralistically you invariably make people sorry for the man. Furthermore such interpretations reduce the story's 'logic' to something completely lifeless and banal - a wrong committed, a punishment administered.

As usual I advise that we forget about this clue-symbol approach and simply look to the way in which the story naturally unfolds, trusting to the conviction that he who created the story knew what he was doing. If we do this it immediately becomes clear that the third servant, poor man, never wanted his master's damned money in the first place; that he accepted it only because he had no choice in the matter; and having done so he proceeded to behave with perfect propriety. So if this man was neither wicked or irresponsible, why was his master so angry with him on his return? Was it not because of something in his attitude; an inability, or unwillingness to face reality, a kind of blindness to his situation resulting from fear? The man knew his boss was an out-and-out opportunistic capitalist, yet continued to think he could avoid being involved in the same game and so he buried his head (as well as the money) in the sand. Is it not this attitude that makes his fate so inevitable? As soon as his boss realizes he has no stomach for the risk business he will, of course, get the sack. The fact that he is an honest, law-abiding individual only makes his fate more piquant.

What we have here is a story about *risk-taking* (the common experience). The story's 'logic' is that the servant is foolish to believe he can live free of risk-taking when he finds himself in the employment of a high-flying capitalist.

How might the parable have been used? We know that one of Jesus' favourite themes was the need for servants of the Gospel *to dare to* [Mk 10.29; Mt. 10.16; 13.45; Lk. 17.33 etc.]. So I suggest Jesus was challenging a disciple who imagined he could follow him yet avoid the risks involved in being committed to the Gospel.

Analogy:	As the agent of a dedicated money-making master is obliged to take risks with what is entrusted to him	So, seeing that God too is a demanding, opportunistic master aren't you foolish to think you can avoid risking what he has given you?
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34 **The Town on a Hill**

Mk Mt. 5.14 Lk. Th. 32

Clearly the early Church found it difficult to interpret this parable, which offered no obvious clue-symbol to work with. Matthew seems to have understood it, and also the parable of The Lamp [Pb. 8], with which he erroneously twins it, as an exhortation to the disciples to stand up and be seen (see v. 16). Thomas on the other hand has tried to make it into an image of impregnability.

I am always struck when I visit Mediterranean countries to see so many old towns perched on the tops of hills. They look terrific, but to my twentieth century eyes their settings seem inconvenient. Of course, the people who first came to build them chose these hill-top positions because they were prime military sites for control and defence, which meant they could be used to gain political prominence within the region. (Such towns would often be described as 'sitting proudly'). *Prominence*, then, is the common experience upon which this story is built.

How might Jesus have used this parable? Well, it is implicitly about the inevitable consequences of taking a high-profile stance (the story's 'logic'), and we know from the Gospels that people certainly found Jesus' high profile a problem. Close to the beginning of his ministry, his family made a concerted effort to persuade him to draw back lest things he said and did should get him into serious trouble [Mk 3.21, 31f]. It seems likely that what we have in this parable is Jesus' response to such pressure from well-wishers. I think it was his way of pointing out that when you are given the job of taking the lid off society and exposing people's attitudes you will only defeat your object if you start backtracking when powerful people oppose you; there was no trouble-free way of achieving what he had set out to do.

Analogy:	As it is foolish for the inhabitants of a dominant town to think they can avoid the political troubles afflicting the region	So, is it not foolish of you to think that I who seek to challenge people can also have the option of a quiet life.
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Mk

Mt. 13.24

Lk.

Th. 57

The weeds this story speaks about are the poisonous darnel which looks very similar to wheat in its early stages of growth. Though it was a common practice to weed out the darnel from the fields it was impossible when harvesting to prevent small amounts of darnel seed being gathered with the wheat. This is a serious problem because even in very small quantities darnel causes drowsiness and, in higher doses, convulsions, vomiting and even death. So a sieve made out of camel hide was used to extract darnel, whose seed is marginally smaller than that of wheat. Of course when it came to sowing it was even more important to use 'good' i.e.: properly sieved grain since otherwise the problem got completely out of hand.

In dealing with this story there are two obvious priorities. First we have to put completely out of our minds Matthew's allegorical explanation (absent in Thomas). This explanation, which he puts into the mouth of Jesus, is that the farmer = God, the enemy = Satan. Second we have to forget for a moment the early church's harvest theme in which gathering and sorting = the parousia. Our business is to concentrate exclusively on the story.

The story itself is a counsel not to act too hastily in weeding out darnel. But how does this square with the fact that weeding was a common practice? It has been suggested that the farmer doubted the effectiveness of such an operation on this occasion because of the closeness of the sowing. Though the text doesn't actually say this is the case the inference may well be correct. However, it would not have served Jesus' purpose to give his story such a disputed basis: if he had wished to place the weight of his parable on the problem pertaining to a particular type of sowing he would have made the point very clearly.

Quite apart from this specific difficulty the parable in Matthew is full of peculiarities which to my mind betray editorial interference:

1) The story tells of a farmer who, though he has a number of employees, goes out and sows his field by himself. This seems unlikely. Either he would have got his farm hands to do the job for him or he would worked with them to get it done quickly. Of course the allegorical interpretation - in which the farmer symbolizes God - demands that he do the job himself, which only make me more certain this was not the case in Jesus' original story.

2) The story emphasizes that the farmer used 'good' i.e. sieved seed. Jesus' hearers, who lived in peasant farming communities, would have taken this as read since no one would deliberately use second grade seed for sowing. Furthermore, for Jesus to emphasize this point would have weakened the dramatic effect by 'telegraphing' to the listeners that his story was about a spoilt situation. Of course Matthew, as an allegorist, wasn't primarily

interested in the integrity of the story. His concern was to provide the parable with a suitable interpretation. For him this meant seeing the farmer as God and the harvest as the parousia. Hence the need to start his version by stressing that the farmer 'sowed good seed' and that the mishap was caused by some third party.

3) If for some undisclosed reason the farmer did have sole responsibility for the sowing, when his farm hands discovered the disastrous consequences would they have had the temerity to bring him the bad news and openly suggest that perhaps he had inadvertently selected a bag of the wrong seed (see v. 27)? Of course Matthew does not dwell on this point for obvious reasons but this is certainly how a peasant audience would have understood the story. Academics may be blind to such considerations but as a manual worker I am not!

4) The farmer brushes aside his servants' inference that he had made a boob and blithely claims, in the teeth of all probability, that the situation they were facing was the result of a neighbour's mischief. Such a suggestion would certainly have caused derisive laughter amongst a peasant audience but Matthew skates over this. His allegorical interpretation requires that an outside agent be responsible, but this should only heighten our scepticism. When it was discovered that the wheat field was full of weeds it would have immediately occurred to everyone in the neighbourhood that some fool had selected the wrong (i.e. unsieved) seed for the sowing. Standing where I do I rather like the idea of the boss making the mistake and then desperately trying to shift the blame when his error was discovered, and indeed Thomas' version may lend some credence to the claim. However, it has to be more likely that in Jesus' parable the farm hands did the sowing and that it was they who, when questioned by their boss, tried to get out of it by suggesting that some unnamed enemy might be the culprit. One can imagine a farming community enjoying the predicament of these men, much as it would if the family of an unmarried girl with a baby tried to explain away their embarrassing situation by talking about a virgin birth!

A parable has to be built on a *common experience*: an experience shared by its hearers, since it is the assumed validity of this experience that generates the self-authenticating 'logic' in the hearers' minds. Matthew, however, builds his story on a very exceptional circumstance and consequently his story has no thrust. For him this is a matter of little importance since he puts forward the story not as a parable but as an allegory and an allegory has no need for a thrustful 'logic'; an allegory makes its point directly as a take-it-or-leave-it statement.

All in all the story as presented by Matthew is a very second-rate affair, showing none of Jesus' characteristic understanding of situations. Fortunately it is easy to see all these peculiarities as the result of the evangelist's desire to interpret the story allegorically by seeing the farmer as God. If we reconstruct the story in the most natural way the result is a far more convincing piece of work:

A man once sent his servants to sow a field. But when the plants came up and bore grain, many weeds appeared also. So the householder called his servants to him and said "Did you not sow good seeds in my field? How then has it weeds?" They answered "Sir, we sowed good seed. Perhaps an enemy has done this. Do you want us to go and gather in the weeds?" But he said "No,

lest in gathering them you root up the wheat along with them. Let them both grow together until the harvest.”

With this reconstruction the general run of the story becomes clear. On witnessing the effects on his crop of some past mistake the farmer does not take his servants’ advice and embark on a cover-up operation in order to save face but concentrates on doing what is best for his farm. You will notice that here the weight of the story can no longer be placed on an unsubstantiated suggestion that the seed has been unusually closely sown. The parable now has a firm foundation: namely the mistake that has been made and the predicament to which it has led - a situation that Jesus’ peasant hearers would surely have relished!

The common experience at the heart of this story is an everyday experience: *the human tendency to cover up mistakes whatever the cost*. Interest is not centred on who is responsible for the fault but on the different reactions to it. On the one hand there are the servants, who try to pin the blame on an unknown third party and who go on to advocate a risky cover-up operation; and on the other there is the farmer, who knows it is the harvest that counts - not saving face. This latter is of course the story’s ‘logic’.

How might Jesus have used the parable? The issue here is not that people should have the moral strength to own up to their errors, since Jesus always motivated people non-moralistically by appealing to their profoundest self-interest. In this story he demonstrates that the servants, in advocating the expenditure of time and effort on a cover-up operation, are jeopardizing their shared interests, which have nothing to do with what the neighbours think but are bound up with the economic viability of the farm. The parable was probably addressed to someone whose past mistakes had recently come to light and Jesus was trying to get her to see that, in worrying about what people might think, she was doing herself no favours.

Analogy: As the servants, in suggesting a cover-up, were their own worst enemies and as the farmer was perfectly right to think only about the good of his farm

So, shouldn’t you be getting on with living your life rather than worrying about what others might think of some stupid thing you have done?

36

Buried Treasure

Mk

Mt. 13.44

Lk.

Th. 109

Though Thomas’ version is quite unlike Matthew’s it is basically equivalent to a certain Rabbinic story. This tells of a man who inherited a place full of rubbish. As he was lazy he decided to sell it for a ridiculously small price. However, the person who bought it immediately went to work and, as he was digging, found treasure hidden within it. With the proceeds of the treasure the new owner built a palace on the land and went about the bazaar followed by a train of slaves. This made the man who had sold him the land choke

with envy. The moral of this story, like that of Thomas, is that you only find the treasure if you are prepared to work the field. I call this a moral and not a 'logic' since the story is hardly based on a self authenticating common experience. Though perfectly plausible and not in the least bit allegorical it does not naturally unwind to deliver its trust. On the contrary it gives the impression of being cleverly engineered to deliver a moral lesson, there being no question of it making available a new awareness for discovery. Clearly Thomas' version has been corrupted, making Matthew's closer to the original.

Finding buried treasure was not an uncommon experience. Palestine had for centuries been overrun by invaders so the indigenous population had often been forced to bury its valuables before going into hiding. Jewish law stated that treasure found by someone working on a piece of land he had just purchase belonged to him.

Two alternative approaches have been adopted by interpreters. Some have suggested the crux of the story is the great sacrifice needed to acquire the treasure. For them the point of the parable is the need for heroic action when faced with the possibility of possessing the kingdom. This, however, won't wash. The idea of throwing caution to the winds comes from the so called 'twin' story of The Pearl [Pb. 37] and is not appropriate here (The parables are not really twins since they have quite different 'logics'). When the man stumbles on the treasure he acts in fact *with great caution*, immediately reburying it so that the owner of the field will not find it and claim it for himself.

Other people have adopted the idea that the parable is about the great value of the treasure, arguing that the decisive element is the peasant's joy in finding it. However, I for my part find Matthew's reference to the peasant's joy rather strange. The story is clearly about a man who acts with calculation, his essential motive being to keep the existence of the treasure secret until he has bought the field. If he starts to act as if had had just received a windfall people, including the owner, will begin to ask questions, which is the last thing he wants. I conclude that Matthew introduced the note of joy, which wasn't in the original parable, his intention being to let his readers know that they should put on their parousia spectacles.

The idea that the parablemaker either wanted his hearers to focus on the great value of the treasure, or on the great sacrifice needed to gain it, introduces a false dichotomy. I believe he was concerned people should concentrate on something quite different, namely the question as to how to judge other people's behaviour. Because the early Church, through its many alterations, inadvertently blunted the hard-nosed aspect of Jesus' parables we aren't immediately struck by how crazy the man in this story must have seemed when he started to sell everything he had. I imagine that had his wife found out what he was doing she would have tried to have him locked up before he could ruin the family for the sake of a piece of land they did not even have the necessary capital to exploit.

Today, if a person wins the pools everyone realizes her subsequent behaviour has to be judged in the light of this fact. Likewise, in this story, you can only properly appreciate the peasant's behaviour if you judge it in the light of his discovery of the treasure; something his wife and neighbours couldn't do since its existence was the one thing the man dared not share with anyone for fear of giving the game away. *All of us have condemned someone else's behaviour - only later to discover how mistaken we had been*

because we had not taken their motives into account. This is the common experience on which the story is built, the ‘logic’ being that you can only properly appreciate the peasant’s behaviour by seeing it in the light of his discovery of the treasure.

In what circumstances might Jesus have used the story? Well, the evangelists represent Jesus as calling for volunteers to join his cause; something that could mean leaving home and friends, the abandonment of property and business, and the adoption of a vagrant life of hardship, with an ignominious death in prospect at the end. I can’t help thinking that friends and relatives must have thought those who volunteered quite mad. Could *any* cause warrant such a sacrifice? Jesus might have answered them thus, “I can see you are agitated, but are you really in a position to judge? Shouldn’t you first take the trouble to find out what motivates your ‘mad’ friends? You might just discover that such apparently strange behaviour springs from nothing more than enlightened self-interest.” Instead, perhaps, he told this parable.

Analogy: As an ignorant observer would come to the wrong conclusion in judging the peasant’s behaviour in selling all to buy the field

So, do you not misjudge someone who has decided to give up everything to become my disciple, when you fail to take into account what he believes he has found?

37

The Pearl

Mk

Mt. 13.45

Lk.

Th. 76

There are two major differences between Thomas’ and Matthew’s version of the story. In Matthew, the man is a merchant who specializes in pearls, whereas in Thomas he is a general wholesale trader. Again, in Matthew the merchant sells everything he possesses to purchase the pearl, whereas in Thomas he realizes the money simply on his tradable merchandise. Thomas’ version has to be closer to the original since the notion that the character in the parable is a specialist trader spoils things by anticipating the element of surprise when suddenly we learn of the fabulous pearl. Furthermore the idea of a merchant selling literally everything - so well suited to the so called ‘twin’ of The Buried Treasure [Pb. 36] - is out of place in this story.

What we have here is one of Jesus’ economic parables. This merchant is certainly not the idealistic dreamer of Christian tradition, searching for the father and mother of all pearls. He is a hard-nosed businessman with the toughness and flair that we associate with a Charles Clore or a Rupert Murdoch. He has spotted a chance to make a great deal of money. Hence the characteristic highlighted in the story - the common experience - is *the risk business*, the ‘logic’ being that the merchant’s success is due entirely to his willingness to trust his business acumen and take a risk that would frighten the life out of most other people. Translated into the terms of the kingdom this parable’s objective

would appear to have been to get someone to trust his own judgement about Jesus' offer of forgiveness and a new life and dare to take the plunge.

Jesus must have encountered people who showed great interest in him and what he was doing, but who hesitated to join his movement because they saw it as presenting too terrifying a challenge. Perhaps this parable was Jesus' reply in one instance.

Analogy:	As the hard-nosed merchant, on seeing the pearl, didn't balk at the risk involved but trusted his judgement	So, should you not also trust your judgement and dare to risk everything to follow the Gospel?
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38

The Drag-Net

Mk

Mt. 13.47

Lk.

Th. 8

Using the fishing technique described here, a net is either dragged along between two boats or laid by a single boat and then drawn to land with long ropes.

In Thomas the story has been altered so as to bring it into line with the so called 'twin' parables The Pearl/Buried Treasure [Pbs. 37, 36]. He writes that the fishermen threw back all the small fish in his catch into the sea 'and chose the large fish without difficulty' (cp. his strange transformation of the parable of The Lost Sheep [Pb. 27]). However, the new logic doesn't work. Either the man throws back the small fish because it is against the law to keep them - their being ritually 'unclean' or worthless for eating - or else he does so because he is satisfied with his one big fish. Consequently the question of a *choice* doesn't enter into the matter.

Matthew has taken the 'harvesting' of the fish as indicating that this is the parousia story. But though the typical gathering and sorting elements work perfectly well together it is difficult to get the whole to function convincingly as a parable. The reason is that parables only operate well where there is a single illuminating thrust and here we have two in competition, each modifying the other. Consequently we have a choice between two equally weak and confusing alternatives for the story's 'logic'.

Fishing is an indiscriminate process which none the less involves a selection.

Fishing is a selective process which, however, has its indiscriminate side.

But maybe there is a way of combining the 'gathering' and 'sorting' elements so as to indicate a single common experience. It occurred to me the story might have been designed to focus on the idea that the business of fishing involved a connected series of tasks, carried out in sequence, each at its appropriate moment: gathering first and then afterwards sorting. Viewed in this light the parable might have been used to make someone aware of the foolishness of trying to sort out the sinners from the righteous

distracts attention from the story's common experience, which is *hypocrisy*: the seriousness of the governor's failure to forgive in the light of the king's forgiveness of him himself. It also reduces the story's impact in that we are left feeling a little bit sorry for the man. Matthew was clearly wrong if he thought that the parable was designed to teach hearers to fear discovery and punishment and act accordingly. The 'logic' is not this but the need to remember your own record when dealing with another's. When Jesus recounts that this most fortunate man threw his fellow debtor into prison the hearers' condemnation of his behaviour is already assured. It was therefore somewhat crass of Matthew to prolong the story by insisting that the governor was punished with the utmost severity. A good story-teller knows you have to let your hearers judge for themselves and that to force points down their throats is counter productive.

Matthew has placed this story in the context of an argument between Jesus and Peter. It has been suggested this reconstruction does not fit since Peter's question to Jesus is about repeated forgiveness and Jesus' story is not. But this is to seriously misunderstand the incident (which I believe on this occasion matches the story extremely well). Peter *isn't* asking a genuine question. He is trying to get Jesus to admit that for forgiveness to be a worthwhile exercise it has to elicit a change in behaviour. I am reminded of the story of the Chinese policeman, which did the rounds during the time of the Cultural Revolution.

A visiting American reporter asked a policeman what he would do if he caught someone speeding. The policeman replied that he would explain to the offender how antisocial his conduct was, and point out that if everyone insisted on driving about in the same manner, life would become unbearable. "But", the reporter said, "what would you do if you caught the same person speeding again the next day?" The policeman replied that he would take him aside and explain to him how antisocial his attitude was.... "Yes! Yes!" broke in the American reporter "but what if you caught him speeding again a third time?" The Chinese policeman looked the reporter steadily in the eye and replied that if he caught the person speeding a third time he would again take him aside and explain to him how antisocial his conduct was....

Like Peter this American reporter wasn't looking for an answer to his question. He was simply concerned to get an admission - in this case that sanctions are necessary even in a revolutionary society. What Peter wants is for Jesus to admit that, even in his kingdom, there will be times when forgiveness will be a simpleminded, inappropriate response to a crime. I must say that Jesus' story-reply fits so well with this incident and exposes so unflatteringly the attitude of the future leader of the Church that I am almost persuaded that we have here an exceptional case of incident and story preserved together.

The crux of Jesus' story is the king's initial act of forgiveness. Had the governor not needed the king's forgiveness we would have judged his behaviour towards the court official as unfeeling, but not horrendous. It is precisely because the king found it in his heart to forgive the governor that everything the governor did thereafter either lived up to, or undermined, this initial act of grace. In other words the 'logic' of the story is that the governor's refusal to forgive his fellow debtor vitiated the forgiveness he had himself received and demonstrated his incomprehension of its consequences. He had welcomed the king's pardon, and he thought it had let him off the hook, but it hadn't. Forgiveness and life were his only on condition that he admitted his criminality. However, his conduct against a fellow criminal demonstrated that he had not accepted his criminality so his doom was sealed.

It may be asked why Peter should accept that his sins are a infinitely blacker than those of his persecutor? A person's awareness that her sins are infinitely worse than those of her neighbours who offend against her is central to Christian tradition and certainly goes back to Jesus himself but it flies in the face of the convictions of present day society. We all realize we commit sins. However, it is generally felt the real problem lies with a tiny minority who are criminals and who, unlike the rest of us, are *especially* wicked.

I have no intention of trying to address this vast question here. However, it may be worth while pointing out that had Jesus made the debt of the two men in his story of the same order we would have found the parable's thrust unexceptionable. We are quite willing to accept that everyone makes mistakes and to forgive accordingly. We are comfortable with this notion and ready to criticize people with double standards who excuse their own mistakes while recommending punishment for others. What we have great difficulty in accepting is *criminal* behaviour, which is to say people with wicked intentions - for example the repeat-offender who was the subject of Peter's question. What Jesus in his story seems to suggest is that when we see ourselves as we truly are we discover this same criminality that we find so unacceptable in others - *only a thousand times worse!* I can only speak for myself but I have to confess that looking with difficulty into my own heart I sometimes catch a glimpse of what he was talking about.

This parable marks one of those occasions when Jesus is depicted as refusing to enter into a debate on his opponent's terms (see also The Wedding Guests [Pb. 2] and The Samaritan [Pb. 46]). In this case, Peter had implied that forgiveness was fine, insofar as it served to reintegrate the wrong-doer into society by giving him another chance, but that it was a menace when it encouraged him to think that he could get away with his antisocial activities. Of course we all agree there are too many crimes but, while those of us on the left tend to think our penal system is so obsessed with punishing offenders that it loses sight of the need to reintegrate them back into society, those on the right argue that it is too concerned with rehabilitation and so encourages criminals to think they will get off lightly.

Jesus' reply to Peter's invitation to enter this debate is startling. He shows the whole thing to be centred on a false dichotomy by which forgiveness and some other unspecified way of dealing with the problem (punishment, incarceration, therapy ...) are pitted against each other. He makes Peter see that as concerns the injured party forgiveness is not one option among many but the absolutely necessary precondition for *any* healthy approach to the problem. As a result Peter has the embarrassment of realizing he is up a gum tree.

What Jesus is doing in this parable is establishing the basis on which Peter must found his judgements about how to treat the criminal, without depriving Peter of his responsibility to come to his own decisions. Peter must first put his attitude towards 'his brother' right by remembering that he himself is 'the greatest' criminal in need of forgiveness. This means he must start by forgiving the offender, thereby admitting that they stand on a level. Only when he has done this will he be able to go on and consider such matters as punishment, prevention and rehabilitation in a healthy way.

(The Chinese policeman was clearly aware of this ideological basis. His error was in trying to turn it into a blueprint for a new society; so robbing people of their responsibility.)

Analogy:	As the governor undermined his own forgiveness in refusing to forgive	So, are you not forgetting your own criminality when you dismiss someone else as wicked?
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40 The Labourers' Wages

Mk Mt. 20.1 Lk. Th.

Rabbi Zeira, living 300 years after Jesus, made use of a very similar story in a funeral oration:

“With whom is Rabbi Bun son of Hiyya to be compared? With a king who had hired several labourers. Among them was one labourer who was particularly zealous. What did the king do? He took this labourer for walks, long and short. In the evening the labourers came to receive their pay, and the king gave this labourer the full day’s pay just as he gave the others. At that the labourers grumbled and said: We have worked hard the whole day, and he worked only two hours and still received the same pay as we did. To that the king rejoined: This labourer has achieved more in two hours than you with your hard work throughout the whole day. So Rabbi Bun has achieved more in twenty eight years in respect to the study of Torah than another proven scholar could have learned in a hundred years”.

Given the mutual hostility between the early Church and the Jews it is unlikely that the Rabbi was reworking one of Jesus’ stories. We know Jesus made use of stories that were around during his day, so this is most probably another case in point. For him it was not the originality of the story that mattered but the use it was put to.

Following the usual parousia approach Matthew takes the householder as a clue-symbol for God, the point of the story being that ‘the last will be first and the first last’. But the parable is clearly not about reversed fortunes since every labourer gets the same wage. True, the last ones taken on are paid first but that is simply part of the artistry: the storyteller’s way of bringing things to a fitting climax.

In recent years this parable has called forth decidedly middle-class interpretations. Matthew identified the last employed labourers as the ‘last who will become first’ and commentators, following his lead, have therefore taken them to be 'sinners' since it is said that sinners will enter the Kingdom first. The result has been that they have blackened the character of these men, describing them as lazy people who preferred to chat all day rather than offer themselves for work. Had these commentators been manual workers they would hardly have come up with such patronizing rubbish.

The story is based on the day-wage system: an arrangement whereby labourers have no security of employment, but depend for their livelihood on being picked from a pool of

available workers each day. This is a practice which, fortunately, has largely disappeared in our society; yet it wasn't so long ago that dockers still had to present themselves at the dock gates each morning in the hope of being selected for work. It goes without saying that every dock-worker who dragged himself out of bed early in the morning needed the work. Nonetheless many employers spread the lie (echoed by these middle class commentators) that those who weren't taken on had usually only themselves to blame. They adopted this attitude because it was in their interest to justify a method of employment which kept their costs to a minimum, by virtue of their never having to employ more men than they strictly needed. What they didn't want to admit, however, was that this same system meant that when there came a down-turn in trade many dayworkers and their families went hungry through no fault of their own. This, of course, is why the trade unions fought so hard to have the system abolished.

Because of different historical and geographical circumstances, the details of one particular employment situation won't necessarily square with those of another. Here the dockers would present themselves only for the period of time during which the dock gates were open. If they had the misfortune not to be selected they would then leave, there being no question that, if they stayed, they might find work later in the day. However, in the situation pertaining in first-century Palestine, if a labourer who presented himself in the market-place wasn't selected first thing in the morning there was still a chance he might get something later in the day. The men in the story who sat about in the village square till late afternoon were certainly not shirking. The fact that they stayed there was proof, if any was needed, that they were desperate for work, even if it was only for a couple of hours and brought them only a pittance. Jesus' audience would have understood this only too well. All the labourers have gathered in the usual place. Arriving early in the morning the householder selects from the group those he needs. Clearly it is a time of hardship, the number of idle men in the marketplace being a good indicator of the economic climate; true even in parts of rural Sicily today.

From the behaviour of the householder, Jesus' audience would have quickly understood that he is a genuinely pious employer: someone who feels an obligation to his fellow Jews. They would appreciate his efforts to discharge his proper duty for, though it isn't strictly to his advantage to employ more labour, he nonetheless does so. In a very real sense he treats these men as his brothers, as the Law demands. Of course he isn't able to clear the marketplace of all the men still looking for work: to do so would be more than his business can economically sustain; indeed such an act would be folly. But there are other employers in the village. He can surely count on them to discharge their responsibilities similarly, according to the Law.

However, for some reason work is very short: on going out at various times during the day, the householder finds himself obliged to take on more and more men. Then comes the time for the labourers to be paid. It is reasonable to assume the practice would have been to pay those who had not worked a full day only for the hours they had. Thus, those who had worked half the day might have expected to receive perhaps half a denarius each, and so on. However, on this occasion the householder does something unusual, though not necessarily unheard of: he gives every man, regardless of the length of time he has worked, a full day's wage.

Commentators follow Matthew in seeing in the householder the figure of God. They are blinkered to the down-to-earth quality of the parable, and the economic realities which it graphically depicts. At no point does the story suggest that the householder acts otherwise than any pious Jewish employer ought, by doing for his brother Jews what is required of him in accordance with the spirit of the law [Lev. 19:18b]. The only significant fact is that, unlike most other men, this householder puts his convictions into practice right to the end: he starts the day behaving as if these men have a legitimate call on him, and in like manner he finishes it. Let us look at things from the point of view of such a scrupulous householder. It was not the fault of those men that at the eleventh hour they were still without employment. Their and their families' needs were as great as anyone's so, since one denarius was a bare subsistence wage, it went without saying that the right thing for him to do was to pay them too the full day's wage, regardless of the hours they had put in.

I'm not for a moment suggesting that Jesus' audience would have worked this out step by step for themselves, as I have done. They wouldn't have needed to; this is the way they would have naturally understood the story as it unfolded. Thus when they heard that the householder was to give every man the full day's wage, they may have considered it somewhat unusual but would have known in their hearts it was the right thing to do, as even I did on hearing this story as a child.

Of course if we look at things from the point of view of the labourers who had the good fortune to be selected first thing in the morning, we see things differently. When they realize that the men who have worked for just one hour are receiving a full day's wage, they assume they will be getting some sort of a bonus. Yet they too are given one denarius. Needless to say they feel cheated and aren't slow to let the householder know it.

At this point, as far as I am concerned, Jesus' story ends. However, according to Matthew there is more to come, with the householder's little speech. In this he reminds the dissatisfied men of their contract, justifies his position by stating his right to do as he pleases with his own money, and criticizes them for begrudging his generosity. The contents of this speech are either unnecessary, untrue or distracting. The legality of the position has been well established so to repeat the point is to labour it. If the story itself does not justify the householder's conduct the matter will not be rectified by a final pleading. The men are not begrudging the money given to the latecomers but simply insisting on a wage differential. But, most importantly, the employer's self-justification weakens the story by drawing attention away from its proper focus at the crucial moment. It is not on the attitude of the householder but of those dissatisfied workers that we are supposed to concentrate. I conclude that the whole speech was added by the early Church. From whence came this insistence on the householder's generosity and his rights, if not from the desire to see him as God?

The common experience on which this story is built is *exclusion*, the injustice whereby some members of society are made to suffer disproportionately when times are hard. The Jews knew all about this. Not only was it at the heart of their own experience but also their relationship with their God, Yahweh, was founded on the understanding that unlike

other Gods he was fundamentally biased towards such people. Jesus' hearers would have been well aware that the householder had consistently done right by the Law (i.e.: by every good, loving and Yahwistic instinct in humanity) so they would have instantly appreciated how screwed-up the men were who had complained against him.

But we, who are not of that time and culture, will have to progress a little more pedantically. What the householder was doing, through his unusual act of employing as many men as he could and paying them all the subsistence wage, was effectively redressing the inherent injustice of a day-wage scheme which saw to it that excluded individuals were forced to take the brunt of the economic downturn. All his actions were consistent with the understanding that, since they stood together before Yahweh, everyone in the community had a duty to see to it that burdens were shared and no one was excluded. This being the case, the discontented labourers who sought to oblige the householder to maintain the wage differential between themselves and those who had only worked for one hour, were effectively undermining this Yahwistic (ideologically sound) act. For if the householder could only pay the last workers the full wage by giving everyone else a substantial increase he would lose all room for manoeuvre. This is clearly the thrust of the story's 'logic'. In Jesus' terms those mindlessly selfish men were doing their best to delay the Kingdom.

In what sort of a situation might Jesus have told this parable? I suggest he used it on some particular occasion to correct those among his disciples who were showing resentment: they, who were in his movement at its very beginning, were none the less accorded the same treatment as the latest newcomer! Was this fair?

Analogy:	As the grumbling labourers in thinking about themselves were forgetting what it felt like to be excluded	So, in claiming a special status for yourselves are you not forgetting what sort of a position this puts the others in?
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41 Two Sons

Mk Mt. 21: 28 Lk. Th.

Matthew includes this parable at the end of a debate with the chief priests and elders about the question of authority. He sees it as Jesus' way of showing these gentlemen that such questions become of little significance in the light of the knowledge that tax collectors and harlots are going to enter into the Kingdom before people like themselves!

The important thing to remember when considering the story itself is that working in a vineyard is an extremely dirty, hot, backbreaking business which most people detest. Jesus' hearers would have perfectly understood the two young men's lack of enthusiasm for the job. They wouldn't have been particularly disturbed by the behaviour of the son who agreed to do the work but failed to carry it out. The thing that would have shocked them would have been the disrespectfulness of the other son who refused his father to his

face, and they would have expected the story to tell of his punishment. This is not our instinctive reaction for we no longer consider a parent's word as law, especially when a child has grown up and become a young man, as was clearly the case here. However, in those days a son's refusal to do as his father commanded was a serious crime, punishable by the community.

What Jesus' audience would have wanted to hear was a comparison between an insolent and rebellious son, with whom they would have had no sympathy, and a reverent and dutiful boy whose excusable lapse could have been anyone's. But Jesus didn't allow them to hear the story in this way. By ending it with the question "Which of the two did the will of the father?" he forced them to make a completely different comparison: that between the dutiful son's hollow show of *respectfulness* and his rebellious brother's tardy but true demonstration of *respect*, offered in the teeth of his natural, egotistical leanings. Thus Jesus constrained them, against their own inclinations, to admit that respect and a respectful demeanour are not the same thing and that the latter, which they so cherished, could easily be a thin veneer. So the common experience on which the story is built is *respect as over against a respectful demeanour*, the 'logic' being that a respectful demeanour can be just a cover for indifference.

As for the parable's target, Matthew has Jesus aiming it against the Sadducees. However, such wealthy aristocrats whose position within the system was assured were unlikely to have felt the need to put on a great show of respectfulness. People like the Pharisees, on the other hand had less reason to feel secure. They would have been more inclined towards self-justification. I think it was probably against their sort of smug religious pretensions that this parable was directed, whether the individual who was demonstrating this attitude was actually a Pharisee or not.

Analogy: As the second son's respectful demeanour was shown to be a cover for indifference

So, are you sure your vaunted declarations of dutifulness are not a disguised half-heartedness?

42

The Torch-bearers

Mk

Mt 25:1

Lk.

Th. (75)

The 'lamps' in this story would have been simple torches, made by wrapping oil-drenched rags around a wooden stick. Because it was difficult to light them at a moment's notice, it would have been normal for the girls to keep them burning while waiting. However, the bridegroom being late, the torches would have burned right down, making it necessary for the girls to remove the charred cloth and dip the cleaned torches into the fresh oil. Having done this, they would then have accompanied the bridegroom back to his house and danced the night away until their torches finally went out.

Matthew has heavily allegorized this parable, making the bridegroom Christ, the ten virgins the expectant Christian community, the tarrying of the bridegroom the

postponement of the parousia, his eventual appearance its unexpected arrival, and the locking out of the foolish virgins the final Judgement. As a consequence he has inadvertently filled Jesus' story with absurdities:

- 1) Is it likely that the wise girls would have sent the foolish ones off to buy oil at midnight or that these would have found a place of business open at such an hour?
- 2) Is it likely that the bridegroom would have acted as doorman at his own wedding?
- 3) Is it likely that genuine latecomers would have been refused entrance by the householder if the party for his son's wedding was still on and his guests making merry?

Clearly these are not original features, but rather tell-tale signs of Matthew's attempt to make the parable meaningful to the early Church's situation, by allegorizing the story and injecting into it a parousia reference. That said it isn't as odd as it might seem for the bridegroom to turn up at midnight since, even today, this is not an uncommon occurrence at Palestinian weddings, the reason being that the bride's family, in order to show how precious their daughter is, have been haggling over the presents due to them. If we cut out Matthew's allegorizations and subsequent absurdities we get the following tight little story:

Ten maidens took their torches and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. For when the foolish took their torches, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their torches. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, "Behold the bridegroom! Come out to meet him". Then all those maidens rose and trimmed their torches. And the foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our torches are going out." But the wise replied, "No, for there will not be enough for us and for you".

Most commentators claim this story is about 'being prepared'. The trouble with such a statement is that it is highly ambiguous since 'being prepared' can mean at least four different things:

- 1) It can mean being alert and aware - like a boxer who stands 'on guard' in the ring. This is clearly the way Matthew reads the story for he ends it with an exhortation to watch. Unfortunately, such an understanding is quite inappropriate since both the wise as well as the foolish torch-bearers enjoyed a nap while waiting for the bridegroom.
- 2) Being prepared can also mean being armed for the unexpected - like the White Knight in Alice in Wonderland who kept a mousetrap strapped to his saddle. However, the notion of the unexpected cannot be the crux of this story since it is clear that the bridegroom is eagerly awaited.
- 3) Being prepared can also mean being in the right place at the right time, but this kind of readiness is also not an issue in this story since all ten maidens were in the right place at the right time.

4) Being prepared can also mean being properly equipped, in other words accomplishing beforehand all the small but necessary jobs that make it possible to operate effectively when the big moment comes. This final understanding is *the only way* in which the notion of ‘being prepared’ can truly be said to be appropriate to this parable. It is sometimes difficult to consider such a reconstructed parable because one instinctively reintroduces the allegorical features - so strongly are these embedded in the mind. Consequently I find it sometimes helps to reformulate the story in a completely different setting as if one were trying to imagine how Jesus might have told his parable had he been alive today:

Two women were invited to a New Year’s party. One was prudent and filled her tank with petrol on New Year’s eve. The other said to herself “I still have some late shopping to do. I will fill up with petrol on the way to the party tomorrow”. However, when she set off early next day she found all the filling stations closed...

I suppose most of us have experienced this dawning realization that *one has blown the big moment for want of careful attention to some fiddling little detail in its preparation*. This is the common experience at the heart of Jesus’ story, the ‘logic’ being that it is foolish to be careless about any such detail since it can so easily jeopardize the big event one is so looking forward to.

In what sort of a situation might Jesus have used this story? What big occasion might he have been thinking of? Well, he certainly anticipated one momentous event: the crisis towards which he and his movement were heading. He seems to have been keenly aware that the people around him would one day be participants in this drama, and particularly concerned that, when the time came, they should find themselves fully equipped.

As he helped them prepare there must have been occasions when they showed that they ‘couldn’t be bothered’ with some minor detail he wanted them to concentrate on (e.g. “Everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart”). Mightn’t he have answered one of his disciples’ exasperated protests with this parable?

Analogy: As the foolish girls
ruined their big day
because they didn’t
equip themselves
properly

So, if you can’t be bothered to
equip yourself properly for the
coming crisis are you not
foolishly risking your great
moment?

43

Sheep and Goats

Mk

Mt. 25.32

Lk.

Th.

In Palestine it is normal for a shepherd to own a mixed flock and it is customary for him to separate them in the evening because goats, being more susceptible to the cold, need

shelter whereas sheep prefer the open air. Matthew has used this picture of the shepherd separating the sheep from the goats as a figure for the returning Christ's act of judgement. This has sent commentators scrambling to find ways of justifying why sheep should be 'good' and goats 'bad'. Some claim that the superior value and white coloration of the sheep makes them suitable as symbols for the blessed while the inferior value of the goats and their dark coloration makes them suitable as symbols for the damned!

We have already noticed that the evangelists rather liked the gathering and sorting motif and tended to introduce it into Jesus' parables even when it clearly went against the story's 'logic' (p. 65); the harvest being their favourite way of depicting the parousia. The curious thing is that here the gathering element is absent from the sheep/goats 'simile' (though not of course from the saying as a whole) since the collecting of the flock is never mentioned. It seems unlikely, in a story where both elements were originally present that Matthew would have subsequently allowed one of them to disappear. So the absence of the gathering of the flock from the 'simile' strongly indicates that it wasn't part of Jesus' original parable.

There is another curious thing about Matthew's construction: the strange way in which the sheep/goats 'simile' is fitted into the general description of the last judgement. Even if you happen to think that a shepherd separating his animals is a suitable analogy for the way in which God will eventually sort the 'righteous' from the 'cursed' (which I don't), once the analogy has been introduced it makes no sense to further extend it, as Matthew seems determined to do (v. 33). For while it is perfectly acceptable to speak about the righteous being placed on God's right-hand side (traditionally the place of honour and fortune) and the wicked on his left (traditionally the place of misery) I can think of no satisfactory reason why a shepherd should choose to do the same with his sheep and goats. I believe this peculiar situation is the result of Matthew's attempt to insert Jesus' sheep/goats parable into an independent judgement-saying. I suggest Matthew's original judgement text ran something like this:

Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another. And he will place the righteous at his right hand but the wicked at his left. Then the King will say.....

He then inserted Jesus' sheep/goats parable into the middle of it in the form of a simile:

Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another *as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats*, and he will place ...

Now the natural way of proceeding from this point would have been to drop the simile and continue as before:

... and he will place the righteous at his right hand, but the wicked at his left ...

However, rather oddly, Matthew chose to imaginatively extend the simile:

... and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at his left ...

As I see it this was an unavoidable step because there was no way Matthew could count on his readers identifying sheep as good and goats as bad. Consequently he had to make this symbolism clear even if it put him in a logical no-man's-land.

The reason why Palestinian shepherds keep mixed flocks is because goats will graze on plants that sheep won't touch. Thus, while it is true to say that a sheep will fetch more money than a goat on the open market the overall value of the flock is much greater when it includes both sorts of animal. This being the case any Palestinian would have thought Jesus quite mad had he suggested that having goats in one's flock was like having pests. The same argument holds for the suggestion that Jesus might have relied for the thrust of his story on the colour of the animals. Black goat's hair may not be worth as much as white wool but it still has commercial value.

Whatever way you look at it, the separation of sheep from goats is inadequate as a simile for the Last Judgement: there is simply no convincing way of seeing sheep as valuable and goats as an economic liability. When the prophets wanted a simile to do this job they spoke of threshers separating grain from chaff (Zeph. 2:1f). Such a simile, associated as it is with the harvest, emphasizes the economic angle, from which perspective some things are clearly desirable and others a nuisance. It is this contrast that best illustrates the distinction between the righteous and the wicked and it is precisely this contrast that the simile of sheep and goats lacks.

In some ways Matthew's efforts to save Jesus' Sheep and Goats parable for posterity by integrating it into his judgement saying was misguided, for by doing so he succeeded in portraying Jesus as a second rate communicator who first introduces a meaningless comparison and then covers up his mistake by making out that it has to be understood figuratively.

Of course, we who are a thousand miles removed from the economic realities of Palestinian sheep farming and who have been fed from our cradles on Matthew's text, are convinced that it somehow works. But the force we experience on reading it is not in fact the impact of the simile but the power of Jesus' dark saying about the last judgement, slightly alleviated by the pastoral figure. This is very different from what Jesus' audience would have felt when in a completely different context, as I believe, he told them his sheep and goats story. They would have experienced a parabolic thrust that threw them back onto their real-life experience of steppeland animal-rearing.

The Palestinian shepherd separated out his goats from the flock each evening in order to provide these more fragile beasts with adequate shelter. So clearly the common experience on which Jesus built his story is *special treatment*, the 'logic' being that it makes good economic sense for the shepherd to provide special treatment for animals which are naturally fragile.

How might Jesus have used the story? It is difficult to avoid a comparison with the parable of The Lost Sheep [Pb. 27], which is also about providing special treatment. The principal difference, however, is that while in that story special treatment is required as a result of an animal getting into difficulties, in the present one special treatment is provided on a regular basis.

I have argued that the parable of The Lost Sheep was probably used by Jesus to answer a criticism voiced by some among his disciples that he was always abandoning them to go after some silly person who had got himself into unnecessary trouble. In the case of the present parable I think the criticism must have come from some 'high flyer'; from a person who had complained that Jesus seemed to prefer to spend his time routinely with people who had little to contribute. If he was serious about bringing in the Kingdom he would have to learn to invest himself where his efforts would pay dividends: with people like this critic who were making things happen and getting things done in the community.

Analogy:	As it pays the shepherd to provides special treatment for animals with special needs	So, will it not pay me to pay special attention to people who have special problems?
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44 New and Old Wine

Mk Mt. Lk. 5 : 39 Th. 47b

Before the development of the corked bottle it was impossible to store wine out of contact with the air. This made it difficult to keep it for any great length of time, four years being about the maximum. Thus, what is referred to in these old wine/new wine comparisons, commonplace in ancient literature, is not the difference we make much of between 'finished' wines, young and mature, but between a finished wine and one that is not yet fit for drinking.

Rabbi Jose has a parable on the old wine / new wine comparison which runs thus:

He who learns from the young, unto what may he be likened? Unto one who ... drinks wine from its vat. And he who learns from the old, to what may he be likened? Unto one who drinks old wine.

Clearly the common experience he is building on is the question of maturity - in this sense of being properly finished - his analogy being that as no one who knows about wine drinks it when it is unready so no one who knows about life takes advice from an immature young person.

What was Jesus referring to in *his* new and old wine saying? In the parable of New Wine and Old Wineskins (Pb. 4) the evangelists see Jesus as comparing his own contribution to that of the Jewish tradition. However, it is not easy to make the same thing work here; first because it is hard to see in what way a tradition can mature and second because it is difficult to understand why Jesus would infer that people prefer the Law to the Gospel. To avoid this difficulty it has cleverly been suggested that Luke saw the old wine as referring to the Jewish Bible and the new wine to the Halachah: the body of legal decisions not directly enacted in the Mosaic law. However I am unconvinced by this

suggestion which, though it overcomes the problem, leaves the parable without any critical edge. It seems to me more likely that Jesus was indeed referring to people who rejected his Gospel because they preferred to stick to their old traditions. After all there must have been plenty of such people about!

To drink wine straight from the vat, as Rabbi Jose described, you would need to have a palate like leather. Unfinished wines have an acidic taste of tartar and are disagreeably gassy because it takes time for the fermentation process to be completed. They are described as rough or raw as opposed to the smooth, rounded taste of finished wines. I think Jesus' intention in using this illustration must have been to get someone to see that people who preferred their well worn traditions to his gospel were simply reacting against its rough, raw and exacting demands. Perhaps the Hebrews had initially shown a similar ambivalence to Moses' Law but by grinding away at it they had eventually managed to smooth over its demands and make it comfortably mellow and palatable.

It must have troubled the disciples that many of their countrymen were turning their backs on the gospel. Suppose one of them asked Jesus why people were so unwilling to accept the liberation he was offering. Could it be that Jesus humorously answered with this parable, thus highlighting the less attractive side of the 'good news', which his disciple seemed to be forgetting but which his pious countrymen appreciated only too clearly? If this was the case the parable would have been designed not to target the attitude of the people who were rejecting Jesus but a dangerous incomprehension among his own disciples.

Analogy:	As people reject new wine because it is rough and raw and hard on the palate	So, if our countrymen reject me isn't it because they dislike the exacting demands of the gospel?
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45 Two Debtors

Mk	Mt.	Lk. 7: 41	Th.
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Though Luke has made a mess of the reconstruction of this parable I believe his instinct was right in linking the story to the incident of the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears. To appreciate this event we have to suppose that Jesus has just preached a sermon in the local synagogue in which he has announced God's forgiveness for those who repent and believe his good news. Two people of note were present in that congregation. One, a local Pharisee named Simon, was impressed and, believing that this might be a new prophet, invited the preacher to his house for a banquet. The other, a prostitute, reacted very differently. Embracing Jesus' offer she repented of her wrongdoing. Later, overcome by a sense of relief, she went looking for Jesus to thank him. Catching up with him at the banquet she acts in a spontaneous and unrestrained manner, completely forgetting her surroundings. Simon is quite disgusted by her behaviour and

Jesus' apparent unwillingness to check it. He immediately revises his initial favourable impression of his guest, criticizing him inwardly for allowing this sinful woman to paw him in public. Noticing the change in his host's manner Jesus tells him the story of the two debtors.

Because of the way in which the conversation turns after the delivery of the parable, especially in v. 47, it is clear Luke understands the driving mechanism of the story to be the *contrast* between the gratitude of a major debtor and that of a minor one. However, this seems to produce a nonsense: Better to be a major than a minor sinner since a person who is on the whole righteous cannot possibly know what true gratitude is! Some commentators have tried to avoid this trap by substituting 'poor' for 'sinners' so that the story drives home the point that: only the poor can possibly know the full meaning of God's goodness - People at the bottom of society get used to being confused with sinners in the minds of their betters! However, Luke's incident will not justify such a translation. Furthermore it is doubtful if this change makes the reasoning any more sensible. And in any case parables don't make points. They offer self-authenticating 'logics'.

Luke himself suggests Jesus is using the prostitute's behaviour to draw attention to Simon's own moral failure. "Do you not understand Simon, that in spite of her sin-burdened life this woman ... has what you lack, a deep gratitude". However, there is no way in which he can properly abstract such a thrust from a story which suggests that it is *natural*, not *wrong*, for the small debtor to feel only moderately grateful. In other words the story by no means implies that the small debtor should feel otherwise than he does. Further to this, interpreting the story as an accusation that Simon lacks gratitude is difficult to sustain, considering that the Pharisees were known for their expressions of gratitude towards God. Jesus himself acknowledged this by the prayer he placed in the mouth of one of them in another of his parables (Pb. 60).

As I see it the error is in understanding the story as a contrast in the first place. The question to Simon at the end of the parable (v. 42) should probably be understood as simply Jesus' way of highlighting the fact that *the gratefulness a released debtor feels and expresses is but a function of the generosity that evokes it*. In other words the 'logic' of the story is that if a debtor expresses a superabundant gratitude it is simply because he has been forgiven an enormous amount.

How might Jesus have used this parable? We cannot simply take Luke's word for it that it was employed in connection with the incident he describes, for the three other evangelists have recorded the same incident without including the parable (Mt. 26:6ff, Mk 14:3ff, Jn 12:1ff). Furthermore, Luke's reconstruction of the incident contains a number of peculiarities which suggest that it is just that: a reconstruction. For example, if the woman had already been forgiven, as would seem to be suggested by the demonstration of her feelings, what was Jesus doing pronouncing forgiveness again in v. 48? In this regard it is important to understand the rather strange saying in v. 47 which in the RSV runs:

"Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much".

All this means is that God must have forgiven the woman a great deal since she shows such enormous thankfulness. First century Jews disliked talking about God in human terms, which is why the passive tense is used, and as there was no Aramaic word for thank or thankfulness the word love is used in its place. Then again, the accusation that the host failed to provide the most elementary hospitality (vv. 44-46) is really quite unconvincing. Whatever faults the Pharisees had, failing to treat a guest properly was not one of them. Why then fabricate such an accusation? Well, as it wasn't very clear what was the fault in the Pharisees' attitude it would seem that Luke blackened the man's character to make his supposed 'lack of love' obvious to his readers.

Having said all this I think Luke's intuition that this setting could be used as the incident for the parable was sound; only, instead of taking Simon as being accused of inhospitable behaviour or ingratitude we would have to see Jesus as challenging his fastidious disgust at the formerly sinful woman's extravagant behaviour.

Analogy:	As it is natural for a great debtor to show a great degree of gratitude when the debt is cancelled	So, can't you appreciate that this woman's over-the-top behaviour just shows how aware she is of how much she has been forgiven?
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46

The Samaritan

Mk Mt. Lk. 10 : 3 0 Th.

According to Luke this parable is an answer to the question "Who is my neighbour?" which is to say "What sort of people are deserving of the brotherly concern of a Jew like me?" Since they believed God had created all things most Jews would have agreed that every creature should be treated with proper consideration. However a brother Jew was a special case, calling for particular consideration, so it was important to know who was in this category. Unfortunately there was no general agreement. The Essenes, being extremists, were inclined to discount all Jews who had not joined their community. The Pharisees were much more reasonable though they would have excluded unrepentant sinners. All Jews would have drawn the line against the heretical, half-cast Samaritans.

Luke's incident, the introductory discussion between the lawyer and Jesus on the subject of the two great commandments looks very like the conversation on the same subject reported in Mark [12:28ff] and Matthew [22:34ff]. However, it is worth noting that although Mark and Matthew certainly seem to present different accounts of the same conversation these disagree in one fundamental respect. For Matthew the discussion opens with a question put to Jesus by some Pharisees who have just seen him silence a group of Sadducees. They seek to 'test' Jesus to see if they can trip him up and make him appear fallible and the discussion ends with Jesus routing them. For Mark the discussion opens with the same question put by a scribe who for his part is impressed by how well Jesus had answered the Sadducees; and it ends with Jesus telling the scribe that

he is not far from the Kingdom. The question is whether Luke's theologian was well intentioned or whether he was trying to ambush Jesus. This is an important issue since either there was nothing wrong with his attitude, and Jesus was simply trying to make him aware of something new, or there was, and Jesus was attempting to deal with this fault.

There are two reasons for thinking the theologian was out to get Jesus. First, Luke writes that he 'stood up to put Jesus to the test' and, as we have seen from Matthew, such a formula indicates hostility. Then again Luke writes that after Jesus had answered his first question, which was perfectly straightforward, he then introduced a subsidiary one 'wishing to justify himself'. There is a sting in this comment that puts me in mind of the supplementary questions members of parliament ask in the House of Commons at Prime Minister's Question Time. You know, the ones following on an innocuous enquiry about what the Prime-minister has in his diary for the day. The natural reading of Luke's account is that the theologian was perfectly aware Jesus could only answer his real question, the second one, by taking sides in a fractious dispute; a situation he must have known Jesus was careful to avoid. The interesting feature of Luke's account is that Jesus in his parable didn't answer this subsidiary question about who constituted a neighbour. His story concerned people who acted or didn't act as a neighbour, which was not the same issue. It seems to me that what Luke is trying to tell his readers is that Jesus studiously ignored the actual question, thereby letting the man know that he would give him no definition of 'neighbour' since the question was unanswerable, and ought not to have been asked.

Different views have been put forward to explain how the parable actually works. For example some have claimed that it has the effect of changing the point of view of the observer; that it undermines the theologian's inherent selfishness by getting him to put himself in the sufferer's place. But is there any real evidence that Jesus intended this effect? A modern writer desiring to change her readers viewpoint in this way would simply recount what took place through the victim's eyes. She would describe how the man lay in a stupor in the road, listening to the footsteps of those who passed by, wondering why they stopped but never came to his aid. While such a psychological approach was not available to Jesus, had he been trying to get the scribe to see things as the sufferer saw them he would surely have given the latter a name. As it is, he tells his story in such a way that the man who fell among thieves is the *only* character who is not given an identity and who remains entirely passive throughout, his role being simply to get beaten up.

Another explanation of the way in which the parable works is that it shifts the attention from theory to practice. However, though it is certainly true to say that Luke's theologian was looking at things theoretically, surely Jesus would have found nothing intrinsically wrong in that - had the man's theory been soundly based. Then again, while it would have been reasonable to take the Samaritan's actions as a practical example of good-neighbourly behaviour, little would have been achieved by so doing since the theologian would have known well enough, and better than us, what being a good neighbour entailed.

Since it is pretty clear that Luke was reconstructing the parable by welding the story of the Samaritan onto the incident common to both Mark and Matthew, we shouldn't be too concerned if the conversation seems slightly artificial. It is enough to know that here we have a theologian attempting to embroil Jesus in the much discussed and hotly debated question as to who was entitled to the brotherly concern of a God-fearing Jew. Of course Luke doesn't tell us what the man's personal opinion was. However, he clearly indicates the theologian both found the question legitimate and thought it was important and should be answered.

How did Jesus' story expose the flaw in the theologian's attitude? Some people describe Jesus' choice of characters - the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan - as *extreme* examples selected in order to contrast two types of behaviour. However, judged in terms of the neighbour debate they weren't so much extreme as *typical*. The priest and Levite epitomized the kind of person whom those involved in the great debate would have included as 'neighbours', and the Samaritan the kind of person they would have wanted to exclude. In his story Jesus presented the theologian with a plausible situation in which the first-class candidates for the position of neighbour don't behave in a neighbourly way, whereas the despised outsider does. The common experience on which Jesus builds his story is the way *life itself reveals the quality of human behaviour*, the logic being that it is not the observance of idealistic rules that justifies people's behaviour but their measuring up to the material exigencies of the situations in which they find themselves. In other words it is not a case of a person determining the requirements of the situation by reference to some ideal standard but of the material situation exposing the true nature of the individual's attitude and behaviour.

So Jesus through his parable exposed the whole "Who is my neighbour?" debate as an idealistic charade. The only debater present - the theologian - was left looking ridiculous. Not a pleasant experience - but then healing processes seldom are. Intellectuals - like this theologian (and myself) - often try to avoid the unpleasant business of facing up to reality, by dreaming up ideas about how they think things *ought* to be, and then urging society to follow their dreams. If I am right in thinking this theologian was running away from reality and indulging in 'idealistic' pursuits we must see Jesus' story as bringing him back down to earth with a bump..

Because Christian tradition has, for centuries, interpreted the parable of the Samaritan as an attack on selfishness and the unwillingness to respond to the needs of others, many will find my interpretation hard to take. So, to help people experience the parable as I believe it must have been experienced by Jesus' audience, I offer this modern reformulation:

There was once a politician who frequently voiced the opinion that Britain shouldn't be bothered with the third world. His claim was that we should have learnt from our colonialist past that outsiders are no good at running other people's countries for them. "It is folly for us to take responsibility for them" he was heard to say, "We are manifestly incapable of carrying the burden." He believed each country should only assume the responsibilities it was able to fulfil, which for him basically meant ensuring the welfare of its own people.

One day the politician found himself on a radio panel with an elderly lady he did not know but who was there because she had recently been in the news. Never one to miss an opportunity, he

turned to her and said “Madam, you seem to me to be a woman who knows her mind. Don’t you sometimes feel irritated by these people who are forever claiming that the developed world should bail out countries which have proved incapable of looking after themselves?” The elderly lady answered by telling him this story:

“A British naval task force was on its way to the Persian gulf when it got into difficulties in the Indian Ocean. I don’t remember the details of the incident”, she said, “but they became stranded. The French had ships in the area but they declined to help because they said that they needed approval from the other members of the European community. The US navy were also in a position to give assistance, but they too declined on the grounds that Great Britain had refused to send them minesweepers when they had needed them. However, the Ethiopian navy, when it heard of the plight of the British sailors, sent off both its ships and brought them all to safety.”

When the elderly lady had finished her story she turned to the politician and said “Who do you think acted responsibly?” He, blushing angrily, replied “Those who helped I suppose.” “Exactly” said the elderly lady “So, don’t you think we should behave as they did?”

Analogy:	As the first-class neighbours didn’t act in a neighbourly way whereas the despised outsider did	So, why try to define the limit of your caring if all that matters is to act appropriately when you meet someone in need?
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47 **The Insistent Neighbour**

Mk

Mt.

Lk. 11: 5

Th.

Because there was little light available in Palestinian houses people went to bed at nightfall. The master of the house would bolt the door - by thrusting a wooden bar through iron rings - and everyone would bed down together on the raised portion of the single room that constituted the peasant home. Opening the door would involve drawing the bar - a noisy and tiresome business.

In the New Testament the words “Which of you ... ?” always introduce rhetorical questions, so clearly Luke intended his readers to understand verses 5 - 7 as an extended question along the lines:

Can you imagine, if one of you had a friend who came to you at midnight and said to you, “My friend, lend me three loaves, because a friend of mine has come to me on a long journey, and I have nothing to set before him, that you would call out, “Don't disturb me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything”?

Given the prevailing laws of hospitality the answer to this question could only have been “of course a friend would not refuse such a request”. Consequently Luke is able to imply at the end of the story that if a friend would not refuse such a request then neither would God. In other words he interprets the parable as a call to pray and not to give up. However, it is really very clear that in attempting to reconstruct the parable Luke has forced it ‘against the grain’ into this rhetorical form. The result is a question so long and

involved that it is completely unmanageable. Had Jesus been trying to make the above point, using the 'which of you' form, he would surely have said something more like this:

Which of you, if a friend came knocking on the door in the middle of the night, asking for bread because a guest had turned up unexpectedly, would refuse to get up and serve him?

Phrased like this the saying would have closely resembled the one which Luke inserts almost immediately afterwards:

What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? [11:121]

Had Jesus told the parable in this way would there have been any point in expanding it so as to produce the quite complex story we find in Luke's Gospel? I think not, which means that Luke was doing something different, trying to force an already fairly complex parable into the "Which of you?" form. Had he felt free to reduce it substantially we would never have known what had happened. However, his respect for his text was such that he changed it as little as possible and it is this that has given his game away.

When you forget about this "Which of you" business that Luke has introduced it becomes obvious that the basic form of Jesus' story (the form which produced all the elements that fit so badly with his reconstruction) was a tension between alternative outcomes. On one side were the factors which made it likely that the householder *wouldn't get up*: the door was bolted and his children were asleep with him in bed. On the other were the factors which make it likely that *he would*: he had a moral obligation because the man outside was his friend. Furthermore, the man was clearly unlikely to go away until he got what he wanted. How did Jesus make use of this basic "will he, won't he" tension? The concluding remark in v. 8 helps us understand. This indicates the parable was Jesus' way of acknowledging that friendship has its limits and were it not for the man's shameless insistence in continuing to knock hard on his neighbour's door he might never have got what he wanted. This suggests that the basic building-block of the story, its common experience, is *the resistance encountered by a petitioner when he asks for help*, the 'logic' being that shameless persistence is far more effective than an appeal to friendship in overcoming this obstacle.

No one who has the job of distributing a scarce commodity gives a claimant what he wants without checking that the claim warrants satisfaction. Jesus, who was often asked to meet people's needs, himself showed this natural resistance. We seldom read of anyone approaching him and making a request without his expressing a hesitation. Perhaps the best example is his encounter with the Syro-Phoenecian woman [Mk 7:27]. At first, he objected to her demand quite forcefully; indeed his resistance was only finally overcome because under pressure she displayed a most unusual faith.

Some commentators claim that the oriental insistence on the importance of providing hospitality makes it difficult for us to judge this parable by our own standards of

behaviour. However, I hardly think this is true. To demonstrate my point I submit this story from my own experience:

In the mid-1970s I went to live in a big housing scheme in Glasgow believing that this was just the sort of place in which to develop my biblical theology and grassroots political activity. As I had a paid job (I was working as a hospital driver at the time), my wife and I were in a privileged position relative to most of our neighbours, the majority of whom were unemployed. At about twelve o'clock one winter's night, when we were in bed fast asleep, there was a great banging at our door. Now, we had grown used to ignoring all the shouting, screaming and banging at doors that regularly punctuated the night in Glasgow housing estates. However, this time it was our door and I heard the voice of Jim, a good friend, shouting through the keyhole. He needed some food and wondered if I could supply it. It was not unusual for families like Jim's, who were on benefit, to be completely without food for a day or so before their money arrived. Had he called at a reasonable hour I would have been more than happy to oblige. But to be hauled out of bed on a cold winter's night was another matter. I pretended not to hear him, hoping he would come to his senses and try again in the morning. Jim, however, was not to be deterred. He continued to shout and bang on the door without restraint, in a way that my own inhibitions would have prevented me from emulating, even if someone had been dying. Eventually, I could stand it no more and sprang out of bed, hissing to him to hush it for I was coming. As soon as I let him in, Jim explained things to me. He had been approached by a woman from across the landing because she and her two children had had nothing to eat for two full days. Like most families of the unemployed, television was the only amusement they could afford. So, as they had nothing to do, and to take their minds off their empty stomachs, the whole family had been watching the 'box'. When the programmes ended for the night, the woman and her children had become instantly aware of how hungry they were. In desperation, she had applied to Jim. Unfortunately, Jim - being himself unemployed, with four children to support - had nothing to offer her. However, because he and I were mates and were involved together in many activities, he knew he could rely on me to help out!

Good old shameless Jim supplied what the woman needed that night, but I wonder if he was aware of my conflicting motivations. I would dearly love to be able to say that I had sprung out of bed as soon as I had heard him, because he was my friend and because of the strength of my political and theological convictions. However, the truth is that I went to the door only because Jim seemed not above knocking it down, if that was the only way of raising me.

So how might Jesus have used this parable? Luke would have us believe Jesus was talking about prayer. This seems to me unlikely and in any case the group of sayings he uses to introduce the parable (in fact, what we know as the Lord's Prayer) are recorded in Matthew as independent items so he is clearly just guessing. Suppose Jesus had come across some woman who found it difficult to admit that she needed help and who, instead of acting straightforwardly, was making out that all she wanted was an arrangement between friends. She would do his washing if he would take a look at her sick child. Most people will have had some experience of the kind of predicament I have in mind. The uncomfortable thing about need is that it sets up a radically unequal relationship between the person in need and the other who is in a position to meet it. Because people are proud, they see this situation as demeaning and hate it; it makes them ashamed. I call this the need-pride-shame syndrome.

Let us say that I have to go to the local authority to apply for a larger flat, or to ask that my children be moved to a different school. When I eventually make it to the counter I start to act uncharacteristically. I am over-eager to show agreement. I nod and smile and

“Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” (12:15)

Following the pattern established by the prior warning it seems we should understand Jesus here to be saying that his hearers should beware of covetousness because it, too, is not what it seems. Though, like the Pharisees, it appears qualified to help them achieve their desires, like the Pharisees it isn’t capable of delivering the goods. If this is the right way of understanding Luke’s intention it is incorrect to say he believed that for Jesus earthly goods were of no importance, which is just as well since the statement is rather absurd. What Luke believed Jesus taught was that you shouldn’t deceive yourself into thinking that earthly wealth had the power to satisfy your longing for security; which is a different point, one that is as true as the other is false.

Luke claims this story of The Rich Farmer is about greed (RSV ‘covetousness’). I think he is probably right but only if we use the word in a precise way. We tend to view greed as a characteristic of people who only think of themselves. However, there is nothing about this kind of greed in the story since there is no hint that the farmer, in pulling down his barns and building bigger ones, was taking for himself what should have been shared with others. Ever since man took up agriculture and established a settled existence he has sought to master his situation so that he may relax, put his feet up, and simply enjoy himself, free from worry about his insecurity. This desire to be freed from worry by gaining control over one’s position is what Luke identifies as greed, and the story of The Rich Farmer is, as I see it, the means of conveying to an audience the essence of this common experience.

To help you see this point let me offer a story of my own that aims to achieve the selfsame objective. It is about one of the first parties I remember going to:

I must have been five at the time. It was in the post-war period, when rationing was severe, so I had become used to the idea that food was essentially functional: nourishing, but sparse and dull. Yet when I saw this party table I suddenly realized I was being presented with almost unlimited quantities of the stuff. Moreover all of it seems to have been designed with the sole purpose of tempting my palate. I am afraid that I was immediately completely taken over by this particular form of greed. I expressed it by trying to eat just as much of the banquet as I possibly could. I also surreptitiously stuffed a lot more of the gorgeous food into my pockets, my concern being to take care of the future! I can remember that my hostess, the mother of my little friend, experienced quite some difficulty in distracting me away from the table. When going to bed that night I stuck my hands into my pockets and was horrified to discover that someone had filled them with a gooey mess of broken sandwiches. Then, of course, it suddenly struck me that I was the culprit.

Both this story and that of The Rich Farmer are based on the same common experience: *the attempt to free oneself from the basic insecurity of life by gaining control.*

Classically, Hebrew theologians raised this matter in terms of man’s awareness of mortality (Gen. 3) and I think they were right to do so, for most human insecurities can be taken as in some way reflecting our fundamental inability to come to terms with the fact that we are going to die. In this respect Jesus’ story, which ends with the rich farmer’s death, is perhaps better than mine. This then is the story’s ‘logic’: that the farmer in thinking he could realize his dream of a secure future was deluding himself .

Knowing that by nature he was mortal he should have distrusted greed as a guide since there was clearly no way in which he could guarantee his future by his own efforts.

How might Jesus have used this story? We know he was surrounded by people who felt insecure: in the collection of sayings recorded by Luke immediately after this parable he stressed over and over again that individuals should not be concerned about their future. Perhaps this parable was his way of helping someone in this state of mind to see that she had to come to terms with the fact that she had been set in an unguaranteed environment and was obliged to trust God for her long term security.

Analogy: As the rich farmer was deluded in thinking he could secure for himself a life free of care

So, aren't you deluding yourself if you think you can in any way guarantee your future?

49

The Barren Fig Tree

Mk

Mt.

Lk.13: 6

Th.

According to Jewish Law, a fig tree's fruit could only be gathered at its fourth year. So the tree in Jesus' story - now six years old - is almost a hopeless case and, as trees take a large amount of nourishment from the ground, an economic liability as well. The idea of digging round the tree and manuring it, as the gardener proposes, is an exceptional treatment since a fig tree usually requires little care and attention.

In the story of Ahiqar (earlier than the 5th. century CE) there appear the following lines:

"My son, you are like a tree which yielded no fruit, although it stood by the water, and its owner was forced to cut it down. And it said to him, 'Transplant me, and if even then I bear no fruit, cut me down.' But its owner said to it, 'When you stood by the water you bore no fruit, how then will you bear fruit if you stand in another place?'"

There are two highly significant differences between Jesus' parable and the Ahiqar story, which are intimately related. The first is that whereas the Ahiqar story is built on the fairytale element of a talking tree, Jesus' parable is characteristically down-to-earth. The second difference is the fact that whereas in the story of Ahiqar the listener is trapped in a moralistic framework - the tree is judged to be at fault and its pleading in its own defence only serves to highlight this fact - in Jesus' story there is no hint of moralism.

If we accept, as seems most likely, that Jesus based his parable on a popular story that continued to survive for centuries after his death the conclusion is that he was responsible for introducing the third character - the gardener. The interesting thing is that this change had the effect not only of making the story more realistic but also of releasing the listener from its moralistic framework. Now it is the gardener, not the tree, who is the owner's interlocutor; and so it is no longer the behaviour of the tree but the attitude of either the gardener or the owner that comes under scrutiny.

Is it then the attitude of the gardener or that of the owner which is to be regarded as a problem? Have we here a reasonable master in conversation with his sentimental old vinedresser, in which case the 'logic' of the story is that the latter must learn to override his feelings? Or have we an impatient proprietor whose experienced gardener knows that being in a hurry often causes quite unnecessary damage? If so the 'logic' would be that the master should keep his profit-making instincts under control. It has to be admitted that neither of these 'logics' is well made by the story as it stands. Indeed, for the question to be resolved one way or the other it would be necessary to label the characters, in the way I have done, as 'reasonable' and 'sentimental' or 'impatient' and 'experienced'. However, Jesus' stories never depend on such a cheap device, for in them the 'logic' is simply developed from the way in which the story naturally unfolds.

In Jesus' story the 'logic' has clearly to do with the economics of fig production. Consequently we should view the owner as behaving in the way owners of vineyards do. Naturally he is going to look to the tree to give him a financial return on his investment. In the same way we have to see the gardener acting in character. Naturally he is going to show concern for the same tree which represents so much effort and hope over the years.

Luke wants to see the parable as being about repentance. To do this he is obliged to make the fig tree the story's focus. This of course, is a retrograde step for it undermines both the down-to-earth reality and the unmoralistic stance of Jesus' parable, bringing it back into line with the Ahiqar story and, one presumes, the popular tale on which he based it. So, as an antidote, I would like to introduce another biblical story, built along the same lines as Jesus' parable and delivering, I believe, a very similar impact.

The story I am thinking of is given in Genesis 18:20-33. Like the parable of the Fig Tree it has three players: God, Abraham and the corrupt city of Sodom. Here is a brief synopsis:

Because God despairs of Sodom he resolves to visit the city and find out if all that has been said about it is true and, if it is, to destroy it. He informs Abraham of his intentions. However, Abraham is tormented by what God tells him and pleads on Sodom's behalf. He starts by asking God to spare the city if he can find just fifty righteous people within it. God agrees, and an extraordinary bartering session ensues. Abraham eventually manages to get God to promise that he will spare the city if just ten righteous citizens can be found.

The idea of repentance is certainly pertinent to this story but it is not the main theme for Abraham is clearly the central character and Sodom's conduct is outside his control. No, this story is about Abraham's sympathy for Sodom; most clearly conveyed in the description of his protracted negotiations with God. Abraham emerges from this cathartic experience resigned to the fact that, if ten righteous men can't be found in Sodom he will have to agree with God about the city's overall worthlessness. However, it can't be that Abraham's attitude is in question for, had this been the case, God would certainly have been given the last word; whereas what actually takes place is that the conversation simply breaks off and we are left feeling that no one has been proved to be in the wrong. The same is true of the story of The Barren Fig Tree.

The explanation of this somewhat unusual situation is that these stories are not about people with twisted attitudes but about people trapped in a dilemma. Abraham is aware of the sinfulness of Sodom and Gomorrah but cannot bring himself to admit that their destruction is a proper solution to the problem. The protracted negotiations with God are a way of forcing Abraham to come to terms with the stark fact of Sodom's worthlessness. The negotiations between the owner and his gardener perform the same function. I therefore conclude that Jesus used his story to extract someone from the horns of a dilemma: to help her come to terms with some unpalatable fact.

The common experience on which the story of The Barren Fig Tree is built is of *an object's worthlessness*, its 'logic' being that there inevitably comes a time when it ceases to be sensible for the gardener to continue defending the fig tree. The longer the tree goes on using the soil, but producing nothing, the less of a case he has in its defence. It should be noted that there is nothing in the least bit moralistic in this statement which simply stresses the need to face up to economic facts.

So how might Jesus have used this parable? Was there some failure or disaster that he clearly anticipated? I am put in mind of his prophecy over Jerusalem:

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often I would have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate ...” Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. But he answered them, “You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down.” [Mt. 23:37 - 24:2]

I can well imagine the disciples protesting against such a prediction, and Jesus answering them with this parable.

Analogy:	As the gardener had to agree that the fig tree's continued barrenness would inevitably lead to the conclusion that it was not viable	So, don't you have to agree that Jerusalem's continued lack of spiritual (ideological) viability will inevitably make her destruction certain?
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50 The Locked Door

Mk Mt. (25: 10) Lk.13 : 25 Th.

This is a story which the evangelists have severely abused. It seems very likely Jesus did tell a parable about a locked door which the early Church recorded in one of its earliest compilations. However, Luke has chosen to heavily allegorize it by adding two independent sayings (vv. 26,27 and vv. 28,29) which Matthew recorded in different settings (Mt. 7.22-23 and 8.11,12) while Matthew has used it to forge a new ending for the parable of the Torch Bearers (25.10). Though the evangelists treat the story very

differently they both want their readers to understand it in the light of the parousia: The Jewish establishment who rejected Jesus will be shut out from the banquet held in honour of Jesus' second coming whilst the Christians will get in to sit at table in the company of the good and the great from Israel's past.

Extracting what might well have been the original story we end with a bare account of a person who knocks on a door only to find that he has arrived too late; the householder has already locked up and gone to bed.

“Once the householder has risen up and shut the door, you can stand outside and knock at the door saying, 'Can we come in' but you will get no answer.”

Like this the story appears positively cryptic. How, for instance, is one to judge the caller's behaviour when we know neither the reason for his visit nor the cause of his delay in turning up late? One can only suppose that for first-century Palestinians the situation was fairly obvious and that from the point of view of the storymaker such details were unimportant.

One thing however, is clear; this story is different from that of The Insistent Neighbour [Pb. 47] in that the householder is unlikely to let the caller in, or the caller to persist in his knocking. Perhaps we should think of the householder as a storekeeper and a customer has arrived only to find everything shut up for the Sabbath - though you needn't take this hypothesis too seriously since its only concern is to make the story more realistic to twentieth century eyes.

In this regard let me tell you a story of my own:

When I was a boy my mother would often send me round on my bike to the local corner shop to buy things she had forgotten in her major shopping expeditions to town. of course I would usually be in the middle of a game and so would put off such chores until the very last minute. I can still remember flying down the road late in the afternoon, hoping against hope that on turning the last corner I would find the shop still open and with welcome humanity moving in and out of it. However, I can remember even more vividly the few occasions when I arrived there out of breath to find all the shutters down and the place deserted. How I would regret my foolish procrastination at such moments!

What sort of incident might have prompted Jesus to tell this story as a parable? Who was showing, by his attitude, that he was in danger of leaving things too late? The evangelists make it clear they believed Jesus was referring to the parousia; that momentous decision which everyone had to make without delay since the end of history lay just around the corner and could interrupt the proceedings at any moment. However, it does not seem to me the story warrants such a drastic interpretation. The agony this story conjures up is not of a person who discovers that a life-or-death opportunity has been lost forever but of one who finds that through his procrastination he has missed a very specific opportunity.

Life is a continuous string of such opportunities, offered on a never-to-be repeated basis. The art of living is to grab such chances when they arrive. Of course an opportunity missed is never the end of the story since life continues to present a host of others. However, that particular one will never arise again and our failure to seize it may well

become a source of permanent regret. Could it be that someone was delaying his commitment to join Jesus' movement and Jesus told him this story to get him to see that this same principle holds true of the Gospel: that when it presents you with an occasion to act, you'd better not delay in taking it up? This truth must have been sharply focused in Jesus' mind by his awareness of the momentous crisis he was bringing about. No one knew the future. It could be that the man before him would never see him alive again and then what regrets he would have!

Analogy:	As the caller, in putting off his visit to the last minute ruined his plans	So, by putting off your commitment, might you not be throwing away an irreplaceable opportunity that you will live to regret?
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51 Precedence at Table

Mk Mt. Lk.14: 8 Th.

The principle enunciated in v. 11 "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted", is used by Luke again as the conclusion of the parable Two Men in the Temple [Pb. 60] while Matthew uses it as an independent logion (23:12). This suggests Luke himself has added it to the Precedence at Table saying as an explanation; as his way of letting his readers know that they should read that saying in the light of the parousia when everyone will be finally judged. However, some scholars argue we have to take the principle as original because in the Rabbinic tradition a direction for table-manners by Simeon ben Azzai is accompanied by a very similar statement of principle by Hillel (20 BC):

"Stay two or three seats below your place and sit until they say to you, 'Go up'. Do not begin by going up because they may say to you 'Go down.' It is better that they should say to you , 'Go up, go up' than that they should say to you 'Go down, go down'. And so has Hillel said: 'My humiliation is my exaltation, and my exaltation is my humiliation'."

But in my opinion the principle doesn't belong with the saying about precedence at table. Luke's interpretation of the text in the light of the parousia (notice he turns the meal into a marriage feast) reads the Precedence at Table saying as a parabolic story in which a host's reactions to the behaviour of his guests is likened to God's judgement of peoples' behaviour at the second coming. But this is hard to justify, first because it is difficult to see how a saying can be both a parabolic story and an instruction and second because the idea of judgement, introduced by the parousia interpretation, makes nonsense of the basic construction of the saying. For the host is not concerned either to exalt or humiliate his guests. It is their conduct that forces his hand. He is only interested in the good running of his banquet. With people still arriving he feels it is not right to leave the humble guest sitting all alone by himself in the worst seat and, when his guests are seated, he feels he has to give a place of honour to a very important late arrival. To equate this situation with the heavenly banquet in which God adopts the role of judge

and rewards or punishes those who are brought before him is to misrepresent the motivation of the host on which the saying is built.

The suspicion that the original saying had nothing to do with the parousia is given backing by a late but authoritative Greek manuscript containing a version of the parable in Matthew which does not speak of a marriage feast or claim that Jesus was referring to the parousia banquet:

“But seek to increase from that which is small, and to become less from that which is greater. When you enter into a house and are summoned to dine, do not sit down at the highest places, lest perchance a more honourable man than you shall come in afterwards, and he who invited you come and say to you, ‘Go down lower’; and you shall be ashamed. But if you sit down in the worst place, and one worse than you come in afterwards, then he that invited you will say to you, ‘Go up higher’; and this shall be advantageous for you.”

Bezan text interpolated after Mt.20:28. [Metzger p50]

Even as the saying stands in Luke a true parabolic story is apparent behind the instruction formulation. The scene is set, as in a narrative, and there then takes place a gradual unfolding of events. This makes it very different from Rabbi Simeon's admonition which, as behoves moral directives, is short, clear-cut and to the point. This can be seen even more clearly in the saying in the book of Proverbs from which it certainly springs:

Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, “Come up here,” than to be put lower in the presence of the prince.
[Proverbs 25:6f]

I can't help thinking that had Jesus' saying been meant as an instruction it too would have been cast in the same direct form. The fact that it contains obvious story-aspects suggests that underneath lies a true parable that would have gone something like this:

“Two men were invited to a feast. The first immediately installed himself in a place of honour while the second sat in the lowest place. When the host saw this he said to the second guest ‘Friend, go up higher’. When everyone was seated, the most eminent person to be invited arrived. Then the host said to the first guest, ‘Give place to this gentleman’ and he began, with shame, to take the lowest seat.”

Everything points to the fact that such a parable existed in the early Church and Luke reconstructed it along the lines of the Simeon-Hillel saying because he didn't know how else to use it and this enabled him to give it a parousia interpretation.

I presume Jesus must have known the passage from Proverbs. He may even have been aware of a traditional saying cast in much the same form. However, in putting forward his own version as a parable, I believe he was consciously aiming to produce a very different effect. He was not giving a direction for behaviour; setting out the advantages of a humble demeanour or focusing on the foolishness of acting self-importantly. The enlightenment he was offering was rather more profound. As the story naturally unwinds the experiences of both guests highlight the fact that it is not they who decide the positions they will end up occupying, it is the community who does this for them. In this respect the host acts simply as the communal assessor. At the beginning of the party he decides that one guest merits a better position than he has chosen for himself. Later he

indicates that, given the particular circumstances produced by the tardy arrival of an eminent person, another guest no longer merits the position he has occupied.

In other words the common experience on which Jesus' story is built is that *one's position in life is not determined by oneself*, the story's 'logic' being that it was foolish of the self-important guest to ignore this fact.

In what context might Jesus have used this parable? When he comments on social standing in the Gospels it is always in relation to the kingdom, as in the following instance:

And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him, and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." [Mk 10:35ff]

Is it not possible that Jesus told this parable because a disciple was making no secret of the fact that he considered himself to be a person of some importance within the kingdom? Of course it may be argued against me that in his reply to James and John Jesus intimated it was God, not man, who established a person's social standing in the Kingdom:

"...but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." [Mk 10:40]

This is certainly true. However, if the Kingdom is to be conceived of as here present it is still necessary to maintain (as I believe this parable does) that we, as individuals, are dependent on the ability of others to recognize the position God has given us; dependent on other people recognizing what I call the 'reality of our situation'. This story doesn't claim that everyone in society will necessarily be allotted their 'right' places (as it would if the host were taken to be God). All it tells us is how we are, in fact, assigned these positions: that is, according to the judgements of others. So, if other people put us in the 'wrong' place (as happens all the time!) then it is their responsibility before God, not ours.

In thinking through all this it is important to understand that Jesus did not conceive of the Kingdom as a political structure in which we could see, established here on earth, a perfected social order. Jesus saw the Kingdom, rather, as a healthy state of mind revealed through healthy behaviour. In other words, where healthy attitudes exist there the Kingdom is already in place.

Analogy: As it was foolish of the self-important guest to forget that his host was going to be the judge of people's standing

So, isn't it foolish of you to give yourself airs and graces since it is we who have the responsibility of assigning to you your place among us?

Mk

Mt.

Lk. 14: 28

Th.

The building in the story is almost certainly a watch tower like the one in Isaiah 5.2. There are a number of Rabbinic parables about watchmen guarding orchards, for example this one by Rabbi Ashe (3rd c CE), a comment on Proverbs 4:14f.

“Unto what may this be compared? Unto a man watching an orchard. When he surveys it from without, the whole of it is being watched; but when he surveys it from within, only the part that is in front is under view, but that which is behind is not kept under watch.”

It is understood that the building involved here is an expensive project of which the whole neighbourhood is certainly well aware.

From the start of the text it is clear that Luke is reconstructing the parable. He sees it as part of an exchange between Jesus and a crowd accompanying him and introduces it thus:

“Which of you, desiring to build a tower”

However, it is wholly improbable Jesus would have been addressing a group of rich farmers wealthy enough to contemplate such a costly project. I think it is far more likely the parable was actually introduced by a formula such as this: “What man desiring to build a tower...” (See a similar formula in the companion parable, A King Going to War [Pb. 53].)

Following Luke, commentators see this story as a call to psych oneself up either to taking a great risk or to making a great sacrifice. Unfortunately the story’s logic does not justify such an interpretation. It’s about cool calculation, not heroic endeavour. It focuses on the farmer’s understanding of his capabilities. The danger to which it draws attention, the common experience on which it is based, is a person’s *over-reaching*. The thrust its ‘logic’ makes is that you shouldn’t start something you can’t finish.

In what circumstances might Jesus have told this story? Luke sees it as aimed at people who were joining Jesus’ movement, and I have no reason to doubt he is right. Undoubtedly there must have been people who allowed themselves to be whisked off their feet by the heady talk surrounding Jesus. Could it be that Jesus told this story on some occasion to bring such people down to earth and make them realize that the Kingdom didn’t involve a suspension of the laws governing material reality?

Analogy:	As the farmer set out to build his tower without counting the cost, thereby laying himself open to failure and ridicule	So you, in shutting your eyes and believing there are no limits to what you can achieve as my disciples, are you not opening yourselves to failure and mockery?
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Mk

Mt.

Lk. 14: 31

Th.

This story is reminiscent of the kind of situation with which the ancient kings of Israel and Judah had often been faced. Inhabiting as they did a buffer zone between superpowers in Egypt, Turkey and Mesopotamia, they constantly had to deal with superior forces eager to gain control of the region by turning the minor powers of Syria-Palestine, such as their own, into vassal states. Naturally these kings viewed vassaldom with great distaste and were ready to revolt, given the slightest chance. The trouble was that they only had to miscalculate once to bring catastrophe upon themselves and their communities. Indeed Israel never really recovered from the consequences of king Hoshea's attempt in 725 BC to achieve independence by playing off her masters, the Assyrians and the Egyptians, against one another (2 Kings 17.1-18).

Luke makes the mistake of treating this parable and the previous story of The Tower Builder as twins (stories that make identical points) and most commentators have slavishly followed him. As I have already indicated (see New Wine in Old Wine Skins, [Pb. 4], and The Lost Sheep, [Pb. 27]) though two parables may often look fairly similar they rarely possess identical 'logics'. So though there may be similarities between the 'logics' of these two stories we must see first if we can separate them. The main difference between A King Going to War and the previous story is that the subject is faced not with a project but with an enemy. The king of a minor power receives news of the arrival in the region of a hostile expeditionary force and has to decide whether he should make a stand or send envoys offering peace and vassaldom.

The king's predicament is that he has to judge the strength of the opposition. He has *to weigh the balance of power*. This is the common experience on which the story is built, the 'logic' being that it would be a tragic mistake for him to set out on an adventure purely on the strength of his emotional reactions.

Everyone involved in a movement has to learn the lesson that success is not guaranteed by the justness of the cause. In the first flush of joining you can easily find yourself swayed by your emotions but from painful experience you learn to keep these in check while you make cold calculations. Jesus' movement must have contained its fair share of emotional hotheads - Peter and Simon the Zealot for instance. They probably saw the job of bringing in the Kingdom in terms of going out into the world and putting everyone straight. We have seen that Jesus may have used the story of The Strong Man's House [Pb. 6] to try to get such disciples to see that defeating evil was a rather more complicated matter, involving first the need to deal with the evil in themselves. Could it be that he used the present parable as a retort to a foolish remark on another occasion, to ask them to consider carefully whether they thought they yet had the measure of their opponent, the ideological power of evil, and were in a fit state to sustain such an onslaught?

Analogy: As it would be reckless for the king to fail to take the strength of his enemy into account

So, isn't it reckless of you to fail to weigh things up carefully when taking on the power of evil in society?

54

The Lost Coin

Mk

Mt.

Lk. 15:8

Th.

The ten silver coins in this story would have been part of the woman's dowry. It was the custom for married women to wear such coins as ornaments, stitched to their head-dresses. Today Palestinian women have many hundreds of such coins on their head-gear, which makes people believe that this woman must have been very poor. However, it is far more likely that Luke was the person responsible for giving her such a miserable dowry and that the number ten was simply part of his reconstruction. One should hesitate to place undue weight on the numbers in Jesus' stories unless they play a crucial part in the proceedings, as for instance in The Unforgiving Servant [Pb. 39]. In the first place, altering a number is an obvious way for an editor to change the logic of a story so that it fits his new interpretation. In the second place, using a number to label a character 'poor' is a weak way for a parable-maker when forming his 'logic'. In this instance I am certain the number 10 is contrived because it gives the story such a platitudinous 'logic': As the woman is poor she can't afford to lose any of her coins. Furthermore I fail to see how such a 'logic' can be made to apply to anything Jesus said or did.

Luke treats this parable as a twin of The Lost Sheep and most commentators make the mistake of following him. We have seen that the common experience at the heart of The Lost Sheep [Pb. 27] is the need to offer occasional special treatment to an animal which has got into difficulties but this can hardly be said to be the common experience of The Lost Coin. The danger of considering any two parables as twins can be illustrated by this midrashic story about the *Mashal*. The *Mashal* is a Rabbinic saying that explains a passage of the *Torah*. As an explanation it is not authoritative and thus can easily be discounted as lightweight by students of the Law:

Let not the *Mashal* be light in thine eyes. For by means thereof one can comprehend the words of the *Torah*. It may be likened unto a king in whose house was lost a golden coin or precious pearl - does he not find it with the aid of a lighted wick worth a paltry As? Even so let not the *Mashal* be of small account in thine eyes, for with the aid thereof one may discover the meaning of the *Torah*.

In terms of the main elements used - coin lost, lighted lamp, coin found, this story is far closer to our parable than The Lost Sheep. Indeed one might almost consider them as variants of the same parable were it not evident that they are based on quite different common experiences. The midrashic story is built on the idea of an object of insignificant value being essential to the discovery of another object of very great value.

This, however, is far from being the common experience behind Jesus' story of The Lost Coin.

So let's forget Luke's reconstruction and look at the workings of the story itself. When dealing with the parable of The Lost Sheep I emphasized that the ideas of 'extravagant concern' and 'rejoicing' introduced by the evangelists were quite out of place. In this parable, however, they are perfectly applicable. It is a common experience that when we lose a personal possession it instantly appears to us much more valuable than before we lost it. We exteriorize this amplification of our feelings by behaving extravagantly, first displaying a quite unusual concern for what is lost, then giving wild displays of joy and relief when we find it. The 'logic' of this story is that you can only appreciate the woman's extravagant behaviour by seeing it in the light of her loss. It is because she has *lost* the coin, not because of its intrinsic *value* that she is so joyful in finding it. Notice that this 'logic', though different from that of the midrashic story, is similar in that it also involves a questioning of the common habit of dismissing something because of its lack of intrinsic value. In the Midrashic story it is the lighted wick that is at first sight regarded as valueless whereas in Jesus' story it is the little silver coin - one in a head-dress of hundreds.

How might Jesus have used this story? I have no reason to disagree with Luke in seeing it as directed against those who criticized Jesus for befriending publicans and sinners (15.1f). However, I believe we can go a step further by suggesting that these critics were mocking Jesus for the inordinate amount of time and effort he expended on such undeserving people, and for his disproportionate expressions of joy at their smallest responses.

Analogy: As the woman is extravagantly concerned when she loses her coin, and extravagantly happy when she finds it

So, should I not be unusually concerned about people who are lost, and inordinately joyful when they return?

55

The Prodigal Son

Mk

Mt.

Lk.15:11

Th.

Following what appears to have been Luke's own understanding of the story (15.10), this parable has usually been understood as an illustration of the love of God, along the lines:

As the father forgives the prodigal son - So God forgives us sinners when we repent.

The problem with this is that it only takes into account the first half of the story. It is understandable, therefore, that the authenticity of the second half, in which the elder son refuses to join in the merrymaking caused by his brother's return, has often been questioned. However, no good reason for this view has ever been advanced apart from

the fact that it does not fit this pattern of interpretation. On the other hand there are several other good reasons for believing this is not a correct way of understanding the parable. For example if the story is about the father's love how do you account for the central character being the younger son? Then again, how do you explain the fact that the story's crucial turning point - the moment of repentance - occurs when the father is off stage? Clearly we shall have to abandon the traditional interpretation and think again.

To properly appreciate the story one needs to know something of the prevailing legal situation regarding inheritance: In Jewish law, a man was able to bequeath his property to his sons during his lifetime. If he did this the property legally became theirs, although they were not permitted to sell it to someone else, and the entire income it produced remained their father's. In this story the younger brother wants the right to dispose of his portion of the inheritance (one third, according to Jewish Law) because he wishes to live independently, taking his chances, as we may suppose many did, in the more exciting and comfortable surroundings of one of the great merchant cities of the ancient near east. The withdrawal of such a major part of the family's working capital would inflict considerable damage on the estate, which is why the elder son feels so bitter towards his brother. When the father receives his returning son with a robe and a ring and shoes this signifies something more than just seeing to the boy's comfort. The repentant young man has asked to be taken back as a mere labourer, yet his father insists on receiving him as an honoured guest. Of course, there is no question of the prodigal being restored to his inheritance and therefore of doing the elder son out of what now is his. In telling his elder son "all that is mine is yours" the father assures him that nothing in this respect is changed. However, he also makes it plain that as long as he lives his younger son will have a place in his house.

The crux of the story is the prodigal's transformation, which means that the common experience is the phenomenon of *repentance*. V. 17 states that it was while the young man was feeding swine in a far-off country that he 'came to himself', which in Aramaic is the expression used to describe repentance. Indeed, eating carob-beans - the pods with which the boy was feeding the swine - was used in Israel as a symbol of the kind of depths of poverty that could easily generate repentance. Thus, for example, Rabbi Simeon ben Johai:

"Only when Israel is reduced to such a state of poverty that they must eat carob do they repent of their evil ways. "

The father sees his son returning and 'from afar' recognizes he is a changed man. He won't even let his son deliver his prepared statement, but cuts him off in mid-sentence with an announcement that they must all celebrate; for his true son has returned. The remarkable line; "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found" carries the story's 'logic': There is only one healthy response to repentance - forgiveness. At the end of the story, when the elder brother refuses to join in the general rejoicing, his father repeats these words to justify his action in killing the fatted calf. In effect he is telling the elder son that his righteous indignation is unjustified, not because it is wrongly based but because it is blinding him to the big fact that his brother has 'come to himself': having been lost to the family and farm, he has returned to play his proper part in them again - surely the only appropriate response is joy!

How might Jesus have used this story? When I read it I can't help thinking of Zacchaeus, that wretched little man who had become rich by doing the Roman oppressors' dirty work; who had lined his pockets by ripping off his fellow Jews. How people must have hated him, especially the honest, law-abiding, upright members of society like ourselves - those described, rightly or wrongly, by Luke as Pharisees. When people heard how Jesus had honoured Zacchaeus, by going to his house and banqueting with him, they must have felt sick. How could Jesus consort with such as he? Could not the parable of The Prodigal Son be Jesus' response to someone who had expressed such feelings?

Analogy: As in criticizing his father and refusing to join the celebrations the elder brother allowed his indignation to blind him to the wonderful change in his younger brother

So, in criticizing me for showing my joy at Zacchaeus' transformation, aren't you allowing your indignation to blind you to the marvellous change that has occurred in him?

56

The Indestructible Steward

Mk

Mt.

Lk. 16:1

Th.

Reading this story one has to remember that there was then no such thing as book-keeping or auditing. After the steward had been sacked, there would have been no way for the master to check how much people owed him, apart from the falsified promissory notes which the steward, with the help of the clients, had drawn up.

For moralists like myself this is a very difficult parable since the story plainly justifies the steward's persistent criminality. For this reason I can sympathize with Luke who was obviously uncertain how to deal with it himself. It is clear he has added a number of different, and by no means compatible, explanations to suggest how readers might want to interpret the story.

The sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.

Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into eternal habitations.

He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and he who is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.

Like the parable of The Banquet [Pb. 28], this is one of Jesus' 'escape-artist' stories whose common experience is *the natural self-love which affirms a person's identity in everything he or she does*. Not surprisingly, therefore, the basic pattern of the two stories is the same: The central character has offended, and his offence has caught up with him. He is in a trap from which there is apparently no escape. In prospect is his utter humiliation. However, instead of succumbing the 'hero' is galvanized by his self-love

and finds a way to an unexpected triumph. On this level the two stories are identical. However, each establishes its unique character in the way it details the particular avenue of escape dictated by the situation. In the parable of The Banquet the tax-collector is looking for social acceptance; so he escapes by finding an alternative and quite unlooked-for solidarity with the outcasts. In the present parable, the steward is looking for sheer survival and the story explains how he assures his future by sharing with others the benefits of his crimes and thus making them beholden to him. This compounding of the crime - technically achieved by the way in which the steward 'exports' his fraud and spreads its benefits - is, as I see it, essential to the 'logic' of the story of The Indestructible Steward. It is also the feature that makes it devilishly hard for Christians who are slaves to morality to handle. Yet there is no doubt that it is responsible for generating the special delight we feel at the steward's escape. We understand instinctively that it would ruin the effect were there to be a legal way for him to extract himself from his predicament. In other words this particular component is not an adjunct to the story, it is the crucial aspect that furnishes the story with its specific character. The fact that the steward is so hemmed in, making it impossible for him to preserve his life otherwise than by compounding his fraud, serves to establish that, since it is seeking life that counts, giving up and dying because that is what morality dictates would be plainly stupid. This is the thrust of the story's 'logic'.

One of the most characteristic features of Jesus as he is portrayed by the evangelists was his out-and-out refusal to do the usual religious thing and play on his hearers' sense of personal worthiness: their altruism and commitment to excellence. His approach, from which he never deviated, was to appeal to peoples' profoundest desire for personal advantage (Mt. 5:12. 6:4,18. Mk 8:35f, Lk 6:35,37,38. 12:31,33. 18:29f etc.). For him, entrance to the Kingdom was not to be obtained by those who blinkered their vision by trusting to moral precepts. Rather, entrance was granted to those who approached life with eyes wide open to its opportunities. Accordingly he was always at pains to encourage self love, as in this parable, since only when motivated by it did a person have any chance at all of responding to the gospel. It is true, of course, that Jesus strongly discriminated between greater and lesser advantages, between those which he described as bringing 'life', seized only by people whom he described as having 'faith' (Mt. 8:10, 15:28, Lk 7:50, 8:48 etc.), and those which become obstacles when given priority, like food, clothing, money, honour, and power. However, it was this basic desire in a person for her own advantage that he chose to work on and never despised, rather than the desire to achieve standards and to become better, so often the objectives which religious people pursue.

How might Jesus have used this parable? Supposing he is one day confronted by a disciple who is an 'old moralist' (We know there were many of these in the early Church since we can see their hand in the tradition's editorial work). The man is going on about how lax and degenerate society has become. "What upsets me most about people these days", he explains to Jesus, "is how different they are from you and me. Whereas we are strongly motivated by the desire for the life of excellence prescribed in our Law, these people seem only concerned with their petty personal advantage." Could Jesus have told such a person this story to try to free him from the mental trap he had dug himself into?

Analogy: As the steward was manifestly right to ensure his continued survival, even though this meant adding considerably to his crimes

So, isn't it right for people to champion their lives rather than become the slaves of the community's precepts?

57

The Rich Man and Lazarus

Mk

Mt.

Lk. 16:19

Th.

It seems Jesus based this story on the final part of the popular tale of a tax-gatherer called Bar Majan. In the first part this wealthy social outcast had invited all the local gentry to a splendid banquet only to find that when the time came none of them turned up. In order to save face he had then instructed his servants to go out and invite all the poor and outcast people who would not be too proud to refuse a free meal (see Pb 28). The story continued by describing how in that same town there lived a poor scholar. One day he died and being who he was no one was present at his funeral. On the same day Bar Majan also died but, because of his one good deed in giving food to the poor, God rewarded him with a splendid funeral to which everyone turned up to see him off. Now the poor scholar had a colleague and he was allowed to see in a dream the fate of the two men in the next world:

“A few days later that scholar saw his colleague in gardens of paradisaal beauty, watered by flowing streams. He also saw Bar Majan the publican standing on the bank of a stream and trying to reach the water, but unable to do so.”

It is difficult to know how Luke understood Jesus' parable since he simply includes it without comment in a string of stories, sayings, and incidents connected with the question of money and riches. However, from the dialogue at the end of the story it has been concluded the parable must have been Jesus' response to certain rich and worldly people who refused to take his warning message seriously because they saw no reason to believe in an after-life in which their wrongdoings would be punished. They demanded that Jesus should furnish them with proof of this after-life and the parable was Jesus' reply that no such proof would be given since even if he gave them a sign they would find it meaningless.

This interpretation depends on three inferences:

1) That the rich man and his five brothers are among those who doubt there is a life after death.

However, there is no clear indication that this is the case. It is true that the rich man's expensive clothing could be taken as suggesting that he is a Sadducee and it is well known that these arch-conservatives rejected the belief in resurrection which had, only recently, been absorbed into Judaism. Personally I find such a set-up rather attractive. A

wealthy man, who has maintained all his life that death is the end, suddenly waking up to find himself in hell, fits the humorous nature of the story. However, it is one thing to use such an inference to make a humorous aside and quite another to use it as the premise from which the whole 'logic' of the story flows. Had Jesus intended his story to be seen as a portrayal of the theological obstinacy of the Sadducees I doubt he would have left his hearers to surmise it from the description he gave of the man's clothes! In any case the story is clearly not concerned with belief in an after-life. Abraham insists that the sought-for enlightenment, whatever this is, is much more likely to come through the Law (Moses and the prophets) than through the return of Lazarus from the dead. However, if the surviving brothers' disbelief in the resurrection is the obstacle which has to be overcome, then Lazarus's miraculous appearance would at least be pertinent - even though it might not provide sufficient illumination to get them to change their behaviour. On the other hand, the Law would be perfectly useless, seeing that it says absolutely nothing at all about an after-life.

2) The second inference this interpretation depends on is that the rich man and his five brothers were wicked: impious revellers living in selfish luxury.

In fact nowhere in the story is there a hint that this is the case. It has been suggested Jesus' hearers would have realized he was using the Bar Misan story and would have taken it for granted the rich man was an out-and-out sinner. But this can't be so since they would then have taken him to be a tax-gatherer and he simply couldn't have been a tax-gatherer and a Sadducee could he! However, people argue that the rich man must have been guilty of something more than simply being rich, to have suffered such a fate. To understand the story as simply saying 'on earth, wealth, in the life beyond, torment; on earth, poverty, in the next life, refreshment' cannot be correct, they say, for where does Jesus ever suggest that wealth in itself merits hell, and that poverty in itself is rewarded by paradise? The answer to these good people is that Jesus makes this very point almost every time he mentions the subject of poverty or riches (if we take paradise as signifying 'God's approval' and hell as signifying 'God's disapproval' - as I am certain we should):

"You cannot serve God and mammon." [Mt. 6:24]

"It is harder for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." [Mk 10:25]

"Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." [Lk.. 6:20]

"But woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation." [Lk. 6:24]

In these last two sayings, from the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus doesn't say "Blessed are you deserving poor" or "Woe to you selfish rich". Does this mean he thought the poor were innately pious and the rich innately loveless? of course not! No more does this story imply that the poor are always good and the rich always bad. All it suggests is that if you are rich while others are poor then you should not expect to find God with you i.e. to be in his Kingdom; or, if you want to put it in terms of the after-life mythology, you should not expect to go to heaven. According to the Law poverty came into existence within Israel with the settlement of the tribes in Canaan. The understanding is

that though poverty inevitably rears its head in a settled society [Deut. 15:11], there was nonetheless no excuse for its presence in Israel [Deut. 15:4f]. Which is why, when Israel developed a society with extremes of want and wealth in the eighth century BC, the prophets condemned her for breaking the Covenant and pointed people back to the pre-settlement days when there was no such distinction. So, as far as Moses and the prophets were concerned, the presence of rich and poor side by side in Israel was an affront to God, regardless of individual morality, and was fundamentally condemned as such. This is exactly the position described in Jesus' story, in which no interest whatsoever is shown in the personal morality of the rich man. Using the picturesque scene of the afterlife Jesus simply restates the judgement of Moses and the prophets on the rich: these, being content with their fortune in a society where others are in want, bring God's condemnation on themselves because he is the God who favours the poor.

3) The third inference the above interpretation depends on is that Lazarus was a pious, humble man.

Clearly Lazarus' name, which means 'God helps' was meant to be significant. However, though by giving him this name Jesus clearly declares, along with the tradition, that God is on his side this tells us nothing about the poor man's personal moral state. Trying to make sense of the story by blackening the character of the rich man and sanctifying that of Lazarus involves expositors in a classic interpretative error. Jesus did not construct the 'logics' of his stories by using the gauche device of labelling the characters. He developed these 'logics' simply from the way in which the situations described unfolded, which of course was the secret of the effectiveness of his parables. Consequently in this story we should not expect to find anything more than a rich man behaving as rich men do and likewise a poor man being just that.

So, if it is not possible to make the story function in the context of a dispute about the after-life, how does the parable work? In its first part the story presents the reversal of the two men's fortunes. As Abraham explains, Lazarus was poor in life and so is given joy in Paradise (i.e. meets with God's approval) whereas the other man was rich in life so now suffers Hell (i.e. meets with God's disapproval). This is the situation which in unfolding will develop the story's 'logic'.

But first we have what appears to be an amusing little *entre-act*. The rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to cool his lips with a drop of water but Abraham replies that this can't be done since it is impossible to pass between Heaven to Hell. This seemingly naive interlude has an important function without which the parable would be seriously flawed. The implication in the first part of the story is that the rich man should have helped Lazarus in his hour of need. This being the case hearers of the story would naturally suppose that the same principle must hold good when their positions were reversed in the after-life. To prevent this, the story teller has to establish the fact that heaven and hell are not a continuation of life in some different realm but a judgement on it, and this is exactly what this little *entre-act* does.

Now experiencing the reality he has spent his whole life denying, the rich man is anxious to open his brothers' eyes before it is too late. This gives us the common experience around which the final, and important, part of the story revolves: *the word*

that carries conviction. The rich man believes that a message delivered by a resurrected Lazarus (they did not believe in ghosts) will be just the sort of approach that will open his brothers' eyes. The 'logic' of the story, put once again into the mouth of Abraham in his final reply to the rich man, is that such an idea is ludicrous for if the five brothers are not convinced by Moses and the prophets that being rich puts a person in opposition to God then there is no chance they will be converted by such a miracle.

How might Jesus have used this parable? The story's basic concern is not to get the rich to face up to their position but to get someone else to see the futility of believing that the rich can be 'brought round' by signs and wonders. Perhaps a disciple had naively suggested that Jesus, possessing such extraordinary powers and eloquence, should use them to persuade the wealthy to give up their riches.

Analogy: As the five brothers would
 hardly have been convinced by
 a message carried by someone
 resurrected from the dead

So, is it likely that the rich and
powerful will be persuaded by
anything I say or do, however
spectacular?

58

The Master and His Servant

Mk

Mt.

Lk. 17:7

Th.

Luke implies this parable was addressed to the disciples (vv. 1,5). This seems improbable since it is unlikely any of them owned slaves (in this context the word servant denotes a slave). Note also the curious change from 'you' in v. 7 to 'he' in v. 8. This makes me think the original story commenced "if a man has a servant ..." and Luke changed it to "Will any of you ..." because he wanted his early Church readers to see the parable as addressed to themselves.

As I see it there are two possibilities for the common experience and 'logic' of this story:

- 1) Merit. The service of a slave merits no thanks
- 2) Service. Slaves serve. Guests are served.

1) Merit. Luke and Christian tradition interpret the parable on this basis. It is also the line taken by most commentators. However, there are strong reasons for rejecting it. The slave/master relationship described in vv. 7 - 8 serves rather badly as a means of putting forward the idea of 'one who merits no thanks'. After all, even a dog may render special service to its master and thus earn his gratitude - so why not a slave? Of course I am aware that doing something for love is not the same as doing it because it is your job. However, the story as it stands is not an adequate expression of this difference because it doesn't set out the 'service for love' alternative. In other words if Jesus had wanted to make this point he would surely have told a different story, perhaps one along the lines of this parable by Rabbi Phineas:

There was once a king whose tenant-farmers and stewards came to pay him their respects. When one of them arrived to do him honour, the king enquired who he was. "It is your tenant" he was told. "Then take what he has brought as a tribute" was the royal command. Another came and paid his respects. "Who is that one?" enquired the king. "It is your steward", he was informed. "Then take his tribute again" he ordered. Then entered another. "And who is this one?" he asked. "He is neither your tenant nor your steward but nevertheless he came to do you honour". "Give him a stool whereon to seat himself" ordered the king.

There is no disputing that this parable of Rabbi Phineas has been designed to highlight the special thanks that properly reward a gift from a disinterested party and thus, inversely, the ludicrousness of a servant expecting such thanks. But Jesus' parable, even as Luke presents it, is at best ambiguous on this score. The story proper (vv. 7 and 8) contains no inkling of the idea of merit, which is only introduced in the 'link' saying in v. 9, the sole purpose of which is to prepare the way for the explanation of the parable given in v. 10. As it stands, Luke's text about the master and his servant breaks the rules. Parables, like jokes, shouldn't need an explanation, yet that is what vv. 9 and 10 seem to be all about. The reason why Luke has added this explanation is because the story contained no notion of merit, which meant that he had to find a way of dragging it round so that it did!

Another reason for rejecting the 'merit' idea is its implication that Jesus expected his followers to work in the service of God tirelessly, selflessly and without thought of reward. This is what St. Ignatius Loyola recommends in his famous prayer: 'To give and not to count the cost...', but the evidence is that Jesus did not try to motivate people by instilling into them a sense of duty. His approach was to encourage them to see what was in their own best interests; as he put it: to lose their lives in order to save them [Mk 8:35]. Ignatius' alternative - to lose your life knowing only that you do God's will - may sound Christian but it implies acting against your God-given nature; a pretentious and damaging thing to do.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus repeatedly teaches his disciples that they must take the hard road: they must be poor, meek, merciful, pure in heart, they must be prepared to mourn, to hunger and thirst for righteousness, to be reviled and persecuted. However, in each case the motivation called for is a healthy self-interest. Disciples are urged to take this hard road so as to possess the kingdom, to inherit the earth, to obtain mercy, to see God, to receive comfort, to be satisfied, to be rewarded. There is no trace of duty as a motivation here.

Then again in his two 'escape-artist' parables (The Banquet [Pb. 28] and The Indestructible Steward [Pb. 56] Jesus is clearly out to make people aware how profoundly important it is to hold onto self-love (what he generally refers to as their 'life') since all hope of entry into the kingdom depends on it. As he said on another occasion:

"For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? For what can a man give in return for his life?"

Once again there is not the slightest hint here of duty as a motivation

2) Service. If we take vv. 9 and 10 as simply Luke's attempt to give the parable a suitable meaning, what immediately suggests itself is that the original story (vv. 7 - 8) involved a comparison of the position of a guest - 'Come at once and sit down at table' - with that of a slave - 'Prepare supper for me, and gird yourself and serve me.....'. If this is right then the common experience is *service*, an economic situation in which a person no longer operates as a free agent since his labour has been bought, while the 'logic' of the story is that the slave's role is to serve, not to be served.

It should be noted that in advocating the setting aside of v. 10, I do not mean to imply that the saying it contains is an invention of the early Church. Though its position here is, as I see it, editorial, the idea it expresses - that before God no one has merit - is central to New Testament teaching. If I have a quarrel with Luke it is that in adding this logion to the parable of The Master and His Servant he has lent weight to the false notion that Jesus sought to motivate people by instilling into them a sense of duty.

It might be argued that even without vv. 9 and 10 the story seems to imply a certain expectation of reward on the part of the servant - that having slaved away all day in the fields it would be only just if on coming home he were able to relax for a bit. I wouldn't want to argue against this. However, the story's 'logic' is not dictated by the point of view of the slave, who might well have entertained such feelings, but of the master, who certainly would not, since they would have undermined the master/slave relationship from which he was operating.

It is not uncommon for people to speak of a comfortable old age as if it were God's proper reward for a lifetime's good works. Perhaps a friend of Jesus had let slip such a pious phrase on contemplating the fortunate circumstances of some greatly respected member of society and Jesus had sought to straighten her out with this little story.

Analogy:	As a master does not reward his slave by sitting him down and serving him supper after his long day's work	So, is it likely God would reward someone by giving them a comfortable retirement because of his lifetime of goodness?
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59 The Widow and the Judge

Mk Mt. Lk. 18:2 Th.

The story describes a case in which there is only one judge. This can only mean that it is a money matter since all other sorts of cases had to involve more than one judge. The widow is by definition poor and without influence. She is therefore unable to get justice in the usual way - by bribing the judge. One suspects he has been nobbled by her more wealthy adversary.

Luke's handwork is clearly visible in this parable. First he provides an introduction (v. 1) in which he states that Jesus was talking about the need to 'pray and not lose heart'. Then immediately after the parable (v. 6) he has a joining phrase before he inserts his explanation (vv. 7 and 8). In this explanation, full of parousia references, he makes out that his readers should understand Jesus' story in the light of the persecution the early Church was at that time experiencing. Like the widow in the story they should not lose heart but continue praying for relief since their perseverance would soon be rewarded. All this has to be reconstruction work for it would have made little sense had Jesus first warned his disciples about the coming time of tribulation and then comforted them by saying that it wouldn't last long. A message of comfort and exhortation made perfect sense to the early Christians, for they were already suffering persecution, but it would have been scarcely appropriate for the disciples living before such persecutions had really begun.

This story, The Widow and the Judge, has much in common with The Insistent Neighbour [Pb. 47]. Both have to do with individuals who are powerless to satisfy their needs and so are forced to appeal to someone for assistance, and both involve an element of hesitation/resistance on the part of the individual who is being petitioned. Yet the stories are by no means twins for, whereas The Insistent Neighbour emphasized the utter shamelessness of the petitioner, this story, with its protracted dealings between a penniless plaintiff and a corrupt official, is all about dogged persistence. *Persistence* is, of course, the story's common awareness, the 'logic' being that sheer perseverance more than makes up for a lack of money and influence.

How might Jesus have used the story? Luke writes that his intention was to encourage people 'to pray and not lose heart'. This is a very interesting suggestion - one that should not be dismissed lightly since it openly dares to see God in the guise of a corrupt judge:

And the Lord said "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night?..." [Lk. 18.6,7]

If I grant Luke this reconstruction (somewhat grudgingly since I am naturally a rather irreligious person myself) I have to object to the tone which as always is awesomely serious. Had Jesus likened God to a venal magistrate it could only have been with a touch of humour.

Analogy: As the widow proved that sheer persistence can be a very effective way of obtaining justice

So, should you not look to perseverance when it appears to you that God is getting old and maybe a little deaf?

60

Two Men In The Temple

Mk

Mt.

Lk. 18:9

Th.

The Pharisee's prayer in Jesus' story should not be seen as a parody. We can tell it was a life-like account from a very similar Jewish prayer, which comes from the same period:

"I thank thee, O Lord my God, that thou hast given me my lot with those who sit in the seat of learning and not with those who sit at the street-corners; for I am early to work, and they are early to work; I am early to work on the words of the Torah, and they are early to work on things of no moment. I weary myself, and they weary themselves; I weary myself and profit thereby, while they weary themselves to no profit. I run and they run; I run towards the life of the Age to Come, and they run towards the pit of destruction."

Like this one, from the Talmud, the prayer reported by Luke is not without its finer points. It shows the Pharisee's recognition that he owes everything, even his place amongst the righteous, to God and it shows his self-denial in doing much more in terms of fasting and tithing than the Law requires. On the other hand the tax-collector's prayer betrays not just his remorse but also the hopelessness of his position. For such a man to rejoin the righteous community would have meant not only giving up his entire way of life, but also paying back what he had stolen from people, plus one fifth. How could he possibly remember everyone he had defrauded?

Luke explains in a short introduction that his readers should see this parable as being aimed against people who were self righteous (v. 9). He also adds a parousia warning at the end, referring to the last judgement (v. 14b). But the story can hardly be an illustrative comparison addressed to the self-righteous since they would have been totally immune to the 'logic' of the story. They would have found it utterly shocking, in fact inconceivable, that the tax-collector, who as yet had done nothing to redress his evil deeds, should be justified as over against this obviously pious Pharisee. Because of this, some commentators have argued that the story was not meant as an illustrative comparison but as an authoritative announcement - a word of God. They point out that Jesus has clearly based the tax-collector's prayer on the opening words of Psalm 51 in which it is written that "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God thou wilt not despise." However, it has to be said that though a righteous member of society (like me!) would undoubtedly have found it too bizarre for words that God could prefer a tax-collector's *cri de coeur* to this eminently pious man's carefully constructed liturgy of thanks, the marginal classes, for their part, would have found no difficulty in appreciating the story's 'logic'. Because of their everyday experience as despised members of a powerless and ostracized section of the community they would naturally have found the Pharisee's prayer sickeningly self-righteous - just as the same people find many of our Christian attitudes obnoxious today.

So we have a choice. Either we can follow Luke and see the story as aimed at some Pharisaical figure, in which case it would have been an authoritative assertion of how God sees things, proffered on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. Or we can understand the story as a true parable addressed to some marginal individual, in which case it becomes a bold appeal to such a person's own experience. I reject outright the former hypothesis since I do not believe Jesus told stories in order to lay out spiritual truths on the off chance that some of his hearers would be able to profit from them. In any case had he wanted to make an authoritative statement he would hardly have started by telling a story. He would surely have made a short pronouncement followed by the verse of scripture thus:

“I tell you that a repentant tax-collector is more justified than a pious Pharisee who simply thanks God for his good fortune. For it is written ‘The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit’”.

To appreciate the effectiveness of this parable I believe it is appropriate to envisage it as told to an outcast member of society who was carrying within her a massive contradiction. I imagine this unfortunate woman: on the one hand she both feels and knows that life has stacked things heavily against her and that the disparaging remarks made in her direction by the comfortably-off are unjust and uncalled for. On the other hand, she can't help admiring these people in a way, and envying them their sense of superiority to wretches like herself. Thus it sometimes happens that she herself uses their 'righteous' taunts against other unfortunate sufferers.

Seen in this light the parable becomes an attempt by Jesus to work on this contradiction; to demystify self-righteousness by comparing it with the woman's own experience in which repentance - knowing oneself to be a sinner among sinners - is recognized as the only way of acknowledging the real state of things.

Analogy:	As you are well placed to see how much the Pharisee's self-righteousness puts him in the wrong	So, how can you adopt the same self-righteous attitude towards your fellow outcasts?
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61 Children in the Field

Mk Mt. Lk. Th. 21

Thomas records an incident (Mary's question) along with this story but it is of surprisingly little help in understanding the parable. It does perhaps suggest that Jesus was highlighting a deficiency in his disciples but it does not tell us why Mary wanted to know her son's opinion of his followers. Consequently we are a bit at a loss how to take Jesus' reply. Probably we should take Mary's question as simply indicating that Thomas believed the story came from a source closely identified with Mary's testimony and that he wanted his readers to see themselves as the target.

Personally I have little doubt that what we have here is the remains of a parable told by Jesus; it demonstrates such an acute observation of life and delivers such a penetrating thrust. It is characteristic of children the world over to utilize whatever space is available to them to play out their imaginings. So it is in this story: here the children have taken over a field and have made it the basis of their game of make-believe. Inevitably, in their minds it has become 'theirs'. However, with the arrival of the owners reality intrudes and the children find themselves obliged to give up their imaginary world in order to release the field. Anyone who has surprised children at play will have witnessed such moments when reality breaks in and destroys their world of make believe. Jesus describes the children's rude awakening by saying that they are obliged to 'undress in the owners presence' i.e. to end their pretence.

The common experience on which this story is built is *fantasizing*, the ‘logic’ being that to indulge in make believe is all very well except that there inevitably comes a moment when reality demolishes your pretence, leaving you with nothing but shocked embarrassment.

Thomas claims the parable was aimed against the disciples and I see no reason to quarrel with him. Jesus was constantly urging his followers to face up to the reality of what he was about (Mk 10.29-30, 13.9-13, Mt. 10.38, Lk. 9.57-8, Jn 15.20). He knew only too well that should they hide in a world of make-believe they would suffer a rude awakening. I am once again put in mind of that occasion when James and John came to Jesus and asked him whether he would make them his chief officers when he came to power (Mk 10.35ff). He clearly thought they were fantasizing on this occasion for he swiftly brought them down to earth by asking if they were ready to take the distress and suffering that was involved:

“You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?”

Perhaps Jesus told this story when on a similar occasion he had surprised some of his disciples discussing the roles each would play when he eventually took over.

Analogy:	As the children’s pretence inevitably led to their subsequent embarrassment	So, if you continue with your childish fantasizings won’t you also be embarrassed by events?
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62 Children and Their Garments

Mk Mt. Lk. Th. 37

In this saying story-elements and impact-elements have been knitted together, with the result that Jesus appears to be using the compacted parable form (see Introduction p. 14): urging his disciples to become nudists! This is so eccentric as to make me think that in its transmission the saying has become garbled. If I am right, then originally the saying might well have looked something like this:

As little children without shame disrobe, discarding their garments and trampling them under their feet, so you will have to learn to go ‘naked’ without ‘shame’ by stripping yourself of your, being unnecessary encumbrances.

The exact sense of the words in inverted commas and the missing word in the last line will depend on the reconstruction of the parable that we finally come up with.

nature it has passed unnoticed. The tragedy is beautifully summed up in the final line of the story.

The common experience upon which the story is based is *the treacherous nature of the small fault that tends to go unnoticed*, the ‘logic’ being that a small fault because it is easily overlooked tends to have an effect out of all proportion to its size.

How might Jesus have used the story? Perhaps he had brought to someone’s attention a slight fault of character but this person had become upset and accused him of unfairly exaggerating what was really a very minor defect. “What is the importance of that defect”, this disciple might have thought, “in comparison with the courage and commitment I have shown in following you?” Mightn’t Jesus, in telling this story, have been trying to get such a person to see that instead of being hurt he should be grateful that someone has drawn his attention to what is happening?

Analogy:	As the accident, being so slight that it went completely unnoticed, caused in the end catastrophic damage.	So, shouldn’t you appreciate it when someone draws your attention to a small flaw since you then have the chance of preventing a real tragedy?
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64

The Assassin

Mk

Mt.

Lk.

Th. 98

Reading this business of sticking a sword through a mud wall as a trial of strength, a way for the would-be assassin to see whether he has the necessary power to achieve his objective, is surely mistaken. As I see it, if a would-be assassin doubted his strength the answer would surely be to go for a different way of killing his enemy. On the other hand, even the strongest man can suddenly have a bout of nerves, a predicament that requires just the sort of handling described in the story.

When I first came across this parable in one of its English translations I was disinclined to believe it came from Jesus because it appeared to make use of a legendary figure in referring to a ‘giant’. On no other occasion do we find Jesus including such an element in one of his parables. However, I troubled myself unnecessarily for the Coptic word translated as ‘giant’ really only means ‘a powerful man’ or ‘warrior’. Then again, one might raise the question whether Jesus would have chosen the morally dubious figure of an assassin as the central character for one of his stories. However, it is clear Jesus was not so mealy-mouthed as to restrict his choice of subject because of narrow moral considerations. Remember his fraudulent steward [Pb. 56] and the tax-gatherer Bar Majan [Pb. 28].

What we have in this story is an assassin who, before venturing out to waylay his target, seeks to reassure himself that the fearful prospect has not shaken his nerve. Thus the common experience upon which the story is built is *the unnerving anticipation of a dangerous encounter*, the ‘logic’ being that in such circumstances the only solution to the problem is to find a way of ‘testing your nerve’.

Presumably Jesus used this story to help someone facing an important encounter who was close to backing off. The parable’s aim would have been to help such a person see that giving up was no answer but that finding a way to test himself was. Perhaps I can best illustrate the sort of situation I have in mind by referring to my own experience. I am a union shop steward, and sometimes have to defend my members in disciplinary hearings which could end up in their losing their jobs. Everything goes fine while I am preparing the case, but sometimes on the morning of the hearing itself I experience a moment of panic. The case can be quite involved and I know that things never go quite as planned. Maybe something I haven’t anticipated will crop up, causing me to become confused. What if I muck up my member’s case and she gets the sack? Fortunately I am no longer new to the game. I have learned from experience that the most effective strategy in combating such feelings of panic is to imagine I am already in the hearing and, without reference to notes, to act out my member’s defence there and then in my head. Having thus assured myself that I have a firm grasp of the case and that my nervousness hasn’t affected my memory I can proceed to the hearing with confidence.

Is not Mark 14.32ff an account of Jesus testing himself in the garden of Gethsemane? Perhaps we should see the parable The Assassin as associated in some way with the climax of Jesus’ mission. Mark tells us that the people accompanying Jesus on his final journey to Jerusalem were very much afraid of what lay ahead (Mk 10.32). Perhaps someone showed signs of wanting to back down and Jesus encouraged him with this story.

Analogy: As the assassin found a way of proving to himself that he hadn’t lost his nerve

So, when you find yourself panicking shouldn’t you find a way of doing the same thing?

65

A Father’s Gift

Mk

Mt. 7 : 9

Lk. 11:11

Th.

This parable is couched in the rather unusual ‘more than’ form, which is merely a way of strengthening the basic simile. For the evangelists the saying, which consists of three variants of the same story (see *The Divided Kingdom* [Pb. 5]), is Jesus’ way of encouraging his disciples to pray. However, some scholars have argued that it was probably originally addressed to opponents rather than disciples: to people who had been upset by Jesus’ claim that God listened even to the prayer of tax-collectors. In this way they see the story as Jesus’ way of pointing out that if his enemies, as fathers, were

capable of giving good gifts to their children than surely God was capable of giving the gift of the gospel to such sinners. However, this interpretation doesn't give full credit to the story, which gets its power from the idea of someone cheating another by giving them a bum gift in the guise of a genuine one. In this respect the evangelists' reconstruction is far superior since people are always complaining that though they have constantly asked God for good things all he has sent them has been a heap of trouble!

My only quarrel with the evangelists' reconstruction is that it interprets the story as an exhortation. Parables are never exhortations. They are illuminations that bring about awareness. Clearly the common experience on which the story is built is *parental love* the 'logic' being that with parental love you can discount the possibility of a bum gift.

As I see it, someone has probably been railing at her fate and bitterly complaining about the ill fortune God has sent her, and Jesus answers with this parable. In other words the story is a quizzical way of suggesting that the person in question should take another look at the problem since there is surely something not quite right about the idea of God sending a person a bum gift? Seen in this light the story has a fine thrust. However, the interpretation does present us with a couple of interesting points. Unlike people in the first century CE we associate the problem of unanswered prayer with the controversy about the existence of God. Consequently we find the challenge to look closer at what is happening more as an invitation to doubt God's existence than anything else. This, of course, would not have been the case for Jesus' hearers, for whether these people were his disciples or his opponents they would have taken God's existence for granted. This said, isn't it true that the issue which was expressed by Jesus in this parable in a religious form is just as real for anyone today who loves life, whether they be religious or otherwise? In other words isn't it just as dubious to suggest that life has sent you a bum gift as it is to make the same complaint against God?

The second interesting point the parable presents us with is that the story doesn't fully answer the individual's dilemma. It only questions the solution she is proposing and invites her to take another look. We are not happy with this; we like to have complete, tidy solutions to such important questions, perhaps because we don't like to be in a position where we have to think for ourselves!

Analogy: As it is hard to imagine
a father giving a bum
gift to his child

So, isn't it somewhat unlikely
that your misfortunes are a
bad gift from God?

66

The Narrow Door

Mk

Mt. 7:13

Lk.13:24

Th.

There is one feature of this story that demands immediate consideration. In most parables the story and the real-life subject it refers to are carefully kept apart. Here,

however, elements of both are mixed together: people striving to get through a narrow door combined with disciples striving to get into the Kingdom. This indicates that the saying is a compacted parable (see Preface to the Studies, p. 14).

The evangelists clearly see the door in this parable as the narrow, hence restricted entrance to the kingdom. Following their lead commentators have discussed this restriction in terms of their personal perceptions of the difficulties of gaining entrance to the kingdom. They have talked about the necessary striving in heroic terms, of the need to make a considerable effort, to persevere and to invest high stakes. A famous example of this is, of course, John Bunyan's 'The Pilgrim's Progress'. In doing this they have wonderfully illustrated the danger of imposing inadmissible ideas upon the text. For even if we take into account the fact that doors in first-century Palestinian houses were smaller than ours I do not believe that such entrances required heroic striving, considerable effort, perseverance, or any kind of high investment to enter.

However it has to be admitted that the evangelists were not guiltless in this respect. Luke himself implies that this narrow door is in fact the entrance to the great parousia feast, which at a given moment will be shut permanently. He gets this across by tacking on to it, without explanation, a completely different parable, that of The Locked Door [Pb. 50]. He thus injects into the analogy the false notion of a time limit. Matthew for his part works on the story in a different way. He imagines it as a gate at the end of a long hard road. This permits him to introduce the alien notion of perseverance.

As I see it, the only way of making sense of the difficulty in entering a narrow door is if we see the parable as being built on the idea of *divesting*, its common experience. If we do this the story is understood as advocating the need to jettison all bulky encumbrances and enter the narrow door empty-handed. This is its 'logic'. This image of the disciple striving to divest himself of desirable possessions is surely more biblical than that of the hero striving to accomplish a task requiring great strength, intelligence or courage, however popular the latter became in the church's later hierarchical tradition (e.g. the mediaeval Christian knight). The reason for this is, of course, that the bias of the gospel is always in favour of the poor and the oppressed rather than the rich and powerful. The divesting image suits this bias, since having possessions is seen as one of the chief impediments to entering the kingdom. This is not to pretend that there are no heroes in the synoptic tradition. However, when these do appear, either in real life (the centurion, Mt. 8.5, and the Syro-Phoenician woman Mk 7.15) or in the parables themselves (the taxgatherer in [Pb. 28] and the steward in [Pb. 56]), their behaviour is not characterized by heroic strength but by a positive response to life; something equally open to the weak and the strong.

How might Jesus have used this story? Luke places it during the last fateful journey to Jerusalem. He tells us that at one point a disciple, betraying a sense of panic, asked Jesus if it was true that only a few were to be saved (v. 23). In this context the saying about the narrow door is Jesus' way of getting the man to appreciate that what other people did was not his concern; his business was simply to make sure of his own conduct. However, this reconstruction misconstrues the 'logic' of the story. In no way does the negotiation of a narrow door emphasise the need to concentrate attention on the job in hand at the expense of larger considerations. If Jesus had wished to make the man see that he should

This story is clearly a compacted parable (see Preface to the Studies p. 14). Its impact is that the things we say are important because others take them as the measure of our thoughts and therefore of the kind of people we are. This effect is achieved through the analogy in which a man's words are likened to the goods taken from a store and displayed outside in the street. However, it isn't easy to draw a clear distinction between the 'impact' and the 'story' sides of the analogy. One impact element - the man - has been combined with one story element - the treasure. The rest remain general, and several - the trader, display, store, words, thoughts, heart - are lost; the fact that each evangelist transmits the saying by selecting slightly different elements is an added complication.

On separating out the elements and completing the saying, we are left with the following:

As the treasure that a trader brings out and displays reveals the quality of what remains in the store (and thus of the whole enterprise)

So, a man's words reveal the quality of the thoughts in his heart (and thus of the man himself).

The common experience upon which this analogy is built is *display*; as pertinent now as it must have been in Jesus' day. We naturally judge a shop by the quality of the items on show in the window when we pass by. If we like what we see we enter and investigate further. The same was true in first-century Palestine, only for people then it was not a case of looking into the shop window and then going in to buy but of wandering along looking at the wares laid out at the side of the street and then getting the store-keeper to bring out more of his merchandise if they liked the look of it. The 'logic' of the story is therefore that a store-keeper naturally chooses his display from his best goods.

The same applies, Jesus says, to the things a person says. These are not without consequence, as the speaker may erroneously suppose, for listeners naturally take them as representing the kind of thoughts the speaker has in his heart and thus of the kind of person he or she is. As Matthew puts it: We will be condemned or justified by the things we say (though, of course, he was almost certainly thinking of the Last Judgement, which really has no place in this teaching).

But is it not rather bold to suggest that the underlying analogy is to a storekeeper's display, since no mention is made either of a store or of a display in any of the three versions of the saying? And doesn't the idea of treasure (present in Matthew and Luke though absent in Thomas) bring more to mind the kind of precious objects any individual might collect, such as a fine jewel or an especially good bottle of wine, and doesn't this suggest that what we are dealing with here is a private individual's store?

The problem with seeing the analogy as being about a private individual's possessions is that it makes for a much weaker thrust. After all, what is it to me if someone has a

marvellous collection of gems or wine? On the other hand, if I am out to buy the stuff, it becomes a matter of considerable importance. As I see it what we have here, as with so many of Jesus' other parables, is a story in which the economics of the situation provides the punch. This also means of course that the moralistic element that the evangelists have introduced by talking about *good* and *bad* people is quite out of place. What the story is concerned with is simply a sensible practice for drawing customers.

Analogy: As the objects the trader sets out for display are taken as a sign of the quality of the goods he has in his store

So, isn't it foolish to allow yourself to say crass things since they will inevitably be taken as a manifestation of the kind of person you are?

69

The Uprooted Plant

Mk

Mt. 15.13

Lk

Th. 40

What we have here is the story of a proprietor who finds a stray plant growing in his vineyard, taking up valuable space and nourishment. As it stands in both Gospels the saying is clearly a compacted parable (see Preface to the Studies p. 14) since the subject element, God the Father, has squeezed out and replaced the story element, the vineyard owner. The common experience on which the story is built is *the lack of productivity* associated with such weeds, the 'logic' of the story being that because such weeds lack productivity they are dispatched just as soon as they appear.

What Jesus seems to be doing with this compacted parable is to remind his disciples of the exigencies associated with the fortune of being an Israelite. A plant growing in the wild is left to its own devices but once it appears in the vineyard its productivity is subject to the closest scrutiny. The same principle applies, so Jesus would appear to be saying, to those who would call themselves God's people.

Analogy: As a proprietor, when he finds a weed taking up valuable space and nourishment in his vineyard, pulls it up by the roots

So will not God, when he finds Israelites who do not behave according to his wishes, likewise dispose of them?

70

The Ploughman Who Looks back

Mk

Mt.

Lk. 9:62

Th.

The light Palestinian plough was operated with one hand, leaving the other free to drive the unruly oxen with a long spiked goad. The job demanded great dexterity and close attention to what was happening in front since it was necessary - all at the same time - to hold the plough upright, control the depth of the furrow and be ready to lift it completely out of the ground to avoid rocks, maintaining the oxen in motion and on the right line, with your vision restricted to the small gap between their hindquarters.

Luke places this saying in the context of the selection process whereby unworthy disciples are weeded out by the demands placed on them by Jesus. It is therefore clear he understands the parable as teaching that a person should not allow her attachment to past responsibilities to distract her from the new demands of the Kingdom. Such an interpretation results from a rather simplistic, 'literal' appreciation of the story in which the bit of land just ploughed, which the unfit ploughman keeps looking at, is understood as the past responsibilities to one's family and friends, while the bit of land being actually ploughed, on which the good ploughman concentrates, is understood as the demands of the Kingdom.

I believe Jesus' parable warrants a rather better understanding of what is involved in the ploughman's job. The story is clearly about something of great importance in the make-up of the competent ploughman; something demonstrated by the fact that you never catch him looking back. We must therefore ask ourselves what would make a novice ploughmen *want* to look back over his shoulder? From the description of the technique given above it is obvious that operating the Palestinian plough was a very difficult art to master. Quite possibly it was considered by the peasant community as the job which most tested a person's manual intelligence, sorting out, as it were, the men from the boys. This aspect, together with the fact that a botched operation was both impossible to disguise and visible for the whole community to see, must have underlined the unforgiving nature of the job before which novices trembled! Given this state of affairs it is not in the least difficult to understand why a ploughman would want to look back. The demands of the situation would constantly make him want to reassure himself that he was ploughing a straight and firm furrow, something which could only be done by looking back over his shoulder. This would seem to suggest that *the need to reassure oneself* was the common experience on which the story was built.

Of course, giving way to the temptation to look back would have had immediate and damaging consequences, as anyone with experience would have known only too well. Keeping one's eyes to the front was the golden rule and Jesus could be sure his peasant audience would immediately appreciate the 'logic' of his story: The trained ploughman knows the foolishness of seeking to reassure yourself and that he must give the job in front his undivided attention.

How might Jesus have used the saying? Clearly it is a compacted parable, since 'story' and 'impact' elements are mixed within it (see Preface to the Studies p. 14). This means that it comes across more as a teaching than a specific act of healing. Probably Jesus used it to remind his followers of a lesson they had already learnt: the job of working for the kingdom is so demanding that anxious craving to reassure oneself only interferes with one's performance

If these questions are about Jesus and his mission, as seems likely, then we have to discount the first hypothesis for it is inconceivable that anyone would have wondered why he was 'staying so long'. On the other hand we do know that the disciples were most reluctant to accept that he was going to leave them. So perhaps he used this parable to get them to see that if he was still with them it was only because he had to tend the fire he had started until it was well ablaze: the thrust of the story's 'logic'.

Understood like this there is virtually no difference between Luke's form of the saying and that of Thomas. The only problem was that the former, by omitting the reference to the nursing process, inevitably left everyone confused as to what the fire-raiser was really longing for. However, if you read Thomas' 'guarding' motif back into Luke's version you find that it then makes essentially the same point: that you should not expect to see the fire-raiser hanging about once his job is done.

Analogy: As a fire-raiser, having
 lit his fire, only remains
 to tend it till the moment
 when he realizes it has
 properly caught

So, will I (who have the task of
setting the world alight) remain
hanging about once I have
assured myself that my gospel
has well and truly caught?

Sayings from the Gospel of Thomas.

Text is from The Nag Hammadi Library in English translated by members of the Coptic Gnostic Library Project of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity. James M. Robinson ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977).

On some occasions I have introduced paragraphing within a logia to separate out material that belongs to different parables. These paragraphs are referred to in the studies as a, b, c, or d. There is of course no paragraphing in the original text.

- [....] - words missing due to damage to the text.
- < > - Corrections of a scribal error in copying the text.
- (....) - Words inferred by the editor but not actually in the text
- { } - Words that are an unnecessary addition by the scribe.

[8] And He said, “The man is like a wise fisherman who cast his net into the sea and drew it up from the sea full of small fish. Among them the wise fisherman found a fine large fish. He threw all the small fish back into the sea and chose the large fish without difficulty. Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear.”

[9] Jesus said, “Now the sower went out, took a handful (of seeds), and scattered them. Some fell on the road; the birds came and gathered them up. Others fell on rock, did not take root in the soil, and did not produce ears. And others fell on thorns; they choked the seed(s) and worms ate them. And others fell on the good soil and produced good fruit: it bore sixty per measure and a hundred and twenty per measure.”

[10] Jesus said: “I have cast fire upon the world, and see, I am guarding it until it blazes.”

[20] The disciples said to Jesus, “Tell us, what the Kingdom of Heaven is like?” He said to them, “It is like a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds. But when it falls on tilled soil, produces a great plant and it becomes a shelter for birds of the sky.”

[21] Mary said to Jesus “Whom are your disciples like?” He said, “They are like children who have settled in a field which is not theirs. When the owners of the field come, they will say, ‘Let us have back our field.’ They (will) undress in their presence in order to let them have back their field and to give it back to them.

Therefore I say to you, if the owner of a house knows that the thief is coming, he will begin his vigil before he comes and will not let him dig through into his house of his domain to carry away his goods. You, then, be on your guard against the world. Arm yourselves with great strength lest the robbers find a way to come to you, for the difficulty which you expect will (surely) materialize.

Let there be among you a man of understanding. When the grain ripened, he came quickly with his sickle in his hand and reaped it. Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear.”

[24] His disciples said to Him, “Show us the place where You are, since it is necessary for us to seek it.” He said to them, “Whoever has ears, let him hear. There is light within a man of light, and he (or: it) lights up the whole world, If he (or: it) does not shine, he (or: it) is darkness.”

[32] Jesus said, “A city being built on a high mountain and fortified cannot fall, nor can it be hidden.”

[33] Jesus said “Preach from your housetops that which you will hear in your ear {(and) in the other ear}. For no one lights a lamp and puts it under a bushel, nor does he put it in a hidden place, but rather he sets it on a lampstand so that everyone who enters and leaves will see its light.”

[34] Jesus said, “If a blind man leads a blind man, they will both fall into a pit.”

[35] Jesus said, “it is not possible for anyone to enter the house of a strong man and take it by force unless he binds his hands; then he will (be able to) ransack his house.”

[37] His disciples said, “When will You become revealed to us and when shall we see You?” Jesus said, “When you disrobe without being ashamed and take up your garments and place them under your feet like little children and tread on them, then [will you see] the Son of the Living One, and you will not be afraid.”

[40] Jesus said, “A grapevine has been planted outside of the Father, but being unsound, it will be pulled up by its roots and destroyed.”

[41] Jesus said, “Whoever has something in his hand will receive more, and whoever has nothing will be deprived of even the little he has.”

[43] His disciples said to him, “Who are You, that You should say these things to us?” <Jesus said to them>, “You do not realize who I am from what I say to you, but you have become like the Jews, for they (either) love the tree and hate its fruit (or) love the fruit and hate the tree.”

[45] Jesus said, “Grapes are not harvested from thorns, nor are figs gathered from thistles, for they do not produce fruit.

A good man brings forth good from his storehouse; an evil man brings forth evil things from his evil storehouse, which is in his heart, and says evil things. For out of the abundance of the heart he brings forth evil things.”

[47] Jesus said, “It is impossible for a man to mount two horses or to stretch two bows. And it is impossible for a servant to serve two masters; otherwise, he will honor the one and treat the other contemptuously.

No man drinks old wine and immediately desires to drink new wine.

And new wine is not put into old wineskins, lest they burst; nor is old wine put into a new wineskin, lest it spoil it.

An old patch is not sewn onto a new garment, because a tear would result.”

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

[63] Jesus said, “There was a rich man who had much money. He said, ‘I shall put my money to use so that I may sow, reap, plant, and fill my storehouse with produce, with the result that I shall lack nothing.’ Such were his intentions, but that same night he died. Let him who has ears hear.”

[64] Jesus said, “A man had received visitors. And when he had prepared the dinner, he sent his servant to invite the guests. He went to the first one and said to him, ‘My master invites you.’ He said, ‘I have claims against some merchants. They are coming to me this evening. I must go and give them my orders. I ask to be excused from the dinner.’ He went to another and said to him, ‘My master has invited you.’ He said to him, ‘I have just bought a house and am required for the day. I shall not have any spare time.’ He went to another and said to him, ‘My master invites you.’ He said to him, ‘My friend is going to get married, and I am to prepare the banquet. I shall not be able to come. I ask to be excused from the dinner.’ He went to another and said to him, ‘My master invites you.’ He said to him, ‘I have just bought a farm, and I am on my way to collect the rent. I shall not be able to come. I ask to be excused.’ The servant returned and said to his master, ‘Those whom you invited to the dinner have asked to be excused.’ The master said to his servant, ‘Go outside to the streets and bring back those whom you happen to meet, so that they may dine.’ Businessmen and merchants will not enter the Places of my Father.”

[65] He said, “There was a good man who owned a vineyard. He leased it to tenant farmers so that they might work it and he might collect the produce from them. He sent his servant so that the tenants might give him the produce of the vineyard. They seized his servant and beat him, all but killing him. The servant went back and told his master. The master said, ‘Perhaps <they> did not recognize <him>.’ He sent another servant. The tenants beat this one as well. Then the owner sent his son and said, ‘Perhaps they will show respect to my son.’ Because the tenants knew that it was he who was the heir to the vineyard, they seized him and killed him. Let him who has ears hear.”

[72] [A man said] to Him, “Tell my brothers to divide my father’s possessions with me.” He said to him, “O man, who has made Me a divider?” He turned to his disciples and said to them, “I am not a divider, am I?”

[75] Jesus said, “Many are standing at the door, but it is the solitary who will enter the bridal chamber.”

[76] Jesus said, “The Kingdom of the Father is like a merchant who had a consignment of merchandise and who discovered a pearl. That merchant was shrewd. He sold the merchandise and bought the pearl alone for himself. You too, seek his unfailing and enduring treasure where no moth comes near to devour and no worm destroys.”

[89] Jesus said, “why do you wash the outside of the cup? Do you not realize that he who made the inside is the same one who made the outside?”

[96] Jesus [said], “The Kingdom of the Father is like a certain woman. She took a little leaven, [concealed] it in some dough, and made it into large loaves. Let him who has ears hear.”

[97] Jesus said, “The Kingdom of the [Father] is like a certain woman who was carrying a jar full of meal. While she was walking [on] a road, still some distance from home, the handle of the jar broke and the meal emptied out behind her on the road. She did not realize it; she had noticed no accident. When she reached her house, she set the jar down and found it empty.”

[98] Jesus said, “The Kingdom of the Father is like a certain man who wanted to kill a powerful man. In his own house he drew his sword and stuck it into the wall in order to find out whether his hand could carry through. Then he slew the powerful man.”

[103] Jesus said, “Fortunate is the man who knows where the brigands will enter, so that he may get up, muster his domain, and arm himself before they invade.”

[104] They said [to Jesus], “Come, let us pray today, and let us fast.” Jesus said, “What is the sin that I have committed, or wherein have I been defeated? But when the bridegroom leaves the bridal chamber, then let them fast and pray.”

[107] Jesus said, “The Kingdom is like a shepherd who had a hundred sheep. One of them, the largest, went astray. He left the ninety-nine and looked for that one until he found it. When he had gone to such trouble, he said to the sheep, ‘I care for you more than the ninety-nine.’”

[109] Jesus said, “The Kingdom is like a man who had a [hidden] treasure in his field without knowing it. And [after] he died, he left it to his son. The son did not know (about the treasure). He inherited the field and sold [it]. And the one who bought it went plowing and found the treasure. He began to lend money at interest to whomever he wished.”

Sayings from the Gospel of the Nazarenes.

... it (the Gospel of the Nazarenes) told of three servants, one who devoured his master's substance with harlots and flute-girls, another who multiplied it by trading, and another who hid the talent; and made the one to be accepted, another only rebuked, and another to be shut up in prison. [Eusebius commenting on the lost Gospel of the Nazarenes in his book *Theophany*. M.R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1924), p.3.