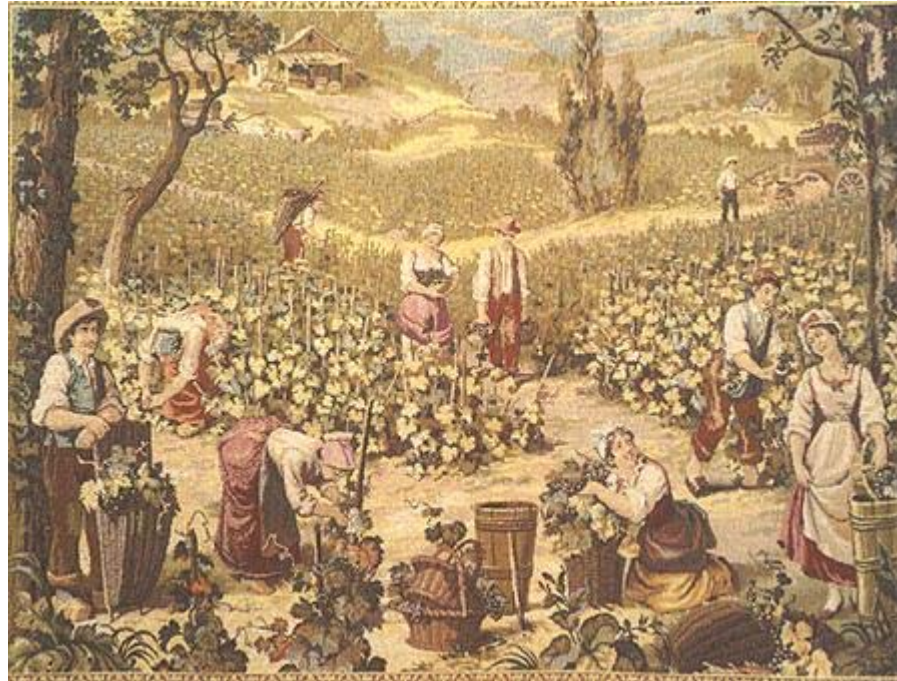


The Parable of the Wicked Tenants



**Adult Sunday School Track 1
RCRC May 25th, 2008**

Outline

- **The Parable of the Wicked Tenants in isolation**
- **The parable retells Isaiah's Parable of the Vineyard**
- **The parable clarifies Jesus' motive for cleansing the Temple**

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- **The Parable of the Wicked Tenants in isolation**
 - **Realism in the parable**
 - **Jesus' technique**
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Egyptian papyri support the realism of the scenario in the parable

- The tenants plan to inherit the vineyard by killing the son. *Is this realistic?*
- Three papyri have been found which show¹:
 - **Evidence of tenant farmers:** A contract between an absentee landlord and tenants in which they work the land and give him the proceeds independent of the quality of the harvest
 - **Evidence of raiders:** Seizure of land by others who drove the rightful tenants away. The law upheld reclaiming of the land for the landlord
 - **Justice didn't always prevail:** A lawsuit made by an absentee landlord who lost his land in a similar unlawful seizure. The landlord was blind and had only his mother, so was unable to exact justice himself. In addition, he is the subject of extortion by the local tax gatherer.

“Information from other historical sources... has shown that possession was more than nine-tenths of the law of ownership in ancient disputes of this nature... The tenants could have interpreted the sending of the son as a sign that the master had died, thus provoking them to try to kill the one who they would have believed was the sole remaining heir.”²

¹ PHEME PERKINS, *Hearing the Parables of Jesus* (Paulist, 1981), pp. 186-189.

² CRAIG BLOMBERG, *Interpreting the Parables* (IVP, 1990).

Others think Jesus deliberately chose an *unrealistic* scenario

“No law would have granted the vineyard to tenants who had murdered the son; though it might have fallen to them had the landowner been deceased, had no other heirs claimed it, and they had been innocent, the deaths would surely be investigated.

The tenants’ appeal to any inheritance laws is absurd in view of their illegal behavior, and neither in Matthew nor Mark do the tenants seek to gain *legal* possession of the vineyard.”¹

The meaning of the parable does not hang on determination of its realism.

¹ Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans, 1999), p. 513.

Jesus' technique deliberately uses the chief priests' and Pharisees' indignation to accuse them

- Other parables which *covertly* turn the hearers' own judgment against themselves:
 - **The Unmerciful Servant** (Mt 18:23-35), answering Peter's question of how many times we need to forgive
 - **The Two Sons** (Mt 21:28-35)—which condemned the chief priests and Pharisees for not repenting as the “tax collectors and prostitutes” had (Mt 21:31)
 - **The Two Debtors** (Lk 7:36-50)—against Simon the Pharisee who grumbled when the women anointed Jesus with perfume
 - **The Good Samaritan** (Lk 10:29-37)—against the expert in the Law who sought to justify himself in Jesus' eyes by asking who his neighbor was
 - **Nathan's parable of the Shepherd** (2 Sam 12:1-10)—against David's murder of Uriah
- Only the Wicked Tenants, and the Two Sons (which immediately precedes it) deliver their message with such bluntness.

Jesus violates his own standard parable practice with dangerous and unusually blunt clarity

- Previously Jesus had used parables as a way to deliver a message in a covert or veiled form:

“The disciples came to him and asked, ‘Why do you speak to the people in parables?’ He replied, “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables: ‘Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.’” (Mt 13:10-13)

“Someone who is telling strangely familiar stories and *meaning the wrong things by them* will land up in trouble... It is as though someone, claiming to represent the real hope for Polish Roman Catholics at a time of foreign domination, were to tell a short story in which, cryptically and symbolically, the figure of Mary was quietly downgraded or set aside. If people really understood what was being said, a lynching would always be on the cards.”¹

- Now Jesus drops all subtlety, transparently accusing the Jewish leaders in a way they wouldn't miss (Mt 21:45).

¹ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 179.

Why did Jesus accuse the Jewish leaders?

- Jesus accuses the chief priests and Pharisees of
 - something they have done (not yield the fruit, kill the servants)
 - and something they haven't done (kill the son)
- **Q: What does Jesus hope to gain by pointedly accusing, and even provoking them?**
- Are the motives of the tenants the same as those of the religious leaders?

“Many object that the Jewish leaders did not recognize Jesus and did not desire to kill Messiah and usurp his place (v. 38). But these objections miss the mark; they run the danger of making the details of the parable run on all fours. Matthew does not take no tolerant a view as some modern scholars do of the way the Jewish leaders discharged their responsibility. Elsewhere he shows (23:37) their fundamental unwillingness to come to terms with Jesus' identity and claims because they did not want to bow to his authority. True, their attitude was not, according to the synoptic record, 'This is the Messiah: come, let us kill him'; yet, in the light of the Scriptures, their rejection of him was no less culpable than if it had been that.”¹
- **Q: Is Carson just weaseling out of a tight spot or is his reasoning sound?**

¹ D. A. Carson, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8 (Zondervan, 1984), p. 453.

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Jesus' parable of the Wicked Tenants retells Isaiah's parable of the Vineyard

- Isaiah 5 contains a parable condemning Judah for not bearing the fruit of repentance.
- **Q: Read Isaiah 5. How does Isaiah's parable differ from Jesus'? Who is rebuked, and why, in each parable?**
- **Q: In Isaiah's parable, what does God do to punish the vineyard? How about in the Wicked Tenants?**

This parable breaks open the world view supported by the Jewish rulers

- **N. T. Wright summarizes the parable as follows:**
 - **“Jesus is claiming to be developing a story already used by Isaiah;**
 - **“the present moment is the moment of crisis, the end of exile;**
 - **“behind the covenant stands a god who cannot be blackmailed by its supposed terms;**
 - **“Israel was made for YHWH’s will and not vice-versa, since he is after all the creator who called her into being in the first place;**
 - **“he will return to his vineyard, to judge its wicked tenants.”**
- **“The parable, allegory and all, functions as an urgent summons which attempts to break open the worldview of the present tenants and replace it with a new one. Such parables are Israel’s story-in-miniature, Jesus’ telling of the Israel-story in order to undermine the present way of understanding the nation’s identity.”**

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 - **The Biblical context**
 - **Isaiah and the Temple**
 - **Psalm 118 and the Temple**

The literary (biblical) context is similar in all three synoptic Gospels

- The parable of the Wicked Tenants appears in all three synoptic gospels
 - Each has a similar context: Jesus' confrontation of the Jewish authorities
 - Triumphal entry
 - Cleansing the Temple
 - Cursing the fig tree (Mt and Mk)
 - The religious leaders question Jesus' authority
 - The parable of the two sons (Mt only)
 - **The parable of the Wicked Tenants**
 - The parable of the Wedding Banquet (Mt only)
- } 3 parables condemning the Jewish leaders
- This parable always accompanies the cleansing of the Temple

Popular Jewish understanding of Isaiah's parable of the Vineyard tied it to the Temple

By Jesus' time, interpretation of Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard had come to involve the first Temple:

“The significance of this parable for Mark's theology is appreciated when the Jewish interpretation of Isaiah's song of the vineyard is clarified. At some point in time subsequent to the Babylonian exile... Isaiah 5:1-7 came to be understood as a prediction of the temple's destruction. This fact is evident by the reading of Targum Isaiah 5:2, 5:

‘And I sanctified them and honored them, and established them like the plant of a chosen vine; and I built my sanctuary among them; yea, I gave them my altar to make atonement for their sins... I will take away my *shekinah* from them, and they shall be for a spoil; I will break down their sanctuaries, and they shall be for a trampling.’

The specification of the ‘tower’ and ‘wine vat’ with temple and altar, retrospectively, is made explicit in Tosefta.”¹

¹ Craig A. Evans, *Biblische Zeitschrift*, 28, pp. 82-86; cf. Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, p. 248.

Psalm 118, quoted by Jesus after the parable, was intimately tied to the Temple

- In each of the synoptics (and even the stripped-down version in the Gospel of Thomas 65), Jesus follows the Wicked Tenants with a quote from Ps 118
- This psalm, particularly vv. 19-27, was designed to be sung by pilgrims going to the Temple, and would have been sung at each of the major festivals (along with Ps 113-117, together called the *Hallel*)
- In fact, the words from this psalm are shouted by the enthusiastic crowd at Jesus' triumphal entry (see Mt 21:9; cf. Ps 118:25-26):

Ps 118:25-26: "O LORD, save us; O LORD, grant us success. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD."

Mt 21:9: "The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!'"

- The *Hallel* is probably also is probably what Jesus and his disciples sang after the last supper (Mt 26:30).

This guaranteed that Jesus' parable would be remembered even after his crucifixion, at every major Jewish festival!

Jesus only says “have you never read” when pointing to himself

- Jesus prefaces his Ps 118 quote with “have you never read...” (Mt 21:42)
- In the NT, only Jesus asks ‘Have you never read?’:
 - **Picking corn on the Sabbath** (Mt 12:3)—“Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?”
 - **Jesus supplants Moses** (Mt 19:4)— “Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female’” (contrasting Jesus and Moses)
 - **The children chant *Hosanna* after he cleanses the Temple** (Mt 21:16)— “Do you hear what these children are saying?” they asked him.

“Yes,” replied Jesus, “have you never read, “From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise’?”
- “In each case he is saying, in effect, that the Scriptures point to him” (Don Carson, *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*)

“You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.” (Jn 5:39-40)

Psalm 118 was further connected to the Son, by a Hebrew pun

- “It was easy for Semitic people to move from the idea of ‘son’ [in the Wicked Tenants] to ‘stone’ [in Jesus’ quote of Ps 118]. For in Hebrew, *ben* means ‘son’ and *eben* means ‘stone’, and they loved plays on words. Interestingly enough, the targum (Aramaic commentary) on Ps 118:22 reads: ‘The *son* which the builders rejected...’, and that was certainly not influenced by Christian exposition! This made the passage congenial to Christians expounding the Old Testament, and rather difficult for those who were not Christians to repudiate, since their own exegetes interpreted it in the same way!”¹
- **The rabbis had the custom of referring to themselves as the “builders”**
- “...The cornerstone or topstone to which Jesus refers is part of the architecture of the temple.” [Keener]

¹Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew* (IVP, 2000), p. 239.

Jesus' stumbling-block reference in Luke points to himself as the Messiah

- In Luke 20:18 Jesus follows his Ps 118 quote with another important reference:
“Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.”
- This uses the imagery of Isaiah 8:14, which speaks of *God himself* becoming:
“...a sanctuary; but for both houses of Israel he will be a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall. And for the people of Jerusalem he will be a trap and a snare.”
- This symbol also appears in Daniel's dream interpretation (Dan 2:34-35, 44-45):
“While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. [2:34]
“In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever.” [2:44]
- “The passage was regularly interpreted, from at least as early as the first century, to refer to the Messiah, and to the kingdom that would be set up through him...
Not only does the 'stone' speak of the Messiah and the eschatological Temple; it also refers to the victory of this Messiah over the kingdoms that have oppressed the people of YHWH.” (N. T. Wright, p. 501.)

Jesus' intricate Scripture references all point back to the Temple and the Messiah

- As in the popular understanding of Isaiah 5, Jesus is retelling a parable which predicted the Temple's destruction
- Psalm 118 is a psalm of ascension to the Temple—where the pilgrims flooding into Jerusalem were all heading for Passover
- The “rejected stone” in the quote from Psalm 118 was also interpreted as the “rejected son,” tying it to the son in his parable, the Son of the Father
- The “stumbling block” reference to Isaiah 8:14 and Daniel 2 alludes to God's being a stumbling block for Israel, and to the Messianic defeat of the kingdoms

“The spoken parable provided the larger narrative framework, drawing on Israel's prophetic tradition and claiming to bring that tradition to its climax, within which the acted parable [of the Temple cleansing] made sense. The parable thus explained Jesus' action... His Temple-action was a messianic act of judgment.” (N. T. Wright, p. 498)

- **Q: How do you see the Wicked Tenants as paralleling—or even explaining—Jesus' cleansing of the Temple? Why is Jesus deliberately drawing so many connections to the Temple? In what way does this parable indicate that the cleansing was *about more than just corrupt money changers* (a rationale which the Gospels never state)?**

The tenants are guilty of withholding the fruits of the vineyard

- On the topic of the criminally negligent leaders, Craig Keener writes

“Matthew also uses this threat from Jesus’ day as a warning for Christian leaders in Matthew’s day (24:45-51) [in the Parable of the Wicked Servants]. The church and many of its leaders who readily condemn Israel’s behavior have repeated Israel’s frequent disobedience often enough in history and to a great extent continue to do so today; many ministers regard the church as ‘their’ field of ministry, rather than keeping in mind who their Lord is.”
- **Q: Discuss the culpability of leaders for the repentance of their flocks, at the local and denominational level. Which leaders today are doing a good job and which aren’t? What successes and failures have you seen?**