

## The Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Mt 21:33-46; Mk 12:1-12; Lk 20:9-19)

### BACKGROUND

*Introduction:* The parable of the Wicked Tenants is unusual for the complexity of its connections with other passages, particularly Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard (Is 5:1-7), and Ps 118, which Jesus quotes immediately after telling the parable (see Fig. 1). Read by itself this parable is correctly seen as a condemnation of the religious leadership (see Questions 1 and 2). When these connections are added, they reveal that the Temple—both its cleansing in Mt 21:12-13 and its destruction in 70 AD—*also* lies at the heart of this passage. This shows how the parable is an even more organic part of its context in Mt 21 (and parallel passages). The Temple connections would likely have been obvious to a first-century Jewish listener.

Additional background information is also provided below regarding the realism of the parable's story line, as well as Jesus' rhetorical techniques.

- *Literary Context:* The Wicked Tenants appears in all the synoptics. Each has a similar literary context: triumphal entry; cleansing of 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 conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders has reached its climax with the cleansing of the Temple (a, if not the, main reason why the leaders had Jesus killed), and Jesus brings the leaders face to face with their disobedience. In Mt this takes the form of three parables: the Two Sons, the Wicked Tenants and the Wedding Banquet. Each deals with the removal or replacement of the Jewish leaders and perhaps also the later incorporation of Gentiles into the Church.
- 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 son of the vineyard is clarified. At some point in time subsequent to the Babylonian exile... Isa 5:1-7 came to be understood as a prediction of the temple's destruction. This fact is evident by the reading of Targum Isa 5:2, 5:

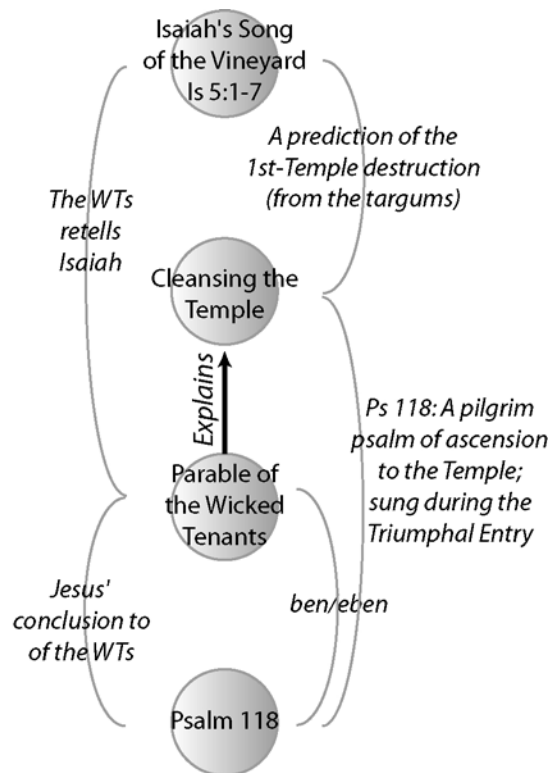


Fig. 1: Connections between these four passages demonstrate the parallel between the Wicked Tenants and the Temple cleansing.

‘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 specific identification of the ‘tower’ and ‘wine vat’ with temple and altar, respectively, is made explicit in Tosefta.<sup>1</sup>

- *Psalm 118*: In each of the synoptics (and even the stripped-down version in 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, words from this psalm are shouted by the enthusiastic crowd at Jesus’ triumphal entry (see Mt 21:9, cf. Ps 118:25-26), and the Hallel is probably what Jesus and his disciples sang after the last supper (Mt 26:30). Note that that Jesus’ lesson here would be remembered even after his crucifixion, at every major festival where Ps 118 was sung.
- *The Rejected Son*: “It was easy for Semitic people to move from the idea of ‘son’ [in the Wicked Tenants]... to ‘stone’ [in Jesus’ quote from 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!”<sup>2</sup> Note also that the rabbis had the custom of referring to themselves as the ‘builders’ (*DJG*, p. 583).
- There is additional connection between this passage and Daniel: Lk 20:18 and Mt 21:44 refer to a stumbling block which will crush any on whom it falls. This is from Isaiah, 8:14, and calls to mind Dan 2:34-35, 44-45, where a new kingdom will emerge which crushes all others. Here, however, Jesus, not Israel, is symbolized by the stone (cf. Mt 2:15 for Jesus as recapitulating Israel).
- *Further Antecedents*: The Wicked Tenants is a retelling of Isaiah’s Song of the Vineyard, Is 5:1-7, in which Judah is condemned for its injustice. While the most famous, this wasn’t the only vineyard parable:

An anonymous parable in Sifre Deut. 312 compares God’s provision of the land for the patriarchs to a king who leases a field to renters who rob their owner so that he finally retakes possession of the field and gives it to his son. The renters are then compared to Abraham and Isaac who were indirectly responsible for the evil of their sons Ishmael and Esau. With a selective memory, the parable concludes, ‘When Jacob came along, no chaff came forth from him. All the sons that were born to him were proper people, as it is said, ‘And Jacob was a perfect man, dwelling in tents’ (Gen 25:27)’ (Blomberg, p. 250).<sup>3</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Craig A. Evans, *Biblische Zeitschrift*, 28, pp. 82-86; cited in Blomberg, *ibid.*, p. 248, footnote 101. See also *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, p. 583.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew* (IVP, 2000), p. 229.

<sup>3</sup> In Eccl. Rab. 5:10.2, imagery similar to that in the Wicked Tenants is used in a much different fashion—where the need for tenants in a field is compared to the need for the soul to be united to a body (Blomberg, p. 250, f.n. 107).

- *Realism*: Pheme Perkins<sup>4</sup> describes three Egyptian papyri which, if taken as typical, support the realism of the scenario in this parable:
  - A contract made between an absentee landlord and tenants in which they work the land in and give him proceeds at a specified or regular time, independent of the quality of the harvest;
  - A second papyrus describing the seizure of some land by others who drove the tenants away; the law upheld reclaiming of the land for the landlord;
  - A third papyrus describing a lawsuit made by an absentee landlord who lost his land in a similar unlawful seizure. In this case he is blind and has only his mother as his ally, so he is in no condition to exact justice on his own terms. In addition, he is the subject of extortion by the local tax gatherer.
- Blomberg (p. 249) concludes that the parable is realistic: “Information from other historical sources, especially the papyri, has shown that possession was more than nine-tenths of the law of ownership in ancient disputes of this nature.” Blomberg adds, “...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.”
- Regarding the tenants’ final decision to murder the son, Keener<sup>5</sup>, disagrees: “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 had they 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.”
- *Parable Methodology*: “In the NT, only Jesus asks, ‘Have you never read?’ (Mt 12:3; 19:4; 21:16; Mk 12:10); and in each case he is saying, in effect, that the Scriptures point to him (Jn 5:39-40).”<sup>6</sup>
- The Wicked Tenants (as well as Is 5:1-7) is referred to as a “juridical parable,” one which “operates covertly to bring about the hearers’ own judgment against themselves” (Evans, *ibid.*). Other parables in this style include Mt 18:23-35 (the Unmerciful Servant), Mt 21:28-35 (the Two Sons), Lk 7:36-50 (the Two Debtors), Lk 10:29-37 (the Good Samaritan).

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<sup>4</sup> *Hearing the Parables of Jesus* (Paulist, 1981), pp. 186-189, as cited in Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (IVP, 1990), p. 250, footnote 106.

<sup>5</sup> Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans, 1999), p. 513.

<sup>6</sup> D. A. Carson, *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8 (Zondervan, 1984), p. 453.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Read Mt 21:28-32, the parable of the Two Sons. Of this, Michael Green writes<sup>7</sup>:

A couple of details are worth noticing. The first hints at the degeneracy of Israel, which he leaders were called to rectify, but about which they did nothing. While it is true that Israel is often seen under the figure of the vine in the Old Testament, it is also the case that when she is so described there is generally an allusion to her degeneracy. [E.g. Ps 80; Is 5; Jer 2:21; Ezek 15:1-8; 19:10; Hos 10:1-15; cf. 2 Esdras 5:23-30.] Israel's state is parlous. The priests and leaders are called to work, but they have declined, and their disobedience is heinous.

Do you agree with Green that Jesus is holding the religious leaders accountable for the spiritual state of those in their care?

2. Read Is 5:1-7. How does Isaiah's parable differ from Jesus'? Who's rebuked in each, and for what?
3. The parable (arguably) accuses the religious leaders of unrepentance, and even predicts their killing Jesus for bearing this and other messages. Given its content, why does Jesus tell them this parable? (Similarly, why does the landlord send his son—and how does this fit in with your favorite theory of the atonement?)
4. Commentators generally agree that this parable is transparently allegorical. Differing from others (Carson, Blomberg, Keener, et al.) in his interpretation, Gardner writes<sup>8</sup>

...the parable as it appears in both Mark and Matthew depicts Jesus as the Son of God sent to God's covenant people (the tenants), but who is violently rejected by those to whom the covenant (the vineyard) was entrusted. As a sequel to the preceding parable in verses 28-32, the story tells us that Jesus fared no better than John the Baptist.

What factors stand for and against Gardner's interpretation? What other identification can you think of for the vineyard and the tenants? (Cf. v. 45.<sup>9</sup>)

5. Regarding the tenants' motive for murdering the son, D. A. Carson writes,<sup>10</sup>

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 so 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 (see also on 21:23-27) 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.

Is Carson just weaseling out of a tight spot, or is his reasoning sound?

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 226. This theme appears again in the Wicked Tenants.

<sup>8</sup> Richard B. Gardner, *Matthew* (Herald, Waterloo, 1991), p. 320. Michael Green sees it as meaning Israel will be replaced by a mixed Jewish-Gentile Church (ibid., p. 228). Keener writes, "But the text is perfectly intelligible without this shift, and Jesus offered no hints in his narrative to suggest to his audience that they needed to abandon their traditional association of the vineyard with Israel [as in Is 5]... though nothing precludes such an application at a later date" (ibid., p. 248).

<sup>9</sup> Note that in v. 43, the Greek *ethnei* (ἔθνη), is singular, and should be translated "a nation"; Don't be tempted to see it as "the nations", idiomatic for "the Gentiles".

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 453.

6. As we saw above, various elements tie the Wicked Tenants to Jesus' cleansing of the Temple. Of this, N. T. Wright writes,<sup>11</sup>

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 made sense. The parable thus explained Jesus' action... His Temple-action was a messianic act of judgment.

How do you see the Wicked Tenants (and the other two parables of judgment in Mt 21:28-22:14) paralleling Jesus' actions in the Temple?

7. Back on the topic of criminally negligent leaders, Keener writes,<sup>12</sup>

Matthew also uses this threat from Jesus' day as a warning for Christian leaders in Matthew's day (24:45-51). 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.

Discuss the culpability of leaders for the repentance of their flocks, at the local and national level. Which leaders are doing a good job and which aren't? What successes and failures have you seen?

8. In Ps 118 the rejected stone was Israel. Jesus reinterprets the stone as himself.<sup>13</sup> What is the new Temple of which he is the capstone? (See 1 Pet 2:6-10; Acts 4:9-12; 1 Cor 3:16; Eph 2:21.) What is the "nation" in Mt 21:43? (See Ex 19:5-6 and again 1 Pet 2:6-10.)

9. A source critic looks for influences due to, for instance audience:

Matthew:	Thought to be written to convince a Jewish reader Jesus is the Messiah
Mark:	Evidently written for a Gentile reader, likely the persecuted Roman church
Luke:	Written to attract converts from cultured Greek readers like Theophilus

With these audiences in view, speculate freely and easily on: Why Matthew is the only synoptic to include 21:43; Why only Matthew includes the *stoning* of one of the servants (21:35); Why the synoptics differ on whether the son was cast out then killer or vice versa (Mt 21:39; Mk 12:8; Lk 20:15). Can you think of any good reason why Luke's version has the quote apparently from Is 8:14 (Lk 20:18; see also Dan 2:34-35, 44-45; Rom 9:33; 1 Pet 2:8)?

10. Following Blomberg's proposal that each main character in the parable be associated with a sub-point, what points would you associate with the owner, the wicked tenants, and the replacements?
11. Given the tendency of the church to become like its surrounding culture, is failure of the leadership inevitable for a given institution? (For extra credit, give examples.)



*Fun fact:* Chrysostom, writing about the Wicked Tenants parable, draws many conclusions, including, "It is now clear that the God of both the New and the Old Testaments is one and the same" (*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, vol. Ib, *Matthew 14-28*).

<sup>11</sup> *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Fortress, 1997), p. 498.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 511.

<sup>13</sup> A standard technique called *peshet*; cf. Helyer, *Exploring Jewish Literature of the Second Temple Period* (IVP, 2002), p. 240.

# THE WICKED TENANTS

Matt. 21:33-46

33 "Hear another parable. There was a householder who planted a vineyard, and set a hedge around it, and dug a wine press in it, and built a tower, and let it out to tenants, and went into another country.

34 When the season of fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants, to get his fruit;

35 and the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.

36 Again he sent other servants more than the first; and they did the same to them.

37 Afterward he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' 38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.'

39 And they took him and cast him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40 When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' 41 They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.' 42 Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures:

'The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?'

43 Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it."

45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them.

46 But when they tried to arrest him, they feared the multitudes, because they held him to be a prophet.

Cf. 22:22 (§ 206, p. 145)

Mark 12:1-12

1 And he began to speak to them in parables. "A man planted a vineyard, and set a hedge around it, and dug a pit for the wine press, and built a tower, and let it out to tenants, and went into another country.

2 When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard.

3 And they took him and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed.

4 Again he sent to them another servant, and they wounded him in the head, and treated him shamefully.

5 And he sent another, and him they killed; and so with many others, some they beat and some they killed. 6 He had still one other, a beloved son; finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' 7 But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' 8 And they took him and killed him, and cast him out of the vineyard.

9 What will the owner of the vineyard do?

He will come and destroy the tenants, and give the vineyard to others.

10 Have you not read this scripture:

'The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner;

11 this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?'

12 And they tried to arrest him, but feared the multitude, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them; so they left him and went away.

Luke 20:9-19

9 And he began to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard,

[DETAILS OMITTED]

and let it out to tenants, and went into another country for a long while. 10 When the time came,

he sent a servant to the tenants, that they should give him some of the fruit of the vineyard; but the tenants

beat him, and sent him away empty-handed.

11 And he sent another servant; him also they beat and treated shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed.

12 And he sent yet a third; this one they wounded and cast out.

13 Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; it may be they will respect him.' 14 But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; let us kill him, that the inheritance may be ours.'

15 And they cast him out of the vineyard and killed him.

What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them?

16 He will come and destroy those tenants, and give the vineyard to others."

When they heard this, they said, "God forbid!" 17 But he looked at them and said, "What then is this that is written:

'The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner?'

[Lk omits quote of Ps 118:23]

18 Every one who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; but when it falls on any one it will crush him."

19 The scribes and the chief priests tried to lay hands on him at that very hour, but they feared the people; for they perceived that he had told this parable against them.

} treatment of servants

Cf. Is 8:14; also Dan 2:34-35 2:44-4.