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The Parables of the Kingdom of God

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Danielle Brin Reist

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The Kingdom is the theme around which much of the sayings attributed to Jesus are centered. In spite of the centrality of this message the nuances of the nature of Kingdom according to Jesus and his followers is anything but clear. Many attempts to understand the nature of the Kingdom have been made with widely varying results. This paper will be yet another attempt to understand what the historical Jesus may have meant when he spoke of the Kingdom. In particular I will be examining parables attributed to Jesus that are relevant to the idea of Kingdom. However before any exegesis can begin it is important to understand the history of scholarship on the topic. In the brief survey of a variety of opinions that have been put forth that follows my aim is to not only review the history of scholarship on the subject, but also illustrate the variety of issues one encounters when attempting to think critically about the Kingdom as Jesus spoke of it. The differences of opinion that scholars have had over the nature of the Kingdom should serve to bring to light the difficulties a project of this nature will encounter.

Bruce Chilton describes the Kingdom of God as eschatological, or future oriented, not apocalyptic.¹ More specifically Chilton argues that while it is true that there is an eschatological nature to the Kingdom it, "stems from Jesus' view of God, not from a particular (apocalyptic) expectation for the future."² Chilton sees Jesus' view of God as stemming from an understanding of the Kingdom as something that expresses God's activity in the world. This points to a certain view of the Kingdom in which Chilton believes the significance of the Kingdom of God is that "God makes his realm ours."³ Chilton articulates a view of the Kingdom of God which he defines as having five coordinates; eschatological, transcendence, radiance,

¹ Bruce Chilton, *Pure Kingdom: Jesus' Vision of God* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 60.

² Chilton, 11.

³ Chilton, 10.

purity, and judgment. These coordinates make up a view of the Kingdom which while future oriented rejects notions of a particular apocalyptic timetable. In this understanding of the Kingdom God's actions in the world are what make up the Kingdom and this Kingdom-making can be seen in the here and now and in everyday activities as well as in the future.

Norman Perrin believes that the key to understanding the Kingdom of God as Jesus used it is to see it not as an idea or conception, but as a tensive symbol.⁴ A tensive symbol is a symbol that does not have a one to one relationship with the thing or idea it is representing. Instead a tensive symbol evokes a myriad of associations. Once the Kingdom is understood as a tensive symbol Perrin believes that questions about the present or future nature of the Kingdom are irrelevant. Instead the question becomes what image Jesus is trying to evoke when using the tensive symbol of Kingdom? This view of the Kingdom equates the coming of the Kingdom with the personal experience of God's divine action within the world. The believer experiences the activity of God, and thus the Kingdom, by the everyday experience of the divine.

J. C. O'Neill has a different kind of understand of the Kingdom of God. He recognizes that the phrase Kingdom of God is more correctly read as God's reign or God's rule, but he asserts that this rule must be a tangible rule over physical space and people. He writes, "the right to reign is the right to reign over a designate realm. The word group always refers to kingly power that is effective, and the effectiveness of the power is always thought of as power over land and subjects," furthermore scripture follows a consistent pattern in which, "god has absolute sway in heaven. He should have absolute sway also on earth."⁵ This view understands the Kingdom as a future, earthly Kingdom in which God will literally reign over the entire world

⁴ Norman Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom: Symbol and Metaphor in New Testament Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), 1976.

⁵ J. C. O'Neill, "The Kingdom of God," *Novum Testamentum*, 32(1993): 131-33.

as king. The parables of the Kingdom then serve the purpose of illustrating how people should behave in order to be sure that they may enter the Kingdom when it arrives.⁶

Yet another important view about the nature of the Kingdom is articulated by E.P. Sanders. According to Sanders Jesus' message about the Kingdom is largely consistent with Jewish eschatological, or end times, expectation of the restoration of Israel. He saw the Kingdom as coming to full fruition in the near future. This Kingdom would be an earthly Kingdom achieved not by political or military power but by divine intervention. It would have familiar structures like a temple and a king, but it would be new and different in that it would bring about a new social order in which sinners and the wicked had a place. As a result of the resurrection the expectation of Jesus' disciples switched from an earthly Kingdom to a heavenly Kingdom. Jesus saw his own mission in the light of what John the Baptist had already done and thus did not emphasize a time of national judgment as might be expected. Sanders rejects the idea that Jesus or his message was unique in any sort of significant way. The phenomenon of Christianity, according to Sanders, is to be attributed to the idea of the resurrection which sustained a group of followers who otherwise would have scattered after their Messiah was crucified.⁷

Charles Dodd has voiced the view that falls most in line with what the average believer is likely to understand the nature of the Kingdom as. Dodd argues that, "in the earliest tradition Jesus was understood to have proclaimed that the Kingdom of God, the hope of many generations, had at last come. It is not merely imminent; it is here."⁸ This understanding uses similar evidence to position that Jesus and his followers expected that the Kingdom was coming soon, but it understands the nature of the Kingdom differently. Whereas others believe that

⁶ O'Neill, 136.

⁷ E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

⁸ C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), 33.

Jesus' anticipated Kingdom would soon usher in a new earthly and heavenly order, an apparently incorrect prediction, Dodd believes that the new order had arrived in a less dramatic, but no less effective form with Jesus' ministry. The parables of the Kingdom are from this viewpoint to be understood as examples of the Kingdom already at work.

Robert Funk describes parables of the Kingdom as metaphors that use everyday objects or examples and leave the meaning of the parable open ended in order to force the reader to make their own understanding. However, for Funk parables of the Kingdom are not riddles to be solved or Jesus attempting to keep the meaning mysterious. Instead the parable creates, "the juxtaposition of two discrete and not entirely comparable entities, [which] produces and impacts upon the imagination and induces a vision of that which cannot be conveyed by prosaic or discursive speech."⁹ The argument here is that the parables of the Kingdom are not constructed as a way to hide meaning, but rather it is only by use of the parable as metaphor that the meaning is able to accurately be conveyed. Funk's ideas are interesting in that they invite a different perspective on the exegesis of parables. The idea that one should take the parable as a whole as essential to meaning rather than a means by which Jesus has obscured his true intentions is one which I wish to take seriously when considering the parables of the Kingdom.

In addition to the parables when thinking about Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God one of the primary passages that must be addressed is Mark 13. Jesus warns his disciples not to be lead astray by those who will come in his name. He speaks of earthquakes, famine, and wide spread violence which will proceed "the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends

⁹ Robert Walter Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and the Word of God* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1966), 136.

of the earth to the ends of heaven.”¹⁰ This paints a clear picture of radical divine action which will result in a new heavenly and earthly order. This would not be so problematic if it were not for Mark 13:30-31 which reads, “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” It would seem that Jesus understands that the coming of the Kingdom of God will come in a decisive moment which will take place in the near future, which from a modern day perspective clearly did not take place. There are now two options left. Either Jesus’ understanding of the Kingdom was mostly if not entirely future oriented or that the expectation was that the Kingdom would come in the very near future. When this does not happen it forces the concession that Jesus was wrong. The other option is to attempt to discover other clues about Jesus’ view of the Kingdom which negates or minimizes the attention paid to Mark 13. Chilton does just that arguing that this passage is rooted in a Jewish belief that there are those who never die, those like Enoch and Elijah who were taken to heaven before their physical bodies died.¹¹ The issue is further complicated by other sayings attributed to Jesus that seem to present a different, perhaps even a contradictory view of the Kingdom that is depicted in Mark 13. Luke 17: 20-21 says, “Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the Kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, ‘The Kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the Kingdom of God is among you.’” This passage gives a completely different view of the Kingdom. This Kingdom does not appear to be a physical Kingdom at all, instead it resides within the individual in the here and now.

¹⁰ This biblical quotation and all other biblical quotations are taken from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: Augmented Third Edition – New Revised Standard Version*, edited by Michael D. Coogan (New York, Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹¹ Chilton, 64.

So far I have used the variety of views of present in scholarship and what are termed the Kingdom sayings of Jesus to provide examples of different ideas for what the Kingdom of God means. Both the variety in scholastic opinion and the seemingly conflicted views offered by Jesus himself in Kingdom sayings serve to highlight just how uncertain the nature of the Kingdom according to the historical figure of Jesus. In order to further investigate Jesus' vision of the Kingdom I will be focusing on the parables of the Kingdom of God. There too can be found conflicting messages about the Kingdom, but I will attempt to use the wealth of teachings attributed to Jesus in the form of parables to bring a little more clarity to the question, what did Jesus mean when he spoke of the Kingdom.

With all of the previous history of interpretation of the Kingdom in mind I will be focusing my study on the Kingdom as it might have been understood by the historical Jesus on the parables of the Kingdom. Of those I will only deal with those that the scholar Norman Perrin lists as likely to be authentic.¹² I will not spend a great deal of time debating the merits of a parable's authenticity, but will rather give a brief overview of the parable and any relevant differences found in multiple versions of the parable. I am taking seriously B.B. Scott's assertion that, "Insight as a methodology entails responding to parables not simply as particulars, but as a group."¹³ In that that spirit, it is entirely likely that several of the parables discussed do not actually go back to the historical Jesus, but that when parables are examined both individually and thematically as a group, insight will hopefully arise. While many of my interpretations of each parable may not differ in any significant ways from previous attempts at scholarly exegesis, I am interested in suggesting one premise pertaining to parable interpretation. It has traditionally been proposed that the English term Kingdom of God is more correctly understood

¹² Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching Jesus*.

¹³ B.B. Scott, *Jesus, Symbol-Maker for the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 95.

as God's reign or God's rule as an active concept. This is in contrast to more territorial understanding of Kingdom.¹⁴ In the first view one might reasonably expect that a parable about the God's Kingdom would feature God as a character acting out this rule. It is through the lens of this proposal that I will be approaching the parables of the Kingdom in order to consider what the historical Jesus had in mind when he spoke of the Kingdom.

The Hidden Treasure and the Pearl

The parable of the Hidden Treasure appears in both Matthew and the Gospel of Thomas.¹⁵ In Matthew the Kingdom of heaven is compared to a treasure hidden in a field, which a man discovers and then sells all he has to acquire it. Immediately following the Kingdom of heaven is compared to a pearl merchant who finds a pearl of particularly great value and sells all that he had to obtain the single pearl. In Thomas the same parable appears to have been split up into two different parts. Thomas 109 is comparable with the first analogy in Matthew, whereas Thomas 76 corresponds to the second comparison. It seems likely that the Hidden Treasure and The Pearl were originally two different parables, as they are presented in Thomas, and were combined into one parable by Matthew. For now I will start with the portion of the parable concerned with the hidden treasure. In Matthew a man finds the treasure hidden in a field that is not his, he then buys the field so that he may have the treasure, presumably without telling the field's original owner about the treasure. In Thomas there is an added detail about the history of the field. It was originally owned by a man who was not aware of what lay hidden in his field. When he died the field passed to his son who sold it, also without knowing about the treasure. The man who bought the field from the son discovered the treasure that its

¹⁴ Gustaf Dalman, *The Words of Jesus Considered in the Light of Post-Biblical Jewish Writings* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), 94.

¹⁵ The Gospel of Thomas is an extra-canonical text that some believe provides an independent source for the sayings of Jesus and is thus useful for historical Jesus research.

previous owners had not, and according to Thomas he then “began to lend money to whomever he wished.”

There are valid arguments on both sides as to which version is most original. Jeremias believes Matthew, and its emphasis on the joy of discovering the treasure to be the most original.¹⁶ Others point to Thomas as the most original with the soundest evidence being that all of the parables of Matthew chapter 13 exist in Thomas and of those the parable of the Hidden Treasure is the only one with significant differences.¹⁷ Matthew tells us that man who found the treasure sold everything he had to acquire it as a result of his joy whereas the man in Thomas has a more curious reaction. No joy is mentioned, instead the man responds to his new-found wealth by lending money to anyone he wished. In Israel, like many places today, money lenders are not considered the most upstanding of citizens. It is therefore quite shocking that the Kingdom of God is being compared to a man who lends money. On one hand Matthew has the element of joy that that is generally regard as an authentic theme of the Kingdom parables. In its favor, Thomas has elements of surprise and shock, also motifs that appear in generally accepted authentic parables of the Kingdom.

While Thomas has the potentially unsavory detail of money lending, Matthew also has a possibly immoral detail. Matthew paints an image of a man walking through another man's field when he suddenly stumbles upon a treasure buried there. Matthew says that “someone found and hid” the treasure, so after discovering it, the man covers it back up, sells everything he has, and buys the field with the original owner being none the wiser. Today's careful reader might catch this and wonder at a man who while not exactly a liar, not exactly entire honest either, being compared to the Kingdom of God. The questions that need to be determined are,

¹⁶ Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), 198-201.

¹⁷ Charles W. Hendrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions: The Creative Voice of Jesus* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 128-29.

is this detail even authentic to the original parable and if it is authentic is it significant. I would argue that this detail is not in fact original. As I have previously discussed I presume that the Hidden Treasure and The Pearl originally were two distinct parables, as they are presented in Thomas, and that Matthew brought them together. In bringing together the two parables it is easily conceivable that Matthew's author altered one or both of the parables to make them fit better together. As discussed the two versions of the Hidden Treasure vary more than the Pearl, and thus I suggest that the author of Matthew altered the parable of the Hidden Treasure to make it more cohesive with that of the pearl. If that is true, than Matthew's description of the man finding the treasure, covering it back up, and then buying the field along with the treasure from its unaware owner makes sense. In Matthew's recounting of the pearl the merchant finds a pearl of great value, which currently belongs to someone else, then sells all he has, goes back to the pearl's owner and buys it. Perhaps the original owner knew how much it was worth, perhaps he did not. Either way, Matthew's hidden treasure and pearl now follow the same format, fitting nicely together.

In Thomas the Hidden treasure has a theme of surprise not present in Matthew. As I just discussed the buyer of the field in Matthew already knew the treasure was there when he bought the field. In Thomas the man bought the field without knowing about the treasure. As he is plowing his field he is surprised to discover the treasure. He did not have to sell all he had to acquire it, instead it was there waiting for him to discover it. This difference between Matthew and Thomas is crucial to examine, because it considerably alters the way the parable is interpreted. In Matthew the man who discovers the treasure is an active agent. He finds the treasure, covers it back up, and then immediately sells everything he has to buy the field and the treasure it contains. The message in Matthew seems quite straight forward and clear: one must forsake everything in order to enter in/participate in the Kingdom. The cost of the

Kingdom is great, but the joy that it brings compels those that find it to abandon all else. In Thomas the message is much harder to decipher. The finder of the treasure in Thomas did not have to give up anything to acquire the treasure; instead it seems that he was merely lucky in his choice of field to buy. However the parable takes the time to detail the history of ownership of the field, presumably this is not done without purpose. The reader is that the field passed from father to son, and that neither ever discovered the treasure hidden within their own field. This suggests that that the virtue of the man in Thomas, that which allowed him to obtain the treasure, is that he saw what others did not. The treasure was always there, waiting to be discovered, but it was overlooked until the main character of our parable discovered it. The final issue to deal with is the reaction of Thomas' treasure-finder, who became a money lender. It is difficult to know whether Jesus' audience would have been shocked at the man's lending of money or not. Either way the man's response to his treasure (the Kingdom) is to share it with others.

Without differentiating between which version is likely to be most original to the authentic words of Jesus there are two different, though not necessarily opposing meanings, to the parable of The Hidden Treasure. In Matthew the meaning is that Kingdom is like a precious treasure and that once found, one must give up everything in order to partake of it. In Thomas the Kingdom is there waiting for someone to discover it, and when they do they feel compelled to spread the word. However, as previously discussed, all the parables of Matthew 13 are paralleled in Thomas with the parable of The Hidden Treasure being the one that differs most significantly, this, considered alongside the fact that the Pearl and the Treasure were most likely combined by Matthew makes Thomas' Hidden Treasure the most likely to be authentic.

The parable of The Pearl is separate from The Hidden Treasure, but is thematically related. The differences in the accounts of Mathew and Thomas are much less significant than those in The Hidden Treasure. In both cases a merchant, whom Thomas calls “prudent” finds a pearl of great value which he sells his possessions to acquire. Matthew’s version ends there whereas Thomas tacks on the verse, “Do you also seek for the treasure which fails not, which endures, there where no moth comes near to devour and (where) no worm destroys.” This is clearly not originally to the parable as it would have been originally told. Here the author of Thomas is directly addressing his readers, essentially informing them of the meaning of the parable himself. While the message of each is essentially the same, the Kingdom necessitates a dramatic response like giving up what one has to obtain it; I would argue that Matthew’s version is closest to the original. Not only is there an inauthentic closing verse, but the addition of calling the merchant prudent seems have strategically added detail used to support the closing statement. However both Matthew and Thomas reflect the dramatic response that is necessary.

As only the valued object and its finder make up heart of the parables this pair of parables does not prove a good candidate for identifying a possible God character. The next question is then what do these two parables say about the nature of the Kingdom. Both the Hidden Treasure and The Pearl have a distinctly earthly quality to them. An extraordinary event happens in the course of the ordinary. What I find most striking about these parables is the idea that life continues after the treasure or pearl has been secured. The purchase of the field or the pearl marks the end of the parable, but perhaps not the end of the story. It is easy to imagine that life goes on for these men, although they now have the joy of the treasure/pearl. Thomas even articulates the results of aftermath of their good fortune, the lending of money. Furthermore there is no mention of others who rejected the treasure as one might expect, only

those who did not find it. Once it had been found one cannot help but react strongly. It seems to me that the most plausible interpretation of this pair of parables is that the Kingdom is present and waiting to be discovered and it will necessitate a strong reaction in those that do.

The Lost Sheep

The parable of the Lost Sheep is one of the most easily recognized of all of the Kingdom parables. It appears in a largely similar form in the gospels of Luke, Matthew, and Thomas. The account in Thomas might be preferred as it is the simplest and therefore likely to be the most authentic, however there is one detail that scholars point to that often causes The Lost Sheep in Thomas to be overlooked. Thomas refers to the sheep that is lost as the "largest" sheep. Many scholars point to largest as an example of Gnostic influence, which is often seen as grounds for dismissal of the passage as far as its ability to inform the authentic words of Jesus. However Thomas also has characteristics to recommend it, namely its simplicity and that it is the only version which begins with the typical "The Kingdom is like" phrase.

Today when hearing this parable many people instantly associate Jesus with the role of the shepherd in the parable. Luke places the parable as a reaction to Jesus being criticized by Pharisees about eating with sinners. When set in this context it leads the reader to see Jesus as the shepherd because it draws an obvious connection between Jesus reaching out to sinners and the shepherd seeking out even one lost sheep. In Matthew the Lost Sheep is addressed to the disciples as an admonishment to seek out the lost as Jesus does. However if just the parables themselves are examined, outside of the context the gospel writers give them there is no reason to see Jesus as the shepherd. In fact, if one were to only read Thomas's version, which by the very nature of the gospel has no context, I think the most natural assumption would be to associate God with the shepherd. Even ignoring the controversy of the authenticity

of largest, it is still undeniable that shepherd and sheep imagery was common, and that in those previous uses God was clearly the shepherd. If the idea that God is analogous to the shepherd character is accepted this fundamentally changes the interpretation of the parable as opposed to an interpretation that views Jesus as the shepherd. It changes the nature of the parable and what it has to say about the nature of the Kingdom.

While the ending of Luke and Matthew leave the reader with the impression that the message of the parable is the need for repentance and a missionary call respectively, Thomas ends the parable simply with the shepherd's statement, "I love thee more than ninety-nine." This seemingly authentic ending combined with an understanding of the shepherd as God depicts a Kingdom in which God is the one doing the painstaking working of gathering each member of the flock with the final line being representative of the joy God experiences with the retrieval of a single sheep. In spite of, or perhaps because of, this parable being relatively short and simple, it is difficult to tease out hints as to the major questions that plague the issue of the nature of the Kingdom. I can find no strong evidence for either the location or the expected time of this Kingdom's arrival. However I think that this is a worthwhile parable to look at because it illustrates the need to be more attentive to the idea of God as central in the Kingdom parables over Jesus.

The Lost Coin

A similar parable to The Lost Sheep is that of The Lost Coin which is found only in Luke 15:8-10, "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the one that I had lost' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who

repents.” Here it is the woman who seems to be being compared to God as the shepherd is in the previous parable. Both parables’ language suggests that the careful searching for what is lost is obvious and inevitable. Of course God goes to extraordinary lengths to find a single sheep, coin, or person because that is the nature of God and the Kingdom. Furthermore God is filled with joy when the lost has been found in both parables. As in Luke’s version of The Lost Sheep the author also suggests that the point of the parable is repentance by the addition of the closing line. However it seems much more likely that the parable’s original intent was to emphasize the nature of God’s care as evidenced by the effort put into retrieving even a single one that was lost.

The Leaven

There are two accounts, Matthew and Thomas, of the parable of The Leaven. The versions are similar to each other with only two significant differences. The first is who or what the Kingdom is being compared to. Matthew says, “The Kingdom of heaven is like yeast...” whereas Thomas says, “The Kingdom of the Father is like a woman...” This difference causes us to question who the active agent is, and presumably, who is the God figure in the parable. If the Kingdom of heaven is like yeast then the Kingdom works through a trusted, yet mysterious (to the Israelites) process, that turns something unfinished into a finished and nourishing project. The yeast transforms the bread as God transforms the world. Or in Thomas the woman who mixes in the yeast is to be compared to the Kingdom of God. The second discrepancy is that Matthew tells the reader that the woman mixed the leaven in with the flour, but Thomas has a peculiar way of describing this saying she “hid” the yeast in the dough. In actuality I do not find this discrepancy crucial to the interpretation of the parable. However, because of this particular detail I prefer the parable of The Leaven told in Matthew over its counterpart in Thomas. It also

mirrors the thought given in the first line of the Gospel of Thomas, "These are the secret sayings that the living Jesus spoke...And he said, 'Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death.'" Taken in context with the introduction to the Gospel of Thomas it seems likely that the detail of the woman hiding the yeast was purposeful in order to emphasize the hidden nature of the Kingdom and the importance of discovering it.

B.B. Scott argues that what is key to understanding the parable of the leaven is the history of leaven imagery, which is largely negative. Examples include: Mark 8:15, "And he cautioned them, saying, 'Watch out – beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod.'" Galatians 5:8-9, "Such persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough." Hosea 7:4, "They are all adulterers; they are like a heated oven, whose baker does not need to stir the fire, from the kneading of the dough until it is leavened."¹⁸ Seen in this context the parable in Scott's words is, "destructive, subversive, and shattering its own sacramentality."¹⁹ It demonstrates a characteristic common to the parables, that of subverting expectations. If Scott's assertion as to the connotations of leaven then the hearer is taken aback by Jesus' use of leaven to describe the Kingdom of God. Even if the ignore possible negative associations leaven imagery is ignored the parable still portrays essentially the same message. The Kingdom is like leaven, of which only a small amount is needed, and through a mysterious process it permeates all of the dough.

I suggest that the process of baking bread suggests an earthly and ongoing process which I believe tilts this parable slightly in favor of Kingdom as somewhat present interpretation. However I think that what the distinct lack of other characters is of real interest in this parable. There is only the woman with her yeast which can be seen as analogous to God. So essentially it

¹⁸ Scott, 75.

¹⁹ Scott, 76.

is a parable about God and the nature of God's work. Unlike common readings of other parables which tend to moralize the parable, making it into a morality tale which describes what one should or should not do in order to be a part of the Kingdom, this parable demonstrates that some, perhaps most, parables are not about people so much as they are about God.

The Wedding Feast

The parable of the Wedding Feast is a parable that tends towards a future vision of the Kingdom. It is also another example of a parable which appears in three gospels; Matthew, Luke, and Thomas. All three follow a similar format but with different details with Matthew being the most different from the other two. In Matthew it is a king who gives a wedding banquet for his son. When the feast is ready he sends out his slaves to inform those invited that it is time. However those invited ignored the king's messenger. The reader is told that some went to their farms and others to their business while the rest seized the king's slaves and killed them. In response the king sent his troops to kill the people and burn the city. He then told his slaves that those he invited were not worthy and that therefore they were to go out into the streets and invite everyone they found. The slaves did as the king instructed, inviting all they found, "both good and bad" until the wedding hall was full. The King then came down to the feast and noticed someone not wearing the proper wedding attire. When the king questioned the man he had no response. The king orders the man thrown out saying, "For many are called, but few are chosen." Many readers are often puzzled at the end of this parable. If the man was invited off the street, with no previous warning, why should he be expected to have the proper wedding attire? This is usually explained as a conflation of two originally different parables. Verses 11 to 14 originally were a separate parable and were combined with the parable of the

Wedding feast by the gospel author.²⁰ The wedding garment portion, taken by alone, makes sense perfect sense when removed from the parable of The Wedding Feast as it serves as a warning that one must be prepared for wedding feast or Kingdom.

In Luke there is no king or wedding. Instead it is simply a man who gave a great dinner. As in Matthew when the feast was ready he sent out his slaves to inform his guests that it was time. The guests however gave excuses as to why they could not possibly come. The first says that he has bought some land and must go and see it. The second informs the slave that he had just bought some oxen and must go try them out while the third says that he has just been married and therefore he cannot come. When the slave returned to his master he gives the slave new orders, "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." The slave did as he was told but there was still more room. Again the feast giver said, "Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner." Luke is distinct from the other two versions of this parable because it has three instead of two invitations. First the invitation goes out to those who were invited, then to those in the streets, but there is still room, so the feast giver sends out his servants once again so that his house will be full. This third invitation is often understood to refer to the invitation to the Gentiles to God's Kingdom. The author of Luke is often viewed as being concerned with the mission to the Gentiles, whereas the author of Matthew, who has no such third invitation, "follows a tradition which was not interested in the calling of the Gentiles," according to Dodd.²¹

Thomas most closely parallels Luke. Once again it is not a king and a wedding feast, but a man and a dinner. When he sent out his servant to his invited guests they gave excuses. One

²⁰ Richard Bauckham, "The Parable of the Royal Wedding Feast (Matthew 22:1-14) and the Parable of the Lame Man and the Blind Man (Apocryphon of Ezekiel)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115(1996): 483.

²¹ Dodd, 94.

man said that he must wait to speak to some merchants that he had claims against, another had just purchased a house, while the third had just purchased a farm. When the servant returns to report what happened to his master he says, "Go out to the roads, bring those whom thou shalt find, so that they may dine, Tradesmen and merchants [shall] not [enter] the places of my Father." While the final line declaring that tradesmen and merchants will never enter the Kingdom is a clear Gnostic addition, the rest of the Thomas is quite similar to Luke's version and some scholars, like Norman Perrin consider Thomas to be the most authentic form of this parable.²²

A popular way of understanding this parable is to understand its central message as being concerned with the welcoming of Gentiles into the Kingdom. Paul Meyer articulates this view when he writes, "The parable clearly intended to explain the inclusion of Gentiles in the present Kingdom of God as *God's* response to Israel's refusal to 'enter.'"²³ This view takes a very allegorical stance; those who are initially invited but refuse are Israel and those who are compelled to come to the feast in the last wave of invitations are the gentiles to whom the Kingdom is now open. In my view this interpretation is too limiting. The first to be invited do not equal Israel and those invited off the streets do not equal the gentiles. The Kingdom is like a man who refuses to have his all of his feast preparations go to waste because his guests have spurned him. The man acts in a surprising, perhaps even desperate way. His main concern is that the feast does not go to waste. This parable suggests a Kingdom which is radical in the scope of its invitation.

This parable is understandably often read as a warning not to reject the divine invitation and it certainly can serve that function. However I instead want to focus on the actions of the

²² Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 113.

²³ Paul D. Meyer, "The Gentile Mission in Q," *The Journal of Biblical Literature* 89 (1970): 414.

king, or God, as opposed to the actions of the invited who is the agent that drives the parable. While a hearer or reader may well take away a message to remain alert to God's invitation what drives the parable is the actions of the God figure. The message is essentially that God and the Kingdom will prevail in spite of the actions of people. If those who are invited reject that invitation others will replace them. Once again it describes the nature of God, God's actions, and thus the Kingdom. If I were to try and answer classic questions about the Kingdom based upon this parable I would have to say that it leans towards a future vision of the Kingdom, but similar to parables of The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, and The Leaven it shares the characteristic that it makes sense to view the focus of the parable as describing the nature of God and thus the Kingdom.

The Sower

The Parable of the Sower is found in all three synoptic gospels, but Mark's version is generally accepted to be the source for the parable in Matthew and Luke.²⁴ While the earliest version is attributed to Mark scholars are suspicious of some of the passages within the parable and contend that they are not original to the parable as Jesus would have told it. Specifically parts of Mark 4:5-6, 7, and 8 contain passages that were added later and the entire interpretation of the parable present in Mark 4:14-20 as well as the other synoptic gospels were an attempt by the early church to give the parable new meaning.²⁵ The interpretation portion shows the most dramatic and clear cut evidence of being added after the time of Jesus. The interpretive verses exhibit much of the language and many of the concepts associated with the early church. They also appear to have been written originally in Greek whereas the parable itself contains characteristics of being translated from Aramaic to Greek. John Dominic Crossan

²⁴ John Dominic Crossan, "The Seed Parables of Jesus," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92 (1973): 244.

²⁵ Crossan, 245-47.

contends that because the interpretation was added at a later date the additions in the parable itself had to be inserted in order to bring the parable into better agreement with the interpretation that follows.²⁶

An examination of the parable itself shows that the fate of the seed in Mark 4:5-6 is much longer than the description of what happened to the other groups of seeds. Whereas verses 4, 7, and 8 follow a terse narrative style with each verse consisting of three distinct parts; the seed, where it fell, what happened to it, the seed in verses 5-6 is accompanied by a longer and somewhat repetitive explanation of why it failed to produce a harvest. A more original version of verses 5-6 might read "And some seed fell on rocky ground and when the sun rose it was scorched."²⁷ This leaves out the explanative portions of rocky ground not having much soil, the seed springing up quickly, and dying because of lack of depth of soil and root. There is also suspicion about the phrase "growing up and increasing" in verse 8. This introduces what is termed the "growing" motif, which in religious interpretations is usually taken for granted, but the entire theme of growth may in fact be an addition made by the early church to make the Parable of the Sower better fit with the interpretation that follows.²⁸ In fact, when the expansions to the Parable of the Sower, including the introduction of the growth motif are taken together with other suspected expansions in other seed parables like the Mustard Seed and the Seed Growing Secretly, it becomes plausible that changes and interpretation of the Parable of the Sower was in reaction to the concerns and theology of the early church and not a reflection of the words or teachings of Jesus.²⁹

²⁶ Crossan, 247.

²⁷ Theodore J. Weeden, "Recovering the Parabolic Intent in the Parable of the Sower," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 47 (1979): 99.

²⁸ Weeden, 101.

²⁹ Kuhn Heinz-Wolfgang quoted in Theodore Weeden, "Recovering the Parabolic Intent in the Parable of the Sower," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 47 (1979): 112.

In the interpretation of the Parable of the Sower offered in Mark 4:14-20 the seed is the word of God. The seed on the path is gobbled up by birds which are said to represent Satan. The seed on the rocky ground are those who believe, but whose faith quickly withers when faced with persecution for their beliefs. The seed among the thorns are those people whose faith is choked out by worldly concerns. The seed that is sown in the good soil are those who receive its message and endure. Theodore Weeden argues that if the reader were to read the parable and not the interpretation that follows the symbolism as described in the interpretation would make little sense. Without these symbols explicitly spelled out for the reader the parable would seem to follow a structure of life/a balance between both life and death/ and death. The sowing of the seed represents life and the ultimate demise of the seed represents death, but whereas the interpretation equates the birds, thorns, and the sun also with death that seems a peculiar conclusion. Weeden notes that the birds mean death for the seeds but by consuming the seeds they live. Similarly while the thorns kill the weeds the thorns themselves thrive and while the sun also kills the seeds the sun is necessary for all life, including the life of the seeds to grow.³⁰ In light of this the interpretation's allegorical symbols, particularly equating the birds with Satan, seem anomalous. The offered interpretation reflects more on the concerns of early Christianity than it reflects the intentions of Jesus.

With a traditional interpretation the ground is the potential believer and the seed is the word and the parable leads the reader to believe in the importance of spiritual growth, becoming better ground so to speak. But the imagery in the parable does not actually match up very well with this interpretation. In the Parable of the Sower both the ground and the seed are passive actors. The seed cannot control on which ground it lands and the ground cannot make itself any more fertile. Instead the active actors are the birds, thorns, and sun. This refutes the

³⁰ Weeden, 112.

commonly held belief that the Kingdom draws closer only through the actions and spiritual maturation of the faithful. Instead I suggest that Jesus' original intent in the Parable of the Sower is not that the Kingdom will only come to fruition through the actions of humanity, instead the Kingdom will come in spite of the actions of humanity. In this interpretation the real importance of the parable is not the various ways that three quarters of the seed is lost and does not bear fruit. Instead the point of the parable is that the Sower still reaps a spectacular harvest of thirty, sixty and one hundred fold in spite of the fate of the majority of the seed that fell on poor ground.

According to John Dominic Crossan the Parable of the Sower articulates "the gift of the Kingdom's advent and the joyful surprise of its experience: despite all the problems of sowing there is the abundant harvest."³¹ In this view of the Kingdom the fate of the seed, or the fertility of the ground are irrelevant. God's Kingdom, or the bountiful harvest, appears despite of all these things and regardless of human actions. In the traditional interpretation the bountiful harvest is really not all that unexpected. Obviously the seed that was planted on the poor ground cannot be expected to grow, but no one is surprised when the seed yields a harvest in the good ground, or the good believer. However, in Crossan's interpretation the bountiful harvest is a surprise and unexpected. The theme of the unexpected in the Kingdom of God and in the Parable of the Sower seems to be truer to the historical Jesus.

If the above nature of the Kingdom of God in the Parable of the Sower is accepted as surprising and inevitable regardless of the actions of people it is still hard to say what exactly the Kingdom of God is. Is the Kingdom an earthly Kingdom or a heavenly Kingdom? Does Jesus see the Kingdom as already present, imminent, or still to come? Is the Kingdom a physical rule in

³¹ Crossan, 266.

the traditional sense or is it a spiritual state? Crossan suggests that the Kingdom as Jesus experienced it was not any of these things. Crossan argues that for Jesus the Kingdom parables were neither eschatological nor ethical teachings. Instead he says that they are ontological-poetic.³² He says that the parables are an “ontological-poetic articulation of the Kingdom’s in-breaking upon himself. ... Jesus’ actions and controversies, and eventually Jesus’ death, are the result and not the referent of the parables, they are the effect and not the cause of these images. The referent is the ineffable mystery of the Kingdom’s presence to Jesus and of his own experience of it.”³³ In the context of the Parable of the Sower this idea of the Kingdom breaking in as Jesus experiences it seems to make some sense. Jesus’ experience of God’s mysterious presence and work in himself and in the world is analogous to the bountiful and unexpected harvest. However even if one accepts the Kingdom parables as Jesus’ own experience of the Kingdom breaking in it doesn’t answer the question what exactly the Kingdom of God is. The parables as an expression of his experience of the Kingdom of God in his own life does seem to suggest that at least to some degree the Kingdom is already present in at least some form, similar to popular ideas about the Kingdom. However whether or not that still leaves room for a true eschatological Kingdom to come, either in the near future and the Jesus’ early followers seemed to have believed, or just sometime in the future is still unclear. It also does not make clear if Kingdom is a heavenly one or a Kingdom set up on a transformed earth.

The Prodigal Son

Perhaps one of the most popular and well known parables is that of the Prodigal Son found in Luke. The parable is typically interpreted as a message of repentance and grace. Much has been made of the seamliness of the younger son demanding his share of the inheritance

³² Crossan, 265.

³³ Crossan, 265-266.

before his father's death. Many have argued that this was not done and that in demanding his share of the inheritance the younger son was effectively wishing his father dead.³⁴ Others differ and assert that it was common practice for the younger sons to be given their share so that they could make their way in the world. Either way the younger son's biggest crime was not that he asked for his inheritance, but what he did with it. Not only does he squander his inheritance with self-indulgent living, but he then is forced to take a job as a swine herder, a profession detestable to Jews.³⁵ Starving, the younger son realizes that even the servants of his father's house live better than him and he resolves to offer himself to his father not as a son but as a hired hand. When the father sees his son coming down the road he flies to meet him and rejects his offer of servitude and instead restores him to his place as a beloved son and throws a feast to celebrate. The eldest son is not impressed with his brother's return and is understandably upset that his errant brother has been welcomed back with a celebration when he, who has always been faithful, is given nothing.

While the activities of the younger son dominates the text as far as words devoted to him, the younger son's actions are merely a setup to the real action of the parable, the unexpected forgiveness offered by the father. The parable is often read with the son's decision to return to his father being the crucial decision of the story, where the son's return is read as analogous to a sinner returning to God. Indeed without the son's return the father could not have offered forgiveness, but it is possible that the youngest son tends to get too much credit. He does realize that his choices have been wrong but his return is just as much out of necessity as it is out of remorse. It appears that he had no other choice. He was out of money and out of options and so he returned home, not to seek forgiveness, but shelter and

³⁴ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 163.

³⁵ Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, 96.

employment as a servant instead of a son. This return sets up the moment that illustrates what the Kingdom is like. The father not only forgives his son, but throws a lavish party instead of chastising him. Least the audience miss the surprising nature of this offered forgiveness the eldest son's grumblings serve as a reminder that this forgiveness was not earned nor directly asked for instead it was merely offered joyously.

The Laborers in the Vineyard

The Laborers in the Vineyard is unique to Matthew. The owner of the vineyard goes out in the morning to hire laborers to work in his field, offering them the usual daily wage. The owner repeats this process three times, each time hiring workers progressively later in the day, promising to pay them "whatever is right." When the work day is finished the landowner pays the last to be hired the full day's wages. Those who had worked the normal length complained that they had received no more than those who worked only a few hours. The landowner responds, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" Assuming there is a God character to be found it is obviously the landowner. It is the actions of the landowner which are to be examined as a key to understanding the nature of the Kingdom. The landowner is both generous to those whom worked only a portion of the day and unfair in the eyes of those who did a full day's work.

When this generosity is challenged by the workers who did a full day's work, the landowner responds by asserting his authority to do with what he wishes with his own money. This assertion of authority is like the authority that God will claim in his Kingdom. God will have the power to subvert the traditional and expected and be generous and merciful to whomever

God wishes. God's supreme authority in the Kingdom is comes as no surprise, instead what is interesting is how God exercises that authority. In paying an equal wage to all workers, no matter the length of their labor, the landowner, and God, is privileging mercy over merit.³⁶ The notion of mercy over merit is an idea stressed by Jesus in much of his teachings. The parable claims the right to offer mercy over merit, rejecting oppositions that it is unfair to the righteous. In this parable of the Kingdom God's generosity makes salvation possible for those who are unworthy. Much like the Prodigal Son this parable shows surprising generosity carried out by figures that could be identified as a God character. In both parables this generosity is neither earned nor asked for, it is merely given.

The Unjust Steward

The Unjust Steward is one of most befuddling parables of the Kingdom, producing many wide ranging attempts to understand it. The manager of a rich man's property is called in and informed that because he squandered his employer's property he was being relieved from his position. The manager, soon to be without a job, and too weak for manual labor and too proud to beg comes up with a plan. He goes to those whom owe his master debts and invites them to alter the books, thus lowering their debt. The manager does this so that when it becomes known that he has been fired, those whose debts he surreptitiously lowered will have good will towards him and take him into their homes. The parable then becomes muddled, with seemingly multiple endings. Luke 16: 8-13 reads,

"And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. 'Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also

³⁶ Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, 118.

in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters, for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve god and wealth.”

Attempts to make sense of this parable are wide ranging. Perrin for example, puts emphasis on a man in crisis who must decide, like a person faced with the proclamations of Jesus.³⁷ Jeremias sees the message as a warning of the coming crisis.³⁸ Still others suggest that parable is about a skillful use of generosity in which the manager, having experienced his employer's generosity by simply being relieved of his position and not jailed, seeks to test that generosity by lowering the people's debts.³⁹ The diversity of interpretations stems from the seemingly opposite messages the parable conveys. In verse 8 the manager's master commended the man's deception for it was a shrewd thing to do in preparation for the future. However verses 10-12 declares that those who cannot be trusted with even a little then they cannot be trusted with "true riches" either.

There are two choices for my suggested God character; the rich man and the rich man's manager. While it is the manager on which the action of the story focuses on it is not the manager's actions which are surprising and subversive, a theme often found in the parables of Jesus. Instead it is the actions of the manager's employer which, if authentic, create the real drama of the parable. It is the employer that praises the deceitful actions of his former employee, even though his actions were directly harmful to himself. It is the employer's actions which are surprising because he does not respond the way one would expect him to

³⁷ Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, 115.

³⁸ Jeremias, 47-48.

³⁹ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1992), 375.

after discovering that he has been cheated. For this reason I will presume that the intent is to see the actions of the rich man as similar to the actions of God in his Kingdom.

Of all the attempts at making sense of this problematic parable I find that Kenneth Bailey has produced the most believable analysis who states, "The parable in an unforgettable backhanded way illuminates, from a unique angle, the splendor of the grace of God in which alone the believer must trust."⁴⁰ His argument rests on the manager and the hearer of the parable recognizing what an act of mercy it was for the employer to simply fire the manager when he suspected dishonest dealings. This is because the audience likely expected that the manager would be thrown into jail for his offence as was the employer's right.⁴¹ Instead the manager simply releases him from his duties without throwing him into jail and without requiring recompense. The now fired manager has the good sense to understand that his master's nature is merciful and decides to take advantage. He pins his future on the belief that his master will be merciful again when he proceeds to change the amounts owed. To the reader's surprise the ex-manager proves correct. Again the master has mercy. According to Bailey the master is "praised for knowing where his salvation lay, not for his dishonesty."⁴² The parable is not a morality tale of how one should behave, but instead illuminates the nature of God, which is merciful, and the nature of humanity, whose only hope comes in relying on that mercy. The Unjust Steward echoes the theme of the scope of God's mercy and humanity's reliance upon it in a similar manner to previously discussed parables.

The Unmerciful Servant

⁴⁰ Bailey, 118.

⁴¹ Bailey, 102.

⁴² Bailey, 107.

Matthew's parable of The Unmerciful Servant is a well known one with little argument as to its interpretation. A king calls in his servant who owes him an exorbitant sum, when the slave cannot pay the king orders him and his family to be sold to cover their debt, but the servant begs for mercy and the king forgives the debt. This same servant goes out and demands repayment from a man whom owes him a small debt. When this man cannot pay he does not show mercy, but has him imprisoned until he can repay his debt. Upon discovering this, the king is infuriated, handing him over to be tortured until the debt was paid. Verse 34 which reads, "And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt" is considered by some to be a later addition.⁴³ Verse 35, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart" is widely considered to be a Christian addition.⁴⁴ Even without the explanatory additions the meaning of the parable seems much clearer than others one encounters. It conveys the need to offer forgiveness just as you have been offered forgiveness.

It is in this parable that I find some of the strongest evidence for reading God as a character. Firstly, consider verse 35. Even though it is an addition by the gospel author it does betray the way the gospel author understands the parable. "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you," illustrates that the actions of the king are understood as the analogous to the actions of God. Secondly, this parable is not just about forgiveness and mercy in the sense that forgiveness is the right thing to do. Rather it is about an individual's need to forgive *as a result of* the forgiveness God has offered humanity. If it was a simple parable about the virtues of forgiving the entire king character is superfluous. Furthermore the king forgives all of the debt, thus wiping the slate clean. Surely the king could have given the man more time to pay or

⁴³ Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, 125.

⁴⁴ Robert Walter Funk, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1997), 218.

worked out some other solution which didn't involve selling the man and his family into slavery. Instead the king does a stunning thing; he completely forgives all of the debt that the man owes. The ten thousand talents worth of forgiveness, an astronomical sum, stands in stark contrast to the servants own unwillingness to forgive even the smallest of grievances even in the light of the amount of mercy he had received. What drives the action of the parable is the king's (God's) stunning act of forgiveness, thus the focus of the parable is on God's action and the response which it should elicit from humanity. Like the Prodigal Son, the forgiveness offered, in this case the forgiveness of debt, is entirely unearned but is offered anyway. The Unmerciful Servant takes this message of unearned forgiveness to the next level by asserting that the acceptance of such forgiveness requires the recipient to act in kind.

Upon examination of these parables I am left wondering how previous scholars managed to come to a conclusion about the nature of the Kingdom especially as it pertains to the Kingdom's eschatological character. Just looking at the parables I have discussed it is possible to say that parables like the Hidden Treasure, The Pearl, or The Leaven suggest that the Kingdom as Jesus imagined it was, at least in some sense already present. However that conclusion is by no means obvious or concrete. Furthermore parables like the Sower or the Wedding Feast lend themselves better to the idea of a future Kingdom. To complicate matters even further are the sayings attributed to Jesus which have only been touched upon here like Luke 17:20-21, "'The coming of the Kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the Kingdom of God is in your midst,'" in contrast with Mark 13:30-31, "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." The parables and sayings that are thought to be original to Jesus simply do not present a consistent view of the timing of the Kingdom.

Furthermore I have found no methodology or theory that can satisfactorily explain away these inconsistencies. Any attempt to do so, whether to argue for a Kingdom as present or a Kingdom as future, either ignores a significant number of parables and sayings or does an insufficient job of explaining the meaning of parables and sayings that seem to contradict the proposed hypothesis. Assuming that the historical figure of Jesus did indeed speak in seemingly opposing ways about the nature of the Kingdom I would suggest that the better question to ask in future research would be not how these parables and sayings can be explained as representing a consistent view of the Kingdom, but rather *why* Jesus appeared to speak of the Kingdom in diverse, sometimes seemingly opposite ways.

However, I have found that there is something that can be said about the parables of the Kingdom. Of the parables I have discussed I find that they fall into two general categories. The first category is parables that describe the inevitable nature of the Kingdom. The Leaven, The Wedding Feast, and The Sower all illustrate that God's Kingdom will come regardless of a particular person's response. In the parable of The Leaven the yeast works in hidden and mysterious ways, but the bread will rise, just as the Kingdom will come about at God's hand despite the actions of humanity. In the Wedding Feast God will not be thwarted by those who refuse the invitation, others will be invited to take their place, allowing the Kingdom to come despite those who refused its invitation. The parable of the Sower acts similarly. While much of the seed is destroyed or withers away the harvest is still abundant despite our expectations.

The second category describes more the nature of God in the Kingdom than the nature of the Kingdom itself. God is depicted in The Hidden Treasure, The Pearl, The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, The Prodigal Son, The Laborers in the vineyard, The Unjust Steward, and The Unmerciful Servant as giving out the riches and mercy of the Kingdom to those who have

neither earned it nor deserve it. In the Hidden Treasure and The Pearl the two men discover their treasure by accident and show wisdom in their response to their good fortune by going to any means necessary to acquire because they are able to recognize the Kingdom for what it is. The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin illustrate the nature of God's care which is even more extraordinary because it is unearned. Similarly the Laborers in the Vineyard demonstrates the generosity of God which is given because it is God's nature, not because the recipients are deserving. The Prodigal Son, The Unjust Steward, and The Unmerciful servant all demonstrate the astonishing nature of God's forgiveness and mercy. None of those who receive this mercy did anything that warrants it, but God grants it gladly anyways. The Unjust Steward also shows that humanity is entirely reliant upon this mercy and that there is wisdom in recognizing this. The Unmerciful servant illustrates that while this mercy is freely given; receiving this mercy necessitates a reaction, in this case showing mercy to others as you have been shown mercy. Similar to the first category of parables that describe the inevitable nature of the Kingdom this group of parables describes the inevitable nature of God.

I have found that while thinking about identifying a possible God character has not been universally helpful it has provided some insight. Namely that it is entirely possible, perhaps even preferable, to see God as the primary active agent in these parables of the Kingdom. When the focus of the parable shifts to a god-like character it changes what one can say about the parable and how it reflects on the Kingdom. It strongly suggests that when God is viewed as the active agent at work in the parables the parables become more than mere morality plays that illustrate what one must do to make it into the Kingdom. Instead they serve as a means to describe how God acts *in* the Kingdom, which helps us to better understand God's nature.

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