

THE PARABLES OF JESUS

Awaiting the Climax of the Kingdom

There is a striking paradox in Jesus' teaching about the kingdom. It was spiritual and present in his own person. Unlike the popular viewpoint, it was not externally visible. At the same time, there would be a climax of the kingdom yet to come, which in the end would be visible and external. Hence, in one sense the kingdom is "already," but in another it is "not yet." In the **Parable of the Ten Minas** (Lk. 19:11-27; Mt. 25:14-30),¹ Jesus responded to the popular view that "the kingdom of God was going to appear at once" (Lk. 19:11). He told the story about an elite who traveled to a far country to secure an appointment as king. (This actually happened in 4 BC, when Archelaus, one of Herod's sons, traveled to Rome upon his father's death in order to secure his kingship over Judah; as such, Jesus' story would certainly have stirred memories of this relatively recent historical event. Since a group of fifty Jewish protestors also traveled to Rome to resist this appointment, when Archelaus was finally confirmed, he wreaked a bloody vengeance when he returned to Judah.)

MINAS and TALENTS

A mina is a weight of about 1¼ pounds, which appears in Luke's version of the parable. A talent is a weight of about 75 pounds, which appears in Matthew's version. A mina is worth about three months' wages. A talent is worth considerably more, and ten talents, if in gold, is worth about \$48 million!

It is unfortunate that many readers of the English Bible have mistaken the word "talent" in Matthew's version for innate abilities (i.e., as in talented or gifted people). Rather, in both versions of Jesus' story, a talent or a mina were resources of wealth.



One Mina Weight
British Museum, London

Before leaving, the man gathered ten trusted servants and gave to each a *mina*, charging them to invest the wealth in his absence. (In Matthew, only three servants are mentioned, and the weight is given in *talents* rather than *minas*). After securing his appointment as king, upon his return he examined his ten servants to see what use they had made of the wealth available to them. One had earned ten *minas* and another five. The newly crowned king awarded them jurisdictions over cities as a reward. (In Matthew's version, cities are not mentioned.) In both Matthew and Luke, however, one servant hid the wealth and, out of excessive caution, did not invest it at all. He then accused his master of being a rapacious master, a somewhat lame excuse for showing no profit. In consequence, the new king took away his *mina* and gave it to the servant who had made ten. (In Matthew's version, the one talent was taken away and given to the one with ten talents.) The enemies of the king were to be executed.

¹ The two New Testament versions of this story in Matthew and Luke differ in several details, plus there is an early version from the Gospel of the Nazarenes that differs in details from both of them, an Aramaic non-canonical gospel from the early 2nd century. We don't actually possess a text of this gospel, and our knowledge of it comes from fragmentary quotations from the Church Fathers. The differences in details between these three versions might be due to editorial work by either Matthew or Luke, or alternatively, Jesus may have told this story on more than one occasion, since the setting in Luke is different than the setting in Matthew.

(In Matthew's version, the unproductive servant was to be thrown into outer darkness, a symbol of final judgment.)

In telling this story, Jesus underscored two things. The master would be absent for a long period, and during his absence, he expected his servants to be productive. At the end, the master would return, and the saying, "...to everyone who has, more will be given, but as for the one who has nothing, even what he has will be taken away," emphasizes that irresponsibility was inexcusable. Thus, while in the present period the kingdom was internal, the final form of the kingdom would call for a reckoning at the return of Christ. It would not be outside the purview of this story to see Israel's religious leaders, the ones to whom had been entrusted the law and the prophets, as those faithless in their stewardship of what St. Paul would call "the mysteries of God" (1 Co. 4:1).

This ideal of stewardship is equally emphasized in Jesus' **Parable of the Servant's Duty** (Lk. 17:7-10). Here, the story is a small-scale farmer who can only afford one farm-hand, and the worker had to plow the fields, watch the sheep, and then serve inside as well. Still, in spite of his workload, he did not expect his master to say, "Why don't you sit down to eat (and I will serve you)." Much more likely, the master would say, "Get my supper ready, and afterwards you may eat." The farmer doesn't thank the slave because he does the work for which he has been assigned. The worker has only done his duty. Similarly, those who are servants of God should not be doing so in order to merely gain a reward. The point of this short parable is a warning against any attitude of thinking that one deserves special recognition for faithfulness. The saying was no doubt aimed at a religious community that kept careful tally of their righteous acts. God was not impressed! He has every right to expect, even demand, one's best. People are not doing him a favor by being faithful, they are only doing their duty.

Similar is the **Parable of the Rich Farmer** (Lk. 12:16-21), which accentuates the fact that the crisis of the hour may not be in waiting for the end of the age, since death is a constant specter throughout life itself. The setting of this story was when the younger of two brothers complained that his older brother refused to give him his inherited share of the property since he wanted to

keep it undivided. Jesus refused to get involved in this family dispute, but he did offer a story with a warning against greed in the parable of the rich fool, a story that brings home the transitory nature of material wealth. Here, a wealthy farmer decided to construct larger storage facilities in which to store his reaped grain (probably barley) until it could be threshed. He was thinking only of what this wealth could bring, the



Ancient agricultural calendar from about the time of Solomon: It reads...

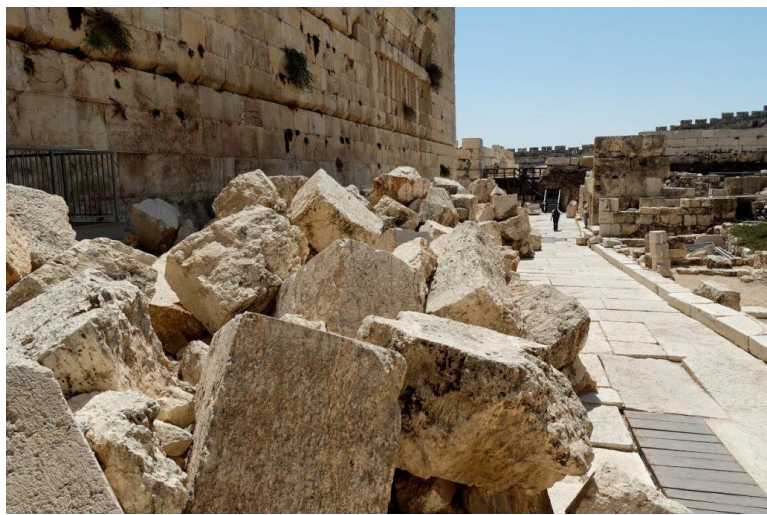
...his two months [are olive] harvest; his two months [are] grain planting; his month [is] hoeing up of flax; his month [is] barley harvest; his month [is] harvest and festivity; his two months [are] vine-tending; his month [is] summer fruit;

satisfaction of eating well, drinking well, and a relaxed state of happy well-being. Unknown to him, that night he would die. The point, of course, is not merely the unexpectedness of death, but even more importantly, the sad state of one who "stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God" (12:21). Jesus went on to say that the meaning and value of life are not in

possessions (12:15), food, clothing (12:23), nor even a longer life-span (12:25). At the end of life, none of these things matter. Hence, Jesus counseled his disciples against anxiety about material things. God cares for crows (12:24) and flowers (12:27-28) in the natural order of things, and in fact, it is the faithless pagan who spends time worrying about creature comforts (12:29-30). What disciples should seek as the highest priority is the kingdom of God (12:31). Material possessions can simply be sold and the proceeds given away to the poor (12:33a). But the kingdom of God, which he gives freely to his flock, is an eternal treasure (12:32, 33b). The areas in which people invest their highest resources are what they consider to be the most important (12:34).

Parables About the Coming Age

Shortly before his passion in Jerusalem, Jesus predicted the destruction of the 2nd Temple, a discourse that appears in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 24-25; Mark 13; Luke 21). In this discourse, he brought together both the events of the temple's destruction, which would happen in AD 70, and the final events at the end of the age. It is understandable that the disciples wanted to know when this would happen. Jesus did not immediately answer their question, but instead, he described the future course of the present age. This was important, because it helped to clarify for the disciples that the final crisis of history would not be identical to the historical crisis for the Jerusalem temple.



Stones from the 2nd Temple, when the Romans destroyed it, lie just as they fell two millennia ago. Jesus had said not one stone would be left on another (Mt. 24:2).

While Jesus indicated that the climax of the kingdom would not be at once, he also indicated that it was always impending and urged his followers always to be ready. In the **Parable of the Burglar** (Mt. 24:42-44; Lk. 12:39-40), Jesus pointedly observed that thieves usually come at unexpected times. (No thief sends out a notice as to when he intends to burgle a home!) In the same way, Jesus' second advent will be at an unknown time. In the **Parable of the Trusted Servant** (Mt. 24:45-51; Lk. 12:42-46), Jesus prepared his disciples for the coming crisis, the crisis of the interval between his departure from the earth back to the Father and his return to the earth at the end of the age. In Matthew, this teaching appears in the sermon about the fall of the temple, while Luke included it in an earlier setting because, along with other teachings, it figures in the character of the life of true discipleship. In both versions, Jesus told the story of a manager who was put in charge of the household while his master was away. Jesus called for watchfulness and fidelity. If there was a delay in the master's return, would the supervisor be responsible and keep his master's trust, or would he take advantage of the master's absence to abuse this trust? Obviously, the central teaching is that the disciples must be faithful to their tasks, even though the time of the Lord's return is unknown. The **Parable on Watchfulness**

(Mk. 13:33-37; Lk. 12:35-38) was a story about a master returning from a wedding festival.² His servants know he will return soon, and they wait expectantly. Still, in ancient times itineraries would of necessity be only approximate because of uncertain conditions. The master could return at any time (actually, at any of the four watches of the night, as specified in Mk. 13:35b). If they were to be faithful servants, they would be ready, and quite remarkably, the master would even serve them a meal because of their attentive faithfulness.

These parables reinforce the unexpectedness of Christ's return and the need to be always watching and ready. In the parable of the thief, the coming of the Son of Man will be as unknown as the coming of a burglar, so Jesus' disciples must always be prepared. In the parable of the traveling master, who has put his manager in charge of the household, Jesus stressed that his disciples must be about their assigned tasks, so that when the master returned abruptly, he would commend them for their diligence. If they behaved irresponsibly, the master might appear unexpectedly and exact harsh punishments upon them. In the parable of the master attending a wedding banquet, his servants must be watching and ready for his return. No one (except the heavenly Father) knows when the consummation will occur. Preparedness and fidelity, not speculation, is what is essential!

In a somewhat longer story, Jesus told the **Parable of the Ten Virgins** (Mt. 25:1-13). The setting is the second stage of a Jewish marriage, the home-taking, when the groom goes to the home of his prospective bride to transfer her to their new home (or perhaps the home of his parents) where they would live as husband and wife. Here, ten young girls awaited his arrival, expecting to greet him with torches of celebration. Where they waited is not stated, but presumably it was not out in the open along the road, where it would unlikely for young girls to fall asleep, but more likely, at the home of the bride. Five had the forethought to bring an extra flask of oil should the wait be long, and five carelessly neglected to do so. As it turned out, the bridegroom delayed some time, and the girls fell asleep while waiting. Suddenly, in the middle of the night, a shout went up that the bridegroom was on his way. The girls without extra oil saw that their torches were about to burn out, so they were forced to leave in order to find more oil. While they were gone, the groom arrived and the wedding party processed to the new home, the site of the celebration. When the five girls returned, they were too late. They were not allowed to enter the wedding festival at all, for the door was now closed! The final line in the parable was Jesus' warning to confirm yet again what he already had stressed: "Keep watch—you do not know the day or the hour!" As in the parable of the closed door, even an appeal that they were friends of the bride would not be not enough to secure an entrance (cf. Lk. 13:22-30).

THE JEWISH WEDDING

Jewish marriage occurred in two stages. Betrothal usually occurred with the parents privately arranging for the marriage of their daughter with the son of another family while she was still quite young, often as young as twelve years old. (After she was thirteen, she could decline the arrangement of her parents). The home-taking was the marriage proper, sometimes years later, in which the girl would be transferred from the home of her parents to the home of her husband. This event was public, and it was typically celebrated with a procession to the husband's home followed by a wedding feast.

² Here, as before, Luke has relocated the parable from the discourse against the temple to an earlier setting, or else, Jesus simply gave this parable on more than one occasion, and Mark and Luke offer two different settings.