

THE PARABLES OF JESUS

A Spiritual Kingdom

The specific phrase “kingdom of God” does not appear in the Old Testament, though the basic idea is certainly in the prophets and the Psalms. In the Psalms it says of God, “They will tell of the glory of your kingdom... Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations” (Ps. 145:11-13). And again, “Yahweh has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all” (Ps. 103:19).

One of the perennial questions about the kingdom of God is whether it should be perceived as an abstract idea (i.e., God’s sovereignty) or a concrete idea (i.e., a realm over which the divine King rules). To be sure, these two options are not mutually exclusive, but it is fair to say that the Jews of Jesus’ generation generally thought of it in very concrete terms. The kingdom of God would arrive due to divine cataclysmic intervention, and as has been said previously, probably in the context of war. This is why Jesus could comment on the violent efforts of the zealots. From the beginning of John’s ministry and even earlier, the hopes of establishing God’s rule had been accompanied by violence, and advocates of violence sought to establish it through armed resistance (Mt. 11:12). Jesus observed, “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force” (Mt. 11:12). This reference has puzzled many, but in the context of a growing nationalistic patriotism, it is not hard to understand. Extremist Pharisees, not to mention the zealots of whatever party, were probably in the background of this saying of Jesus. Anyone announcing God’s rule, like Jesus was doing, was implicitly engaging in a serious and relevant comment on the current Roman occupation, one way or another. At the same time, if



Coin issued by the rebels in AD 68 inscribed with “Shekel, Israel Year 3,” and on the obverse side “Jerusalem the Holy.”

Jesus explicitly opposed armed resistance, as is clear from his Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5:3,

5, 10, 38-41), at the same time he frankly acknowledged that advocates of violent resistance were widely popular.¹ The memories of Judas Maccabeus were still fresh. Jesus, on the other hand, urged that the kingdom was not materially visible. It was something already present in the world. He taught, “The kingdom of God does not come visibly...because the

THE FIRST JEWISH REVOLT

Jewish nationalism and patriotism would erupt into a full-scale revolt against the Romans in AD 66. Taking the Romans by surprise, they managed to drive them out and liberate Jerusalem, at least temporarily. They even minted coins in celebration of their freedom. In the end, however, the Romans would put Jerusalem to siege, and the city and temple would be pillaged and burned in AD 70.

¹ Some interpreters (and some translators) have taken Jesus’ saying in Mt. 11:12 to refer to something other than a comment on the tendency toward political violence in 1st century Jewry. The NIV’s rendering, “the kingdom...has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it,” seems to neutralize the more negative sense of the Greek phrase, but most other English versions, properly I think, retain this negative nuance, e.g., “the kingdom...has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force”, RSV, so also, KJV, NKJV, NASB, NEB, ESV, NAB.

kingdom of God is within you” (Lk. 17:20-21). He blessed children, saying that the kingdom belongs to such as these little ones (Mk. 10:13-16), and whatever else it might mean, it surely meant that the kingdom was in some sense here and now and non-violent. Still, it was not outwardly visible, which is the basic intent of the **Parable of the Seed Growing Invisibly** (Mk. 4:26-29). In this parable peculiar to Mark's Gospel, Jesus emphasized that the assured growth of the kingdom was under God's care and sovereignty. It could not be humanly manipulated. While the "hiddenness" of the kingdom would eventually be exchanged for a glorious "openness," the timing of this transition belonged to God alone. The harvest was God's responsibility; the farmer must simply commit the seed to the soil and trust the process. Immediate or visible results were not necessary to the one who farmed in faith. God, not circumstances, was the guarantor of the kingdom's success! The kingdom had come in the person of Jesus and was demonstrated in his favor to the weak and authority over the powers of evil. Hence, as he said, “If I drive out demons by the Spirit (finger) of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Mt. 12:28; Lk. 11:20).

The Kingdom of God is Spiritual

In none of his parables does Jesus depict Rome as the arch enemy. Rather, the real enemy is in the invisible power of evil that invades the hearts of men and women. The kingdom of God is spiritual, and in his parables, Jesus urges his listeners to think of the kingdom in this way. In the **Parable of the Empty House**, for instance, Jesus tells the story of a man afflicted with an unclean spirit (Mt. 12:43-45; Lk. 11:24-26).² When the restless evil spirit was expelled but discovered that the “empty house” was still unoccupied, he moved back with seven other evil spirits, and the man's final condition was worse than before. If Jesus' authority over evil spirits was a sign that the kingdom of God had come, which is precisely what Jesus said (Mt. 12:28; Lk. 22:20), then if one is delivered from evil but does not replace that empty space by allowing God to take over the “house,” then he is susceptible to a very terrible relapse. Grace, like nature, abhors a vacuum. When one is set free, a new master must reign! Obviously, a story like this one directly suggests that evil in the world is internal and spiritual, not merely external and visible. There are, of course, the obvious signs of visible and external evil in the world; no one would doubt that. But Jesus could say, it would be the “poor in spirit” who would gain the kingdom of God (Mt. 5:3; Lk. 6:20).

DEMONIZATION

There is very little in the Old Testament concerning demons. However, in the context of foreign religions and foreign domination, which confronted the Jews in the intertestamental period under Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman cultures, the idea of evil spirits gained considerable traction. They usually were considered to be fallen angels, rebels against God. In continuity with this rise of awareness of demons, the gospels describe a series of conflict narratives in which Jesus confronts such evil spirits. In some eight instances Jesus exorcised demons from sufferers, and demonization is also part of the background of some of his parables. Though several things can be observed from these incidents, foremost is Jesus' authority over the realm of Satan.

There are two primary expressions describing demonic affliction: to be demonized or to have an unclean spirit.

² Some argue that only those stories which are prefaced with the word “parable” are true parables, but here I take the broader view that every parable need not be labeled as such. For instance, the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus is not so labeled, but virtually everyone agrees that it was a parable.

Several of Jesus' parables point to this spiritual character of the kingdom of God. In the **Parable of the Strong Man**, when Jesus was accused of exorcising demons by the power of Satan, Jesus responded by pointing out that if the devil's realm is divided against itself, it will surely fail (Mt. 12:24-29; Lk. 11:15-22). How can Satan cast out Satan? Further, if an armed strong man protects his home, he can do so successfully only so long as a stronger man does not oppose him. But if a stronger one comes, the stronger will prevail. In saying this, Jesus may have been alluding to Isaiah 49:24, where the Servant-Savior would put down the oppressors of God's people. Certainly, he was underscoring his authority over the realm of evil.

It was this spiritual character of the kingdom that prompted Jesus to warn his followers that if they would follow him, they must be prepared to see God's kingdom in a new light. The



The processed hides of kosher animals were used as containers for wine, hence, wineskins. Because they would eventually lose their elasticity, these skins had to be replaced periodically, especially since the wine continued to ferment after being bagged.

conventional ideas about the kingdom of God simply would not fit the new message Jesus was preaching. In the **Parable of the Patch and the Wineskins**, Jesus gave a striking example of how the old views were incompatible with his revolutionary preaching about a spiritual kingdom (Mt. 9:16-17; Mk. 2:21-22; Lk. 5:37-39). Some, apparently with a tone of criticism, had asked why Jesus didn't emphasize fasting, as did the disciples of John the Baptist. (Fasting, also, was a regular practice of the Pharisees, who fasted two days each week.) Jesus' disciples, on the other hand, were not following this religious expectation. So, in this parable Jesus said it would be folly to attempt to sew a new patch on an old piece of cloth, since when the new piece would shrink after laundering, and it would pull the old

piece apart. (This, obviously, was many centuries before sanforization!) The same was true in wine-preservation. To put new wine in a dried, brittle skin would be a disaster, for the fermentation of the new wine would put too much stress on the old skin, and it would crack, spilling the wine. In like manner, the new life of the gospel of the kingdom would not fit into the old forms of Judaism, and in fact, as Jesus pointed out, people are rarely open to change. They are apt to say, "The old is better."

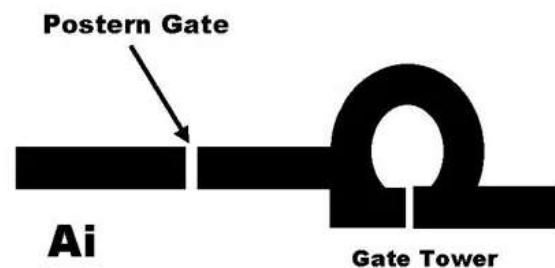
Jesus' **Parable of the Shrewd Manager** (Lk. 16:1-9) is often a bit confusing for most readers. In this story, Jesus describes an estate with an estate manager who had authority to carry out the business of his master. The debtors in the story are renters or share-croppers who had agreed to a fixed annual fee. As a salaried official, the estate manager received an honorarium for each rental contract. His master, who was a wealthy individual in the community, cared enough about how things were going to dismiss his estate manager, whom he probably suspected of taking "under the table" extras. The manager was notified that he would be dismissed, which in turn meant that his authority as an agent was cancelled.³ The question, then, is whether or not Jesus would use a dishonest manager as a model. That the parable was given in the larger context of honesty versus dishonesty (Lk. 16:10-15) only serves to sharpen the issue.

³ K. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 86-110.

There are two alternatives in reading the parable. First, it may be that as an agent with full power of attorney, the steward was entitled to certain commissions, or else he held legitimate control of the interest on borrowed amounts. Since he knew he was to be dismissed, he decided to forego these commissions and/or change the interest rates in order to endear himself to his master's debtors. If such was the case, then the steward's action was not so much dishonest as it was shrewd. On the other hand, the steward may, in fact, have changed the bills for the debtors without authorization, but since the debtors did not know of the man's imminent termination, they assumed that he was acting responsibly under the master's authority. Consequently, they would praise their creditor for his largess, who in turn would be inclined to overlook the matter in order to save face in an honor and shame-based society. Either way, the manager had saved his future by his action, and Jesus commended his shrewdness. Though it cost him dearly, the estate owner could not help but admire the ingenuity of his former employee.

Jesus' application of the parable is both immediate and eschatological. On the one hand, he challenges his followers to be as resourceful as the sacked manager. They really ought to use their money for the sake of others so that in the end they might gain God's favor. At the same time, those who heard Jesus preach faced a crisis far more critical than merely losing their employment. They were confronted with the message of the reign of God, and the time of reckoning was near. Like the resourceful manager, they must act quickly, for the challenge of the hour meant that everything was at stake. Here, again, the spiritual character of the kingdom is apparent in Jesus' challenge for his hearers to respond.

This challenge for listeners to respond is captured in another short parable, the **Parable of the Narrow Gate**. Here, Jesus urges his listeners to make every effort to enter through a narrow door, probably referring to a postern gate, which is hardly more than a narrow opening in a wall (Lk. 13:22-30; cf. Mt. 7:13-14). This parable was given because of a question as to whether there would be many or few saved, and it probably arose out of the common perception that all Israelites had a share in the world to come. However, Jesus did not answer their question directly. Instead, he urged his listeners to enter the narrow door of the kingdom, for the time was short and the day would come when there would be no more opportunity. A crisis was upon them in the preaching of Jesus, and if they did not respond, they would be bitterly disappointed when the good gifts of the kingdom were given to outsiders, particularly Gentile outsiders. Gentiles, who were normally considered to be "last" in the Jewish hierarchy of racial purity and certainly considered to be outside the boundaries of the messianic feast, would end up being admitted. Those Jews who did not respond to the message of Jesus, Jews who considered themselves to be "first," would be shut out! The warning was clear; no one had a monopoly on God's salvation. There would be many surprises! This same urgency is found in the **Parables of Counting the Cost** (Lk. 14:28-33). Whether a tower-builder or king going to war, both need total resolution, and this same resolution was necessary if one was to follow Jesus.



This diagram of a postern gate excavated in an ancient wall at Ai north of Jerusalem shows the narrow entrance. We assume these narrow entrances were blocked by wooden or metal doors in times of attack.