Israel in the Parables

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ISRAEL IN THE PARABLES

"ON THAT day . . . all the crowd stood on the shore. And He spoke to them many things in parables" (Mt 13:1–3). The three synoptic Gospels agree that there was a day, about the middle of the first year of His ministry, when Jesus told a number of parables to the people gathered by the Sea of Galilee. Though He had used parables before, this day marked a change in His way of teaching, a change so impressive to the disciples that St. Matthew felt he could not do justice to it, save by rhetorical exaggeration: "All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, and without parables He did not speak to them" (13:34; cf. Mk 4:33–34). As he was wont to do, the Evangelist saw in this an Old Testament prophecy come true; here was fulfilled "what was spoken through the prophet," who said:

I will open my mouth in parables,
I will utter things hidden since
the foundation of the world.
(Mt 13:35; Ps 77:2)

To search for "things hidden" will be the purpose of this essay. Out of the many gospel parables, I shall select those that in one way or another are related to Israel's place in the economy of salvation. I shall confine myself to this one mighty theme, thus leaving aside other important problems, for instance, the role of the parables in the catechism of the infant Church. And it may be well to say in advance that I look upon Israel as the paradigm of mankind, upon her misstep as the pattern of human failing, upon Scribes and Pharisees as types of those hostile to Jesus in every age and place. Only a perspective so wide can give the parables their full import; only a perspective so universal can free His authentic message to Israel from interpretations that have darkened or overdrawn it.

PARABLE AND MAX

What is a parable? A common word indicates, sets two sides so that the familiar one. Its context and introductory intention to lead his hearers of antiquity, Seneca recommends to bring both speaker and to discussion."1 For Quintilian's image to truth.2

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Like gold are words

The crucible of a wise man

Any biblical passage, the character is enigmatic, if the penetrating mind. The future (see Num 23:10) utterance of a wise man. Even the singer of Psalms teaching is in harmony th

1. Ep. 59:56; cf. Seneca, "Epistles"
2. See Bk. 8:5:72; cf. Q ("Loeb Classical Library")
PARABLE AND MASHAL

What is a parable? A comparison that, as the Greek origin of the word indicates, sets two separate but similar objects or events side by side so that the familiar one may throw light upon the unfamiliar one. Its context and introductory sentence leave no doubt of the narrator's intention to lead his hearers from the seen to the unseen. To the orator of antiquity, Seneca recommends parables "as props to our feebleness, to bring both speaker and listener face to face with the subject under discussion."¹ For Quintilian similitudes reinforce our proofs and lend image to truth.²

Interesting though the use of parables in the rhetoric of ancient Rome may be, the relationship of the gospel parable to the Old Testament mashal is of far greater importance. A broad literary term, mashal is applied to a variety of sayings. No doubt its original form was the popular maxim that, in the brevity of a single sentence, expressed the wisdom of daily life; for instance, when Ezekiel says: "Like mother, like daughter" (16:44). Pithy sayings such as this, coined by the people, later developed into the art form of proverbs in which the comparison is at times fully made, at others only intimated:

*Like golden apples in silver settings
are words spoken at the proper time.*
(Prov 25:11)

*The crucible for silver, and the furnace for gold, but the tester of hearts is the Lord.*
(Prov 17:3)

Any biblical passage, short or long, may be called a mashal, if its character is enigmatic, if its sense is hidden and disclosed to none but the penetrating mind. Thus the oracles of Balaam, giving a glimpse of the future (see Num 23:7), as well as the speeches of Job, being the utterance of a wise man (see 27:1; 29:1), are described as meshalim. Even the singer of Psalm 77, St. Matthew's witness that Jesus' way of teaching is in harmony with that of the Old Testament (see 13:35),

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thinks of his song as a parable, for he sings of Israel's history, not simply to recall the events of the past, but to warn his hearers against imitating the rebelliousness of their fathers in the desert.

As the concise saying became part of sapiential literature, so the longer parabolic narrative became part of prophetic speech. Yet to the interpreters of God's will, literary classification mattered little: Nathan's tale of the poor man's lamb (see 2 Kg 12:1-4), Isaiah's song of the vineyard (see chap. 5), Ezekiel's allegory of the eagles and the vine (see chap. 17), these and other stories like them were, to the Hebrew mind, *meshehalim*. What marks the Old Testament parable is the fact that it is not an explicit comparison but a story intelligible in itself; its real meaning, however, remains unknown to the hearer until the narrator reveals it. "You are the man!" (2 Kg 12:7) the prophet cries out, as David, angered by the greed of the rich man in Nathan's parable, demands the death of the sinner. Again, Isaiah ends his song of unanswered love with: "The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel" (5:7).

By speaking to His people in parables, Jesus consciously placed Himself in the company of those who, prior to His coming, had expressed the divine message in a language drawn from the world of human experience and corresponding to the nature of man, to whom knowledge comes by way of his senses. Even man's most spiritual knowledge is a flower that thrusts its roots in the visible and audible world. Hence Jesus chose an ancient method of teaching which, though cherished most by simple folk, was also savored by the learned. In thus adapting Himself to the mentality of His own people, He adapted Himself at the same time to the mentality of every man, every nation, every age.3

3. The universal appeal of Jesus' parables is stressed by Claude Tresmontant: "The biblical parable could be understood by the Galilean peasant and no less by the Corinthian dock laborer of St. Paul's time; it is equally plain to the factory worker of the Paris of today." (Essai sur la pensée biblique, Paris: Cerf, 1953, p. 65; cf. A Study of Hebrew Thought, trans. Michael Francis Gibson, New York: Desclee, 1960, p. 60.)

That parables are not meant to convey esoteric knowledge but to prod the listener into action is well brought out by Charles H. Dodd. He writes: "[The parables] are the natural expression of a mind that sees truth in concrete pictures rather than conceives it in abstractions. . . . This concrete, pictorial mode of expression is thoroughly characteristic of the sayings of Jesus. Thus instead of saying, 'Beneficence should not be ostentatious,' He says: 'When you give alms, do not blow your trumpet'; instead of saying, 'Wealth is a grave hindrance to true religion,' He says: 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to
Israel's history, not his hearers against the desert.

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PARABLES OF JUDGMENT

I SHOULD like to give a first glimpse of what the parables say about Israel, and what they do not say, by discussing a few of those often called "parables of judgment." Through them Jesus exhorts, ad­

monishes, urges, because He loves; He speaks to the leaders of Israel but also to the whole people in order to bring them to an inner turning and to the full obedience of faith.

THE GRUMBLING CHILDREN

It is early in His ministry that Jesus turns to a crowd gathered around Him to praise the Baptist wasting in prison as a man unbent, in­

vincible, truly a prophet, the greatest messenger of all who preceded Him (see Lk 7:24-28). The people standing before Him are common folk, sinners; they are men and women who at the time of John's preaching submitted to his baptism of repentance while the learned, the Pharisees among them, remained aloof, thereby defeating the plan God had for them (see 7:30). Saddened by these thwarters of God's design, Jesus says:

To what then shall I liken the men of this generation? And what are they like? 4 They are like children sitting in the market place, calling to one another and saying:

"We have piped to you, and you have not danced; we have sung dirges, and you have not wept."

(Lk 7:31-32)

Depending of glad­

enter the Kingdom of God.' In such figurative expressions the germ of the parable is already present. At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought." (Parables of the Kingdom, London: Nisbet, 1935, pp. 15-16.)

4. This is a typical parabolic beginning, akin to the formulas the ancient rabbis used to introduce their own parables: "A parable; it is like," and "Wherewith is it to be compared?" These introductions show, among other things, the "common background in external form" of the parables of Jesus and those of the rabbis.

(William O. E. Oesterley, The Gospel Parables in the Light of Their Jewish Back­

ground, New York: Macmillan, 1936, p. 11.)
accepting the proposals of their leaders, they refuse to participate in
dance or procession; instead of playing, they sit in the market place,
sullen, peevish; instead of joining in a happy song with one another,
they exchange bitter words, words of irritation and reproach. Here
the parable breaks up.

In the choice of a theme so commonplace as to be almost trite,
Jesus discloses His truly Hebrew way of thinking. Unlike the Greek
thinker, who in order to demonstrate his propositions reaches for a
realm of ideas that is outside matter, the Hebrew man sees the things
of heaven incarnate in the here and now of daily life.

To represent a metaphysical or theological reality, the Platonic symbol
has recourse to myth, to unreality. It is disembodied. . . . The Hebrew,
on the contrary, in order to indicate and teach the mysteries that are
the proper food of the spirit . . . uses everyday events, things common
to all, history. Never does Jesus employ myths, [Platonic] allegories or
legends; what is is meaningful enough to make known the mysteries of
salvation He has come to reveal.6

Traditionally, the parable has been related to the verses that follow
it: "For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking
wine, and you say: 'He has a devil.' The Son of Man came eating
and drinking, and you say: 'Behold a man who is a glutton, and a
wine-drinker, a friend of publicans and sinners!'" (Lk 7:33–34).
St. Augustine, for instance, has this comment:
The words "we have sung dirges, and you have not wept," refer to John
who, by abstaining from food and drink, stands for the grief of repent­
ance. The words "we have played the flute for you" refer to the Lord
Himself who, in taking food and drink like other men, represents the
joy of God's kingdom. But [the Jews] wanted neither to humble them­
selves with John nor to rejoice with Christ.6

At first sight, this interpretation seems beyond question but it over­
steps the limits of St. Luke's text, which stresses that the children in
the market place are "calling to one another." There are two groups
of children to be sure, one wishing to play wedding, the other funeral,
but the point is that they are all alike in their quarrelsome refusal
of every suggestion. I surly little urchins: T
alas, of our own.

In order to understand who tells it, one must
The meaning of a parable, if it is dissected, it loses
compare not the individual actual persons, not actual
one must compare not the facts the story is to the whole with the whole.

This principle forbids the Baptist, the other
favored by patristic exegesis; the flute and the singing of the exegete must please them, none can
children snub every one and Pharisees reject the
Jesus and use every suitable

Clearly, this story men responsible for the
and others from the outside brought out most for­

7. Pure parables are for (debtors), and so are pure a
The majority of parables prevail. They are either
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editio of the Commentar­ ponti, 1506, p. 238) which
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of every suggestion. Neither John nor Jesus is represented by these surly little urchins: They voice the refusals of Jesus' generation and, alas, of our own.

In order to understand a pure parable, and thus the mind of him who tells it, one must follow the principle formulated by Maldonatus:

The meaning of a parable must be drawn from the whole of the narrative; if it is dissected, it loses its vigor and its bearing. Hence one must compare not the individual features of parabolic characters with those of actual persons, not accident with accident but substance with substance; one must compare not partial aspects of the story with partial aspects of the facts the story is to throw light on, not segment with segment but the whole with the whole.

This principle forbids us to compare one group of children with the Baptist, the other with the Christ; it also blocks the inquiry, so favored by patristic exegesis, into the significance of the playing of the flute and the singing of dirges, of dancing and weeping. The eye of the exegete must pierce the variety of embellishing features in order to find the essence of the parable, which is none other than the ill-humor of the children in the market place. Just as no invitation can please them, none can satisfy the Scribes and Pharisees. Just as the children snub every offer of their companions, many of the Scribes and Pharisees reject the austerity of John as well as the moderation of Jesus and use every subterfuge to evade the surrender of their inner-most hearts.

Clearly, this story of stubborn children is an admonition to the men responsible for the welfare of their people not to bar themselves and others from the messianic favors at hand. Its cry of warning is brought out most forcibly by two modern exegetes, Dodd and Jere-mias:

7. Pure parables are few (the grumbling children, the unclean spirit, the two debtors), and so are pure allegories (the good shepherd, the vine and the branches). The majority of parables are mixed forms in which now this, now that, element prevails. They are either parables with allegoric features or allegories with parabolic features.

The picture of petulant children who quarrel about their games suggests the frivolous captiousness of a generation who would not see that the movement inaugurated by John and brought to such an unexpected pitch by Jesus was a crisis of the first magnitude, but wasted their time in foolish carping at the asceticism of the one, and the good-companionship of the other. They fiddled while Rome was burning.

"You," says Jesus, "are exactly like the grumbling children. Nothing will please you, God sends you his messengers, the last messengers, to the last generation before the catastrophe. But to you the Baptist is a madman, and I am a reveller. You hate the preaching of repentance, and you hate the proclamation of the gospel. So you play your childish game with God's messengers while Rome burns!"

Subdued though it is, Jesus' lament over His generation echoes Jeremiah's anguish at the indocility of his contemporaries, only now those who cannot be taught or moved are the learned of the land:

My breast! my breast! how I suffer!
The walls of my heart!
My heart beats wildly,
I cannot be still;
For I have heard the sound of the trumpet,
the alarm of war...

Fools my people are,
they know me not;
Senseless children they are,
having no understanding;
They are wise in evil,
but know not how to do good.

(4:19, 22)

But all is not darkness for there is this happy prospect: "Wisdom is justified by all her children" (Lk 7:35). Even though many Scribes and Pharisees keep aloof, there are the children of wisdom who will hear wisdom's word and accept her invitation.

11. "To justify God's doings," "to acknowledge as right His judgment and decree," are expressions found in rabbinical literature. For several examples, see Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch (Munich: Beck, 1922), I, 604.
12. For a Palestinian was an extraordinary me
Israel in the Parables

THE BARREN FIG TREE

Another call to repentance is sounded in the parable of the tree that has lost its vigor:

A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came seeking fruit thereon, and found none. And he said to the vinedresser: "Behold, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down, therefore; why does it still encumber the ground?" But he answered him and said: "Sir, let it alone this year too, till I dig around it and manure it. Perhaps it may bear fruit; but if not, then afterwards thou shalt cut it down."

(Lk 13:6–9)

Neither the owner's charge nor the gardener's prayer are difficult to understand: While the one thinks of his profit, the other remembers his worries and joys at the time the seedling grew and is thus ready to go to any length to save the tree he loves. Again the story remains unfinished.

Whatever their persuasions, exegetes admire this parable because of its charm, its freshness, and its fidelity to nature. Yet one must not exaggerate this fidelity: The parable is true to nature only in so far as is consistent with its didactic purpose. As a matter of fact, even in those days wood was scarce in Palestine, and a gardener would hardly have granted a barren fig tree so long a reprieve. But the parable's intention demands a singular gesture. That the story contains an offer of mercy becomes clear when the preceding lines are kept in mind: "Now there came at that very time [on Jesus' last journey to Jerusalem, a few weeks before His passion] some who brought Him word about the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices" (Lk 13:1). This bewildering report and the memory of a similar incident give Jesus the opportunity to warn not only the Scribes, but all those around Him: "Or those eighteen upon whom the tower of Siloë fell and killed them; do you think that they were more guilty than all the other dwellers in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent, you will all perish in the same manner" (Lk 13:4–5). The terror of judgment is upon them! It is the eleventh hour, only a change of heart can avert the national catastrophe that is near.

12. For a Palestinian gardener the use of manure was almost unknown and thus was an extraordinary measure.
We cannot interpret the parable of the barren fig tree in exactly the same way as we did that of the children in the market place. With the latter, the point of comparison is exclusively the contrariness of the children. All other features are unessential and can be altered without impairing the sense of the parable; suggestions of different games, for instance, would leave the core of the story untouched. The former, however, demands another approach for it is not a pure parable but an allegory with parabolic overtones. The fig tree, which the Greek original places emphatically at the beginning of the story, cannot be replaced without damage to meaning. In reading the parable, one also senses the importance of its persons, the owner of the vineyard and its keeper; there is in fact a certain solemnity about them. Almost unnoticeably, the little tale assumes some of the aspects of metaphor and allegory, in which one thing is not set by the side of another—this is the way of similitudes—but in which one thing is substituted for another.  

When interpreting the parable of the tree whose ebbing vitality has made it a burden to its owner, one must guard against two extremes: an inordinate fondness for allegory and, no less, a fear of it. One must be wary of the tendency of the Fathers to see significance in every single stroke of the image drawn: the vineyard, the digging, the manure, the three years of barrenness. But one must no less avoid the phobia of some critics who flee even the thought of allegory in the parables as Jesus told them. Only when its significant metaphors—the fig tree, the owner of the vineyard, the vinedressers—are distinguisched from its incidental bold relief. The fig tree is a figure of Israel, the owner of the vineyard is Jesus, his vinedressers are the contemporaries of Jesus, by His words and example the owners of the vineyard. The vinedressers are the threathening judges who, for so long but in vain, had tried to renew their vineyard, and her devotion, and her Word (Mt 21:34).  

But who is the vinedresser? In this particular parable, several suggestions come to mind:  

Turning story into simile and metaphor  

\begin{itemize}
\item The fig tree wins a respite of one year because of its little flowers. The tree that bears fruit is the house of Israel (Mt 21:43). 
\item The owner will be spared if it bears fruit next year (Mt 21:42). 
\item But the tree will be cut down if not (Mt 21:43). 
\end{itemize}

For the parable’s last sentence, perhaps [the fig tree] may be interpreted as follows: “If you do not bear fruit, you will be cut down” (Mt 21:43). This would fit the parable’s meaning: As the vinedresser gave the tree one last chance, in hope of renewal, the vinedresser is Jesus, by His words and example the contemporaries of Jesus, by His words and example the vinedressers are the threatening judges who, for so long but in vain, had tried to renew their vineyard, and her devotion, and her Word (Mt 21:34). 

Israel’s was a unique people. It was isolated in history, in the opportunities and conditions of life, in its divine destiny and special mission. (Ps 80:5; 106:45; 110:10; 135:4; Is 1:5; 2:1-5; 56:3-8; 63:17).  

Israel’s was a unique people. It was isolated in history, in the opportunities and conditions of life, in its divine destiny and special mission. (Ps 80:5; 106:45; 110:10; 135:4; Is 1:5; 2:1-5; 56:3-8; 63:17).  

13. Simile and metaphor differ in this: In a simile one thing is likened to another, for instance: "Be wise as serpents, and guileless as doves” (Mt 10:16) or "They were bewildered and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd” (Mt 9:36). In a metaphor one thing becomes another, for instance: “We are the people he shepherds, the flock he guides” (Ps 94:7) or “The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel” (Is 5:7). In his Rhetoric, Aristotle declares that the difference between simile and metaphor is but slight. When the poet says of Achilles that he sprang on his foe like a lion, this is a simile. But when he says of him: “The lion sprang,” this is a metaphor. (Rhetoric, iii. 4. 1406a. 20–22.) Now, an allegory is a series of metaphors which, in order to be understood properly, must be interpreted point by point. Yet, easy as it is to define these figures of speech, it is difficult to keep them distinct while using them. A speaker may move from one form to another, as the situation requires, and not be aware of it.  

14. Attempts, for instance, to see in the three years of barrenness a reference to the three ages of the world, the three phases of Israel’s history, or the three years of Jesus’ public ministry are completely arbitrary. Such easy identifications between parabolic features and historic events frequently destroy the simplicity of the story.  

15. It is the prophets who speak of the people (see Os 9:10; Mic 7:17; 14:5; Zeph 1:12; Zach 1:7). As long as this word of the Lord is spoken, it is not fulfilled; as long as this threat is absolute; both can be interpreted as a type of spiritual judgment or spiritual renovation. As long as the Lord’s people remain unfaithful, his word remains unfulfilled. The threat is absolute; but the end result is dependent on the people’s response to it.  

16. Augustin George renounce the seven churches (see Apoc 1:10). As long as this word of the Lord is spoken, it is not fulfilled; as long as this threat is absolute; both can be interpreted as a type of spiritual judgment or spiritual renovation. As long as the Lord’s people remain unfaithful, his word remains unfulfilled. The threat is absolute; but the end result is dependent on the people’s response to it.  

"What mot I ha.  \( \text{What mot I ha.} \)  

But why, who did it be..."
The tree in exactly the same place. With the contrariness of the different games, the vineyard is Yahweh, the Lord and King of Israel who, for so long but vainly, has been awaiting the fruits of her faith, her devotion, and her worship, in whose name Isaiah laments:

*What more was there to do for my vineyard that I had not done? Why, when I looked for the crop of grapes, did it bring forth wild grapes? (5:4)*

But who is the vinedresser pleading that the death sentence be stayed if not Jesus who is come to save what is lost?

Turning story into statement, this then seems to be the parable's meaning: As the vinedresser, by his pleading and offer of special care, wins a respite of one year for a fig tree destined to be cut down, so Jesus, by His words and wonders, wins for His people a brief delay of the threatening judgment. During that time their spirit must be renewed if they do not wish to perish. We know that most of Jesus' contemporaries did not use the period of grace granted them and that the threatened catastrophe, in all its horror, overtook the city of Jerusalem and its people. Still, it would be wrong to read this and other parables of judgment as evidence of Israel's final rejection. For the parable's last sentence is not altogether without promise. "Perhaps [the fig tree] may bear fruit; but if not, then afterwards thou shalt cut it down" sounds as if the vinedresser would not fell the tree without a new command. Even though the tree may deserve to be abandoned, he begs: "Sir, let it alone this year too."

Israel's was a unique hour in history, yet every historic hour mirrors the opportunities and dangers of that one exceptional hour. As then,
so now, grace is accepted and grace is wasted, and it would seem more often wasted than accepted. God's anger ought to strike, but the prayer for still another year of grace is repeated again and again in the sacrifice of the Son of Man. Once come, once having shed His blood, He never ceases to intercede on behalf of Israel and of the whole world so that judgment may be postponed.17

THE UNCLEAN SPIRIT

The parable of the man possessed by an unclean spirit, too, warns of the judgment that is soon to strike. Without comparing its two versions and without going into the question of its original setting, I shall simply follow the wording of St. Matthew. According to him, Jesus told it in Galilee, sometime after He had received the deputation sent by the imprisoned Baptist and shortly after He had exorcised a man possessed, blind, and dumb. The situation is even graver than it was when He spoke of the grumbling children. Now some of the Pharisees face the young Rabbi with open hostility. In order to degrade Him in the eyes of the people they do not shrink from the most incredible accusation: "This man does not cast out devils except by Beelzebub, the prince of devils" (Mt 12:24). Jesus rejects the slander by saying that a kingdom at war with itself must needs perish. In the parable of the "strong man" that follows, He reveals Himself as the never-to-be-vanquished victor over Satan. Conscious of His messianic dignity, He demands an unmistakable stand for or against Himself; still, He declares that sins against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but not sins against the Spirit. Having refused the Pharisees any sign save that of Jonas, He finally tells the multitude, wavering and undecided, this parable:

But when the unclean spirit has gone out of a man, he roams through dry places in search of a resting place, and finds none. Then he says: "I will return to my house which I left"; and when he has come, he finds the place unoccupied, swept and adorned. Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more evil than himself, and they enter in and dwell there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first. So shall it be with this evil generation also.

(Mt 12:43-45)

17. See Josef Dillersberger, Lukas (Salzburg: Müller, 1941), IV, 170.

With this story, the parable comes alive again (see 17) and borrows the material of His day, without intending demoniacs and their likes. The evil spirit is described to convince himself that he wanted to, not because of which I left" (Mt 12:24). Immortal fear, of the old lodging, now becomes, compelling him the bold stroke that he vividly described in a

For the correct interpretation of literary structure. Is it both? None of its features of meaning, none is a substitution of the parable's sense, of Tillmann, among others:

To see in the arid wilderness adorning (of the house, or, indeed, that of vice) that of an unclean spirit; in the undertaking. These indeed give meaning to their parable itself offers no end.

The only way of a complication of Maldonado accident, but substance the whole with the whole of what the whole? With a man, a state not mere from his tormentor but 18. See Deut 8:15; Is 19. Fritz Tillmann, Dis-
With this story, the whole scene of the exorcism of the mute man comes alive again (see Mt 12:22–24). For the people’s sake Jesus borrows the material for His parable from the popular beliefs of His day, without intending, however, to instruct His listeners about demoniacs and their affliction or demons, their nature and doings. The evil spirit is described as a bandit; braggart that he is, he tries to convince himself that he left the man he possessed because he wanted to, not because he was forced out: “I will return to my house which I left” (Mt 12:44). His restlessness; his stay in the desert, from time immemorial feared as the abode of the devil; his reconnoiter of the old lodging, now more desirable than ever; his miserable weakness, compelling him to seek alliance with seven strong companions; the bold stroke that helps him regain his former dwelling—all this is vividly described in a few brief sentences.

For the correct interpretation of the story one must determine its literary structure. Is it a pure parable, an allegory, or a mixture of both? None of its features comes near the fig tree in gravity or fullness of meaning, none is an obvious scriptural symbol. Thus an allegorization of the parable cannot but end in absurdity. This is the conclusion of Tillmann, among others:

To see in the arid wilderness the world of pagans; in the cleaning and adorning [of the house] the operation of virtues and supernatural gifts or, indeed, that of vices, which are supposed to be the jewels proper to an unclean spirit; in the seven demons the seven deadly sins, is a useless undertaking. These individual features cannot support such a strain: To give meaning to them can only lead to inconsistencies for which the parable itself offers no excuse.19

The only way of avoiding such inconsistencies is the thorough application of Maldonatus’s basic rule: not to compare accident with accident, but substance with substance; not segment with segment, but the whole with the whole. What, then, is this parable’s substance, what the whole? Without doubt, it is the final state of the possessed man, a state not merely identical with that before he gained freedom from his tormentor but one more disquieting, more dangerous, almost
hopeless. It is a state like this that threatens the contemporaries of Jesus if, after having been roused from their spiritual slumber, first by the Baptist and now by Him, they give ear to the malicious talk of those Pharisees who say that He is in league with the devil. If they let themselves be estranged from Him, they will not simply return to their former indifference but slide into something far worse. All this, one must not forget, Jesus says to the men of His day, "this evil generation" (Mt 12:45) as Tillmann notes:

Jesus does not intend the parable to be an abstract of the history of His people, nor does He imply that though they were once delivered from the devil by Moses and his law, they have now, after their rejection of the Messiah, irrevocably fallen into the hands of the archenemy of God.20 Yet many exegetcs of the past, disregarding the primary rule of interpretation, have seen in the parable of the devil's triumph a summary of Israel's entire history. Thus St. John Chrysostom is able to write:

This is what [Jesus] said [to the Jews]: "As a man, once possessed, then freed from his affliction, should he become negligent, brings upon himself a derangement even more grievous, so did you. You, too, victims of great folly, were once in the grip of the devil when you worshipped idols and sacrificed your sons to demons. Still I did not abandon you but cast out that devil by the prophets. Now I myself have come to cleanse you. But you do not heed, rather thrust yourselves into greater wickedness." (For it is a greater and more grievous crime to slay the Lord Himself than prophets.) "Thus you will suffer things more grievous than those you bore in the past, I mean those you bore in Babylon, in Egypt, and under Antiochus." Indeed, harsher than those were the sufferings that befell them under Vespasian and Titus. Hence He said: "There will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, nor will be" (Mt 24:21).

The tribulations to come are not all that Jesus wishes them to understand; He wishes them to know they will be utterly destitute of all virtue and more vulnerable to the power of the devil than in previous periods of their history. Though they did sin then, there were upright men among them and the providence of God was with them and the grace of the Spirit, tending them, correcting them, ever offering them His aid. But from now on, [Jesus] says, they will be fully deprived of this guardianship, so much so that virtue will be rare, evil strong, and the tyranny of 21. In Mt. 1
22. In Mt. 1
23. Cornelii
314.
devils abundant. . . In their evil doings [the Jews today] surpass their ancestors by far; sorcery and magic they practice, wantonness they display, and all of it beyond measure. Though at the moment they are held in check, they have often rebelled and risen against the emperors so that they have sunk to the bottom of evil. 21

Here St. John Chrysostom speaks, not Jesus; for though the great Church father makes the parable on the return of the evil spirit his theme, his bitter denunciations of the Jews are completely out of tune with the parable's intention. The same must be said of another commentary on St. Matthew, wrongly attributed to St. John Chrysostom. Its unknown author goes to an even greater extreme when he applies to the whole Jewish people the term "synagogue of Satan" (Apoc 2:9), a term that in its original context clearly referred only to the Jews of Smyrna; as persecutors of the Church there, they did not deserve to be honored by the name "Jews."

The last state of this people has become worse than the first, for previously, though they were not [true] worshippers of God, they were not deicides and though they sinned against Him, they were still called God's people. But now, as St. John testifies, they have become the synagogue of Satan?2

The tradition that mistakes the parable of the devil's success for a synopsis of Jewish history is well summed up by the seventeenth-century exegete, Cornelius a Lapide, when he has Jesus address His people:

[The wicked companions of the evil spirit] make you blaspheme me, my doctrine, my miracles, and say that by Beelzebub I cast out devils; they make you pursue me incessantly unto death and crucify me, which of all crimes is the greatest and the worst. Therefore God will punish you through Titus with utter destruction and cause you to be without God, without Messiah, without law, without temple, without sacrifice, without kingdom, without faith, that you will obstinately hold your own unbelief and blindness to be the true faith and the true light. 23

There is in this passage none of the restraint an exegete must exercise if he wishes to be an interpreter and not an inventor. Lest he

become a victim of his own bias, he must stay within the confines of a given parable. If one called to preach the gospel widens the parable's application as he ought—for the here and now of Jesus' day is the pattern of the here and now of every day—he must apply it not merely to all the generations of Jews but to all the generations of men. Far from condemning His people to the lasting servitude of the devil, Jesus warns the multitude near Him not to forget what they have seen, not to forget what they have heard. A man, a generation, freed from sloth is like a house from which the spirit hostile to God has been expelled, He tells them. "A new master must reign there, the word of Jesus must be its rule of life, and the joy of the Kingdom of God must pervade it. It must become a katoiketerion tou theou en pneumati, a dwelling place for God in the spirit (Eph 2:22)." 24

PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

The closer we move toward the tragic end of the conflict between Jesus and the leaders of Israel, the sterner the parables become. With the stories of the two sons, the vinedressers, and the wedding feast, the theme of judgment reaches its climax, while another is introduced, that of God's reign. In these parables, Jesus cuts through a maze of illusions, separating spirit from spirit: those who will from those who will not share in His kingdom.

THE TWO SONS

At His triumphal entrance into Jerusalem, throngs greet Jesus as the Son of David, the Messiah. He cleanses the Temple, drives out the money-changers, heals the blind and the lame, while the children praise Him. The next day He returns to the Temple to teach there. Contemptuous of His compassion and angered by His power, the chief priests and elders question Him. When they ask by what authority He does what He does, He answers with a question of His own: "Whence was the baptism of John? From heaven or from men?" (Mt 21:25). Their reply is a fearful, evasive "We do not know" (Mt 21:27). The coming of John, whose message they ignored, was another sign of God's favor. Fugitives, then, from grace, Israel's teachers show them how to proceed to confirm their faith.

"A man had two sons. He worked today in my vineyard and afterwards he regretted he spoke in the same manner of those who do not go. Which of them did the father's will?" 25

Most of the Fathers, the Gentiles, and the despised are kept out of the market place, they may not enter the messianic Kingdom of His impenituous "I want to believe!" Outcasts from society, they repent their initial disbelief in Jesus, and see it as a sign of God's favor. Called to the kingdom of Heaven, they say "Lord, let me say that the kingdom of heaven is not for me!" (Mt 18:29). Thus Terullian God." (Adv. Marcell.)

teachers show themselves unfit for their high office, and Jesus proceeds to confirm this unfitness:

"A man had two sons; and he came to the first and said: 'Son, go and work today in my vineyard.' But he answered and said: 'I will not'; but afterwards he regretted it and went. And he came to the other and spoke in the same manner. And this one answered: 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the father's will?" They said: "The first." Jesus said to them: "Amen! I say to you, the publicans and harlots are entering the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of justice, and you did not believe him. But the publicans and the harlots believed him; whereas you, seeing it, did not even repent afterwards, that you might believe him."

(Mt 21:28-32)

Most of the Fathers take the two sons as figures of the Jews and the Gentiles, whereas many modern exegetes see in them the esteemed and the despised within Israel. The latter view seems to be more in keeping with the compassion, indeed, the respect with which Jesus, after finishing the parable, speaks of publicans and harlots. Hence the son who promised to work in the vineyard but did not carry out his pledge depicts Jewish officialdom. Though Israel's leaders pretend to say Yes to the will of God, they are, at this critical moment, found out. Called to pave the way for God's reign—the reign announced by the Baptist and made present in the person and message of Jesus—they are no longer standing aside like the sulky children in the market place, they are in these very days preparing their final No to the messianic King. The other son, ill-mannered but soon regretful of his impetuous "I will not," is the image of publicans and harlots. Outcasts from society, outcasts it would seem even from God, they repent their initial disobedience, give ear to the message of the Baptist and of Jesus, and as changed men and women welcome God's reign.

No privileged station, Jesus proclaims, no merely external worship, no saying "Lord, Lord," but only total commitment helps a man enter the kingdom of heaven (see Mt 7:21). The parable spells out once again the chief and of Jesus, and as changed men and women welcome God's reign.

25. This identification of the person of Jesus with the rule of God is implied in many New Testament passages, for instance, in Mk 10:29, Mt 19:29, and Lk 18:29. Thus Tertullian could write: "In the Gospel Christ Himself is the reign of God." (Adv. Marcion. IV, 33, PL 2:471.)
more the prophetic grievance against a life that contradicts faith, a grievance never ceasing from Samuel to Malachi:

*Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice And to hearken than the fat of rams.*  
(1 Kg 15:22)

Yet, for all its sternness, the parable of the two dissimilar sons does not lack solace: The publicans and harlots will enter the kingdom of God before the "just," but even to the "just" the doors may open. Though they have broken their promise to God, they may fulfill it in days to come.

**THE VINEDRESSERS**

The tale of the vinedressers gives a still deeper insight into our topic: Israel's mysterious destiny as seen in the parables. So much was Christian catechesis aware of this parable's importance for the history of salvation that, except for the parable of the sower, it is the only one recorded by all three Synoptics. I shall give its simplest version, that of St. Mark, though occasionally supplemented by expressions from the other evangelists.

A man (a householder) planted a vineyard, and put a hedge about it, and dug a wine vat, and built a tower; then he let it out to vinedressers, and went abroad (for a long time). And at the proper time (when the fruit season drew near) he sent a servant to the vinedressers to receive from the vinedressers some of the fruit of the vineyard; but they seized him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. And again he sent another servant to them; but this one they wounded in the head and treated shamefully. And again he sent another, and him they killed, and many others; beating some, and killing some.  

26 Now he still had one left, a beloved son; and him he sent to them last of all, saying: "They will respect my son."

But the vinedressers said to one another: "This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." So they seized him and killed him, and cast him out of the owner of the vineyard (and will give the vineyard in their seasons).

The very first words of the atmosphere. The vineyard, deliberately placed at the physical Israel often that God's design, called to do the physical Israel of the Covenant down to John the Baptist, and the history of the son who in the absence of the "just" are Israel's rulers. God and, since the journey is mentioned in the parable's dramatic effect, the parable portrays, first the parable portrays, first the various messengers and the servant Jesus' hearers may envisage and Pharisaees: "Jerusalem,

27. Busy considers this word's connotation: "They cast him out of the consciousness allusion to the historical persecution by Heb 13:12: 'And so I will cut you off from all the script."

28. The hedge is seen as the tower as the lofty revelation of the Church in which all good serve God's glory. (See Comm. ii, p. 414.)

29. Jeremiah frequently calls the lips the message of the Holy Spirit or the Church in which all good serve God's glory. (See Comm. iv, p. 414.)

30. Jeremiah frequently calls in his oracles the lament: "From even to this day, I have sent you have not obeyed me nor paid heed to their fathers" (7:25-26; see...
killed him, and cast him out of the vineyard. What therefore will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vinedressers, and will give the vineyard to others (who will render to him the fruits in their seasons).

(Mk 12:1-9)

The very first words of the parable take us into an allegorical atmosphere. The vineyard, in the Greek original of St. Mark's Gospel deliberately placed at the beginning of the story, is Israel: not so much the physical Israel often unwilling to serve but rather the Israel of God's design, called to do His will and to submit fully to His reign. Hedge, tower, and vat, to each of which many of the Fathers give a distinct meaning, are nothing more than parabolic features, describing God's minute providence for His people. The vinedressers, who in the absence of the owner are put in charge of the vineyard, are Israel's rulers. Goal and duration of his journey are undiscovered, since the journey is mentioned for no other purpose than to heighten the parable's dramatic effect. The servants are the prophets of the Old Covenant down to John the Baptist. What Scripture tells of the fate of Moses, Elijah, Elisha, Jeremiah, and the other servants of God sent to shake the conscience of Israel, fully corresponds to the situation the parable portrays, futile though it would be to attempt matching the various messengers and their mistreatment with specific prophets. Rather are the servants' sufferings described so graphically that Jesus' hearers may envisage the horror of His last warning to Scribes and Pharisees: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem! thou who killlest the prophets,

27. Buz'y considers this wording the authentic one but finds in the Lucan version: "They cast him out of the vineyard and killed him (20:15; cf. Mt 21:39) a concious allusion to the historic event of the Passion [that] seems to be influenced by Heb 13:12: 'And so Jesus also ... suffered outside the gate.'" (Op. cit., p. 414.)

28. The hedge is seen as the Law or God's solicitude for His people, and the tower as the lofty revelation of the Old Testament that enabled Israel's priests to look ahead to Christ's coming. Again, the vat is said to be the prophets from whose lips the message of the Holy Spirit is poured like a sparkling wine over the people, or the Church in which all good works are changed into the wine of sacrifice and serve God's glory. (See Comm. in Evang. Mt., PG 56:853-854.)

29. Jeremiah frequently calls the prophets servants. Like a refrain, there appears in his oracles the lament: "From the day that your fathers left the land of Egypt even to this day, I have sent you unceasingly all my servants the prophets. Yet they have not obeyed me nor paid heed; they have stiffened their necks and done worse than their fathers" (7:25-26; see also 25:4; 26:5; 29:19; 44:4).
and stonest those who are sent to thee! How often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen gathers her young under her wings, but thou wouldst not!" (Mt 23:37).

The repeated ejections of the servants build up to a climactic peak, the coming of the son and the murderous scheme of the vine-dressers. There, at the peak, we are shown two mysteries: the incomprehensible mystery of divine love which values the fruits of the vineyard, that is, Israel's grateful response, above the life of the one beloved Son; and the equally incomprehensible mystery of human resistance to the promptings of grace. I say human resistance, though the vine-dressers who plotted the son's death that the inheritance might be theirs (see Mk 12:7) were Jews. Their craving for the inheritance was a sin not altogether unique in Israel; others before them looked on their privileges as if they were rights, considered what had been given them on loan as an enduring possession. Still, theirs was a sin not confined to one people: To be one's own master is the temptation of every creature and the fall of many everywhere. But to return to the historic setting of the parable: When resistance becomes rebellion, when the cultivators of the vineyard not only refuse to make their payments but do away with the rightful heir, they forfeit their tenure and must needs be removed.

"He will come and destroy the vine-dressers, and will give the vineyard to others" (Mk 12:9). As untrustworthy guardians of the vineyard, Israel's leaders will be dismissed; worse, the Jewish community will suffer disruption and the people cease to be the visible manifestation of God's reign. The kingdom of God will be taken from them and given into the care and custody of "a people yielding its fruits" (Mt 21:43), the Church. Yet, as with the parable of the possessed man, so with the allegory of the vine-dressers we must be on our guard not to read into it something it is not meant to convey. In spite of the wickedness of the husbandmen, in spite of the dire consequences of their mutiny, Israel is not lost to God's love, for He is a constant lover. He does not repent, He will not revoke the call with which He called her, the Apostle proclaims (see Rom 11:29).

30. After his arrest, Stephen tells the members of the Sanhedrin that God gave Abraham no property in the land in which they now dwell, "not even a foot of land" (Ac 7:5); what He gave was a promise, no more and no less. Like the patriarch, then, a guest, a stranger in the land of Canaan (see Gen 23:4), Israel must be a pilgrim on earth.

31. The two allegories independent of one another may well be that Jesus as the "topstone" or "keystone," completes an edifice (see Jeremias, "Lithos," Tübingen: Kohlhammer, 1951) as does Christ the cornerstone of the Messianic outline of His own people. While one psalm verse ascribes glory following upon Zion's suffering and glorification (Ps 87:6), another (Ps 117) exhorts the stranger in a world of pious to "make haste to enter" the same psalm verse (cf. Jeremias, "topstone" or "keystone," as a "key stone") before becoming king was the messianic interpretation not unknown. (See Strack-...
THE KEYSTONE

Joined to the allegory of the vinedressers is another, that of the keystone. As the first tells of the coming of the Son and of His death, so the second intimates the splendor of His resurrection which crowns His redemptive work:

He looked on them and said: "What then is this that is written, The stone which the builders rejected has become the keystone?" (Lk 20:17; see Mt 21:42; Ps 118:22)

The psalm verse Jesus quotes originally referred to Israel. Because of her political insignificance, she was rejected by the empire builders; while these mighty neighbors divided the conquests that Alexander the Great had left behind, they thought her too unimportant to be made part of their plans. But then came the victory of which Psalm 117 sings, probably that of the Maccabees; it proved that God had chosen from all nations this tiny people as the foundation and the pinnacle of His world-wide kingdom-to-be. Jesus sees in this verse an outline of His own destiny: Thrown aside by the leaders of His people like a useless stone, He will yet rise and be lifted up to become the kingly stone of the temple of the messianic age. This total inversion, glory following upon degradation, is the work of the Father:

51. The two allegories are usually treated as a unit but they are, Buzy remarks, independent of one another in their literary structure. (See op. cit., p. 418.) It may well be that Jesus added the brief and quickly sketched allegory of the keystone in order to combine the prophecy of His resurrection with that of His suffering.) Another exegete, however, sees in this allegory, one of the "favorite proof-texts for the resurrection and exaltation of the rejected Christ," the work of the early Church. (Jeremias, op. cit., p. 58.)

52. If one takes into account the Syriac translation of this psalm verse and other testimonies of Christian and Jewish antiquity, kepelb gniar should be rendered "topstone" or "keystone," rather than "cornerstone." The topstone is the one that completes an edifice (see Zach 4:7-9); the keystone, placed on the crown of an arch, is considered the one that binds the whole structure together. (See Joachim Jeremias, "Lithos," Theologisches Woerterbuch zum Neuen Testament, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1942, IV, 278.)

53. That the young Church understood Ps 118:22 as a scriptural proof for the suffering and glorification of Jesus is shown by the use St. Peter makes of it in his speech before the high priests and in his letter to Christ's faithful dwelling as strangers in a world of pagans (see Ac 4:25; 1 Pet 2:6-7). In the rabbinical tradition the same psalm verse is at times referred to Abraham, who is thought to have been scorned by the builders of the Tower of Babel, at other times to David, who before becoming king was ignored by the "builders," Samuel and his court. Still, the messianic interpretation of the stone rejected by some but valued by others is not unknown. (See Strack-Billerbeck, op. cit., I, 875-876.)
By the Lord this has been done, 
and it is wonderful in our eyes. 
(Mt 21:42; see Ps 117:23)

With the dignity of the Messiah so great, those who flee His rule 
fly to ruin: “Everyone who falls upon that stone will be broken to 
pieces; but upon whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder” (Lk 
20:18; see Mt 21:44). As a clay vessel shatters when it is hurled 
against a stone, so any assault on the Messiah will destroy His 
as-sailant. Again, as the falling stone Daniel describes crushes the mighti-
est earthly power (see 2:34–45), so will the judging Christ break His 
enemies. Though Daniel’s warning speaks neither of the undepend-
able vinedressers nor of the foolish builders as such, but in a general 
way of every force hostile to Christ, still his warning has bearing on 
Israel’s history.

Jesus is bound to Israel by ties of blood; what is more, He is in 
the deepest and fullest sense Israel’s center, the keystone that perfects, 
and gives ultimate meaning to, the building whose foundation was laid 
by Moses and the prophets. Thus the fall of Jerusalem is fact and 
symbol: It marks the inner catastrophe that befell Israel because her 
builders had rejected the crowning stone. Only when Zechariah’s 
prophetic vision is fulfilled, only when Zerubbabel brings forth the 
topstone from the ruins of the Temple and, amidst the jubilant shouts 
of the people, restores it to its old place (see Zach 4:7), will the 
stone no longer be a rock to stumble on but one that unites and sancti-
fies (see Is 8:14; 28:16).

THE WEDDING FEAST

In the Old Testament book of Proverbs, wisdom is said to have built 
a house of splendor and perfection—seven columns grace it. There 
she holds her banquet, where meat and wine, the food of truth and 
the drink of goodness, are ready for her guests. She sends forth her 
maids to summon those whose company she especially desires, and 
she herself invites all who are willing:

34. This image is paralleled in rabbinical literature, with one great difference, 
however; there the crushing power of the stone is attributed to the people of 
Israel. Rabbi Simeon ben Jose ben Lakunia liked to compare Israel to stones but 
the nations to potsherds. “If a stone falls on a pot, woe to the pot!” (Est. R. 7:10; 
85.)
Come, eat of my food,  
and drink of the wine I have mixed!  
Forsake foolishness that you may live;  
advance in the way of understanding.  
(Prov 9:5–6)

It may well be that wisdom’s banquet inspired Jesus’ story of the wedding feast:

The kingdom of heaven is like a king who made a marriage feast for his son. And he sent his servants to call in those invited to the marriage feast, but they would not come. Again he sent out other servants, saying: “Tell those who are invited: Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and fardlings are killed, and everything is ready; come to the marriage feast.” But they made light of it, and went off, one to his farm, and another to his business; and the rest laid hold of his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them.

But when the king heard of it, he was angry; and he sent his armies, destroyed those murderers, and burnt their city. Then he said to his servants: “The marriage feast indeed is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy; go therefore to the crossroads, and invite to the marriage feast whomever you shall find.” . . . For many are called, but few are chosen.

(Mt 22:2–9, 14)

Once more we breathe the air of allegory. The king, the king’s son, the marriage feast—all these are biblical images rich in meaning. No more wondrous way to describe the glory of the messianic era than by images of wedding and banquet, images of love and joy.  

Those invited to the banquet are the children of Israel whom, at Sinai,

35. Marriage is one of the great prophetic images for Yahweh’s covenant with His people, a covenant to be kept faithfully and renewed ardently. (See, for instance, Os 2:19; Is 54:4–8; 62:4–5; Ez 16:7–14.) The image is no less familiar to rabbinical literature. When Rabbi Jose (150 A.D.) read the verse: “The Lord came from Sinai” (Deut 33:2), he understood it to mean that the Lord went forth to receive Israel as a bridegroom goes forth to meet his bride. (See Mekilta, Bahodesh on Ex. 19:10–17; cf. Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, trans. J. Lauterbach, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1933–35, II, 218–219.) Again, in the sayings of Rabbi Eliezer we read that the day the Torah was to be given to Israel, Moses went into the camp and roused her from sleep: “Rise! The Bridegroom is coming and desires Israel, His bride, in order to lead her into the nuptial chamber and give her the Torah.” (See Strack-Billerbeck, op. cit., I, 970.) In these and similar rabbinical passages God is the Bridegroom: In the New Testament it is Jesus, the Redeemer, who lovingly ransoms His bride, the Church, so that she may enter into the fullness of glory (see Eph 5:25–28).
God made His "very own people," His "special possession, dearer to [Him] than all other people" (Deut 4:20; Ex 19:5); or, more exactly, the masters and teachers who, because of their influence, their responsibility, met with the king's particular attention. The servants are again the prophets and, even more, the heralds of the good news that the kingdom of heaven is at hand: the Baptist, Jesus Himself, and the apostles. How is it possible that the friends of the king prefer their private occupations to the royal bidding? How can the banquet mean so little to them that they would rather go about the affairs of the day than sit in his presence? We are not told what leads these men of noble standing to so ignoble a choice but we are shown, to the point of pain, that their rudeness in face of the king's desire for their company changes the course of Israel's history. Preoccupied with their own plans on how to establish God's rule, they hear the gospel, and yet do not hear it. And not hearing, they exclude themselves from the great feast.

When the friends of the king refuse, other guests are invited. Precisely who the newly favored are depends on the meaning we give to dievodos tôn bodôn. If we render it as "end of the street," that is, the spot where the street leaves the city and becomes a country road, then the newcomers are strangers, people from another town in contrast to the native inhabitants, in other words, the Gentiles in contrast to the Jews. But if we translate the Greek expression as "crossroads" or "street corners," then the new table companions taking the place of the noble and rich are people from the slums. Instead of the missing guests of honor who had been invited one by one, a nameless crowd is called to the feast, the "good and bad" (see Mt 22:10). The first interpretation links the parable of the great feast to the saying of Jesus that "many will come from the east and from the west, and will feast with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 8:11). The second interpretation links it to the parable of the net that is cast into the sea, gathering in fish of every kind, clean and unclean (see Mt 13:47). Again, the first interpretation parallels St. Paul's teaching that by Israel's stumbling, by her false step, "salvation has come to the Gentiles" (Rom 11:11), while the second parallels his marveling at the ways of God, so different from those of men. What the world thinks foolish, He chooses to shame the "wise"; what it considers weak, He cherishes to shame the strong. He takes to Himself, not mistake God's glory

If one keeps in mind that the parable of the wedding garment is "chosen" (22:14)—a saying one must lean, I think, if the parable intimates is not "poverty," not its spreading at the beginning. Had the master and dignity, accepted the flocks to the banquet; but not the favor of the king. (That is not be taken literally; here it and "few," therefore, "few," company responds, the feast with man that He accomplishes. Thus, like the words "many," whole parable, so full of convenience is ever to be ready but also to flock, for it has pleased you 12:32).

THE UNPREPARED GUEST

I have not spoken of the wedding garment because the parable, which the Evangelist inserts into the story of the wedding, to various interpretations of and Dodd. To the former... represents the body of those condemned to eternal punishment into the Church on too early died. 36. See Rudolf Schnackenburg, 1959), p. 131. 37. Oesterley, op. cit., p. 121. 38. Dodd, op. cit., p. 122;
possession, dearer (19:5); or, more
their influence, their
The servants
the good news Jesus Himself, and
the banquet mean
the affairs of the
leads these men
are shown, to the
their
the gospel, and
themselves from the

king prefer their

meaning we give
street," that
becomes a country

Gentiles in

expression as
companions taking
slums. Instead

"and bad" (see Mt

of the great feast

the east and from

and Jacob in the
interpretation links

of wedding feast and careless guest are, their combination recalls a rabbinical parable of New Testament times. Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai, who lived around 70 A.D., taught:

This may be compared to a king who summoned his servants to a banquet without appointing a time. The wise ones adorned themselves and sat at the door of the palace, "for," said they, "is anything lacking in a royal palace?" [The summons to enter, they thought, may come at any moment.] The fools went about their work, saying: "Can there be a banquet without preparations?" Suddenly the king desired [the presence of] his servants: the wise entered adorned, while the fools entered soiled. The king rejoiced at the wise but was angry with the fools. "Those who adorned themselves for the banquet," ordered he, "let them sit, eat and drink. But those who did not adorn themselves for the banquet, let them stand and watch."

Rabbi Meir's son-in-law said in Rabbi Meir's name: [Should the fools merely stand and watch, then they] would look as if they were attendants [and thus not suffer the punishment they deserve]. But both sit, the former eating and the latter hungering, the former drinking and the latter thirsting, for it is said: "Therefore thus saith the Lord God: Behold my servants shall eat, but ye shall be hungry; behold, my servants shall drink, but ye shall be thirsty; behold, my servants shall rejoice, but ye shall be ashamed; behold, my servants shall sing for joy of heart, but ye shall cry for sorrow of heart" (Is 65: 13–14).

A definite similarity links the parabolic teaching of Jesus to the manner in which the rabbis instructed their hearers. There is the same inconcinnity about His parables and theirs, the same awkwardness and, at least to our Western mind, the same discordance between the introductory formula and the substance of the tale. Though parables may begin: "This may be compared to a king" or "The kingdom of heaven is like a king," their concern is not with the king but with the response of the servants and the first invited. Here and there we

40. Like the rabbinical stories of the time, Jesus' parables begin in two different ways. There are those that simply start in the nominative case, with no introductory formula at all: "Hear! Behold, the sower went out to sow" (Mk 4:13); "A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell in with robbers" (Lk 10:30); "A certain man had two sons" (Lk 15:11). Other gospel parables begin with a dative based on the Aramaic le. Most rabbinical parables start in a similar way: masbal. le . . . , which literally translated means: "A parable. Like . . . " and which is an abbreviation of "I shall tell you a parable. With what shall I com-

find the same metaphor of everyday life: buy . . . ; the same frequent category.

Rabbi Johanan's parables were of the best. Others are the vigor of the gospel parables necessary: the reign of God, interpret difficult verse and moral tenets, when the existence of His hearers' response to the divine summons. Rabbi Johanan's tale, told in this manner, to appear before God many times. "Repent one day and the next they asked him: "Does he die tomorrow," then his whole life will be spared, his story is closer to the parable of the wedding feast for they know neither that of the wedding feast (see Mt 25:11–13). So do not wish to depreciate the ingenuity of their storytelling. In attributing to the relative merits of rabbinic and of Jesus' in Lichte der Juden in Alters (Tübingen: Mohr, 1948). It is worth mentioning here moral life and the master of "In attributing to the relative merits of rabbinic and of Jesus' parables, I do not wish to depreciate the ingenuity of their storytelling. Jewish Encyclopedia, IX, the relative merits of rabbinic and of Jesus' story tellers. In attributing to the relative merits of rabbinic and of Jesus' parables, I do not wish to depreciate the ingenuity of their storytelling. In attributing to the relative merits of rabbinic and of Jesus' parables, I do not wish to depreciate the ingenuity of their storytelling. Jewish Encyclopedia, IX, 41. See Shab. 133a; cf.
Rabbi Johanan's parable is one of many rabbinical stories, and one of the best. Others are more diffuse, but all lack the freshness and vigor of the gospel parables and their concentration on the one thing necessary: the reign of God. The rabbis told their stories in order to interpret difficult verses of Scripture or to illustrate various religious and moral tenets, whereas Jesus told His in order to touch the very existence of His hearers, demanding that they do not delay their response to the divine summons.41 There is something of this appeal in Rabbi Johanan's tale, too, for it is a comment on the subtle admonition by which Rabbi Eliezer impressed on his disciples that if they wished to appear before God in heaven, they would have to be ready at all times. "Repent one day before your death," he said to them. Startled, they asked him: "Does a man know, then, on what day he will die?"

"[Of course not.] All the more reason for him to repent today, lest he die tomorrow," the rabbi replied. "[And if he repents today,] his whole life will be spent in repentance."42 In this, Rabbi Johanan's story is closer to the parable of the wise and foolish virgins than to that of the wedding feast. There, Jesus pleads with His own to watch, for they know neither the day nor the hour of the bridegroom's return (see Mt 25:1-13). Still, to my mind, the words of Rabbis Johanan

find the same metaphors: "king," "feast," "garment"; the same themes of everyday life: buying and selling, housekeeping and farming; and the same frequent use of stories that are part parable, part allegory.

41. In attributing to the parables of Jesus a greater concreteness and immediacy, I do not wish to depreciate those of the rabbis. One cannot but admire the skill and ingenuity of their storytelling. On the nature of rabbinical parables see "Parable," *Jewish Encyclopedia*, IX, 513-514, where some significant examples are given. On the relative merits of rabbinical and gospel parables see Paul Feigl, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu im Lichte der rabbinischen Gleichnisse des neuestamentlichen Zeitalters* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1912), pp. 270-271, and Oesterley, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-11. It is worth mentioning here that Joseph Klausner saw in Jesus the great teacher of moral life and the master of the art of parables. (See *Jesus of Nazareth*, New York: Macmillan, 1943, p. 414.)

42. See Shab. 153a; cf. B. Talmud, Shabbath, p. 781.
and Eliezer do not have the intensity of the words of Jesus; theirs
do not urge as His do.

THE DIALECTICS OF THE KINGDOM

There are many other parables of which I have not yet spoken, and
of which I shall treat only a few. They seem to have a variety of
themes but, basically, they are variations of a single motif: the fortune
and misfortune, if these words are permissible, of God's love and
Jesus' message in the world. The two opposite fates that God's care
for man always encounters give these parables a universal character;
still, they have a special significance for the children of Israel.

THE SOWER

That the parable of the sower is one of great moment is evident from
the fact that all synoptic Gospels include it. Its primary meaning
is simple enough: God's word—the message of the kingdom—must
be heard, more than that, affirmed, accepted, accomplished. What the
kingdom of heaven needs is "doers of the word" (Jas 1:22; see also
Eph 4:15). Addressed to men of all times, this catholic lesson must
have moved the multitude by the shore as if it were meant for them
alone (see Mt 13:1-3). Again, the parable may well have answered
dark questions that must have beset the disciples and the first Christian
generation: Why, of all men, did the leaders of the people, whose
office it was to guard the traditions and hopes of the fathers, show
themselves hostile to the gospel? Why did they close their hearts to
the proclamation that the messianic days were at hand? Why did Israel
not obtain what she was seeking (see Rom 11:7)? Simply because
God would not establish His reign—such is His magnanimity—with¬
out man's co-operation. As the seed cannot flower without the right
soil, so the message of the kingdom of heaven cannot prevail unless
man receives it.

In addition to this general answer, the individual images seem to
indicate some of the obstacles that kept Jesus' preaching from having
an abundant harvest. Is it not characteristic of Satan, the adversary,
to rob the heart of the word pregnant with grace (see Mk 4:15)?
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43. See Mt 13:1-3, 18-23; Mk 4:12-9, 13-20; Lk 8:4-8, 11-15.

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Pharisees who

slowly and imperceptibly harden themselves against His message? Is it not their influence that makes many in Israel believe that what is decisive is to be of Abraham's seed? Thus Jesus has to stress that no privilege, however great, confers upon man a claim to God's kingdom; God reigns only where man opens his whole self to the word, only where God and man meet in love.

The image of the rocky ground, too, tells something of Jesus' audience. Those who receive the word with joy but in time of persecution fall away are like those Galileans who so eagerly listen to the Good News that even the air is filled with promise, but just as readily give the enemies of the gospel entrance into their hearts. Finally, the thornbushes, figures of the cares of the world, of the deceitfulness of riches, and of the desire for things other than God's reign (see Mk 4:19), point to Jewish officialdom which, like many a ruling caste of other times and peoples, is slave to wealth and world.44

Yet, if the parable of the sower is read as the story, indeed, the fate of God's word in Israel, then not only the dry road, the stony ground, and the stifling thicket must be found there but also the good earth that yields fruit thirty, sixty, even a hundred times. The trust of Mary, the devotion of Joseph, the warmth of Elizabeth, the longing of Simeon and Anna, the affection of Martha and Mary and Lazarus, the zeal of the apostles, the ardor of the little Church of Jerusalem, the faith of the many Jewish followers of Jesus whose names went unrecorded—all these are a soil so rich that the Church is still nourished by it.45 And on the great day, when Israel as a whole will turn to her Messiah, she will be as never before a field freed from smothering rocks and bushes, whose hundredfold fruit will be for the whole of Christendom like "life from the dead" (Rom 11:15).

44. In the opinion of Dodd the explanation of the parable of the sower as found in our Gospels (see Mt 13:18-23; Mk 4:13-20; Lk 8:11-18) did not come from the lips of Jesus; it was rather the work of the infant Church, taking up His word. Dodd sees it as "a striking example of the way in which the early Church interpreted sayings and parables of Jesus to suit its changing needs. The interpretation assumes a long period during which the effectiveness and genuineness of Christian belief are tested by 'the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches,' and by 'persecution and affliction because of the Word.' The parable is made to yield warning and encouragement to Christians under such conditions. The interpretation is indeed a moving sermon upon the parable as text." (Op. cit., p. 181.)

45. The fervor of the infant Church and its lasting influence is lovingly described by Charles Journet in "The Mysterious Destinies of Israel," The Bridge, II, 57-59.
THE LABORERS IN THE VINEYARD

No other parable has suffered so many different, even opposing interpretations—some of them truly fantastic—as that of the laborers in the vineyard. First at dawn, then in the morning, again at noon and in the afternoon, finally an hour before the end of the working day, the owner of a vineyard goes out to hire laborers. With the first crew of hired hands, he settles on a denarius as the day’s pay; with the rest, he makes no agreement, only promising them fair wages. When in the evening all of them, including those who worked only for an hour, receive a denarius, there is excitement, even outbursts of indignation. Those hired at dawn, who have borne the day’s burden and worked under the blazing sun, reproach the householder with injustice, but he rejects the accusation by reminding them of the morning’s bargain. What audacity to deny him the right to be generous to the men of the last hour, since those who were with him from the beginning received their just due! (see Mt 20:1-16).

In order to reconcile the parable of the laborers with the norms of justice and thus to lessen its paradox, many exegetes have added some features of their own to the facts given. One says that those hired near the end of the day showed greater zeal for work so that in the brief span of an hour they accomplished more than those who entered the vineyard first and who, by their lack of diligence, above all by their outrages and mutterings, lost every claim to a reward. Others hold that what the vineyard’s owner values most is the will to work; since that will is the same with all the laborers, even though some cannot fulfill their desire until late in the day, the wages are the same for all of them. Stranger still is the attempt to harmonize the whole parable with Jesus’ saying: “Even so the last shall be first, and the first last” (Mt 20:16). Such an attempt inevitably ends in bias and error: “All this [that is, all that happened at the hour of payment] proves the Lord’s saying, namely, that the Church and the kingdom have no new finding; no less the discrepancy between the Parables and the Parable of the prodigal son, the end, he writes, “is the opposite...” Such an attempt inevitably ends in bias and error:

46. Interestingly enough, there is a rabbinical parable about workingmen in which the motif is accomplishment: A king hired many laborers, one of whom brought greater understanding to his work than was needed. Thus the king made him the companion of his walks. When in the evening the royal attendant received the same wages as the other men, they murmured: “We have toiled the whole day, while this one has toiled for only two hours, yet the king has given us and him the same amount.” To this the king replied: “He has done more in two hours than you have during the whole day.” (See The Jerusalem Talmud, Ber. 5c, as quoted by Oesterley, op. cit., p. 108; and Fiebig, op. cit., p. 78.)


49. In Mt. Homn., LXIV, who sees in Mt 20:16 a log semblance.
These and similar interpretations are contradicted by the unmistakable wording of the parable. It never occurs to those hired first to complain that they have to wait longer for their pay than their fellow workers. (The Palestinian worker of those days had time and did not mind waiting.) Their understandable protest is against the equality of the wages: "These last have worked a single hour, and thou hast put them on a level with us, who have borne the burden of the day's heat" (Mt 20:12). Hence the verse on the destiny of the first and the last, most likely a proverb, which appears in so many different contexts throughout the Gospels that it has been called the *Wanderlogion*, cannot possibly be part of the parable. This is no new finding; no less a man than St. John Chrysostom noticed the discrepancy between the parable and its apparent conclusion. "The end," he writes, "is not in accord with the beginning. Indeed, it is the opposite... The last verse is not a conclusion Jesus draws from the parable, for the first were not the last but, against every expectation, all receive the same reward." 49

Undoubtedly, the real significance of the parable is in the words of the vineyard's owner: "Have I not a right to do what I choose? Or art thou envious because I am generous?" (Mt 20:15). Thus the story of the laborers who are not paid according to the laws of natural justice proclaims the sovereignty of God's goodness, the free gift of His love. The individual persons and features of the story serve no other purpose than to confirm this message; like the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son, they are a dark background for the sudden rays of grace that fill the lives of those who were hired last.

The only role the parable assigns to the laborers who have worked all day and receive the agreed wages, is to bring out all the more strongly the Lord's saying, namely, that the Jews are excluded from the Church and the kingdom of heaven, while the Gentiles take first place." 47
the unusual way in which the last hired are called to work, and rewarded. The parable considers the problem of whether or not there are men who—to speak unparabolically—earn God's reward as little as Mk 2:17, Lk 5:32, 15:32, Mt 5:45 consider the question of whether or not there are really just men. It is simply a matter of setting before our eyes the image of those who are rewarded "without merit or worth..." [The gospel of God's generous love] does not cancel the thought that God rewards; what the parable emphasizes is that reward is not proportionate to performance. Indeed, the relationship between performance and reward is such that it cannot be understood by those who think only in terms of an exact "work-merit" pattern, who see God's relationship to men as that of a scrupulously calculating employer towards his employees. So great is God's love [freely pouring its gifts over His children] that it remains incomprehensible to those who think along no other lines than human justice, who see God but as king and judge and are thus puzzled by the good news of Jesus.

What is it, then, that the parable of God's sovereign goodness wishes to tell Israel? Certainly not that she will be last, nor that she will be excluded from the kingdom of heaven—the parable in no way touches on the relationship between Church and Synagogue. Rather is it a call to Israel, and thus to every man, to rethink the vital question of all religious observance, that of merit and reward, and to reshape life accordingly. God guided and disciplined Israel as a father his son (see Deut 8:5). He promised reward to the faithful and threatened punishment to the sinners, He blessed the obedient and cursed the disobedient (see Ex 20:12; Deut 28). Again, in the book of Judges, Israel's history conforms to a strict design: The people's sin is followed by God's punishment, the people's conversion by God's help. Legitimate though this belief in divine retribution is, it is not without danger: All too easily the knowledge that God rewards becomes a claim on Him and a demand for recompense; all too easily, love turns into calculation.

There can be no doubt, I think, that the ancient rabbis did not sufficiently guard themselves against this hazard. There were those who looked upon salvation as the fruit of human effort; in their eyes, the many commandments given to Israel were but a means of acquiring merit. They assumed, it seems, a perfect equation between man's good deeds and God's goodness; reads one of their books, he who built the vineyard, then, last; how natural and how is asked to forget what is just before God by the mere human toiling in her (see Phil 3:13)." Just as Peter, she must learn that other reward is promised; it cannot be deserved.


52. A glimpse of the Council of Trent declares, according to Christ's promise, cold water to drink . . . 52. A glimpse of the Council of Trent declares, according to Christ's promise, cold water to drink . . .
work, and rewarded. Not there are men as little as Mk 2:17, whether or not there are men before our eyes the worth. . . ." [The thought that God is not proportionate to performance and reward; who think only in God's relationship to towards his employees. (His children) that it is no other lines than and are thus puzzled

The notion that the Law and its many commandments were given to Israel to make her worthy of divine favor and enable her to receive reward is not infrequent in rabbinical literature. (See, for instance, Mak. 23b; cf. B. Talmud, Makkoth, p. 165; Lev. R. 51:8; cf. Middraish Rabbah, IV, 402; Mekilta, Pisha on Ex. 13:1-4; cf. Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, I, 151-152.)

Still, it would be misleading to equate Judaism, as is sometimes done, with service of God merely for the sake of reward. I should give an unfair picture of rabbinical thought were I not to mention the prayer which, morning after morning, the devout Jew turns to God: "Sovereign of all worlds! Not because of our righteous acts do we lay our supplications before thee, but because of thine abundant mercies. What are we? What is our life? What is our piety? What is our righteousness? What our helpfulness? What our strength? What our might? What shall we say before thee, 0 Lord our God and God of our fathers? Are not all the mighty men as nought before thee, the men of renown as though they had not been, the wise as if without knowledge, and the men of understanding as if without discernment?" (The Authorised Daily Prayer Book, trans. and ed. Joseph H. Hertz, New York: Bloch, 1952, pp. 27-29.)

In like spirit, an ancient commentary on Psalm 141:1 declares: "One man puts his trust in the decorous and upright acts he has performed. Another puts his trust in the acts of his fathers. But I put my trust in thee. Even though I have no righteous acts, answer me [0 Lord], because I have called unto thee." (See The Midrash on Psalms, trans. William G. Braude, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955, p. 350.) There is also the teaching of Rabbi Johanan that from Moses, who prayed as one not demanding his right but asking for grace, man should learn that no creature has any claim on his Creator. (See Deut. R. 21; cf. Middraish Rabbah, VII, 30.) The list of quotations could easily be extended. I shall note only one more saying, almost Pauline in character, that all men are in need of God's kindness, of His favor. (See Gen. R. 60:2; cf. Middraish Rabbah, II, 596.)

A glimpse of the Catholic teaching on merit may be appropriate here. The Council of Trent declared that "in Scripture much is ascribed to good works. According to Christ's promise, 'whoever gives to one of these little ones but a cup of cold water to drink. . . shall not lose his reward' (Mt 10:42). And, according to the Apostle's witness, 'our present light affliction, which is for the moment, prepares for us an eternal weight of glory that is beyond all measure' (2 Cor 4:17).
THE TWO DEBTORS

A kindred theme, that of guilt and forgiveness, is set forth in the parable of two debtors who could not pay their debt but had it remitted by a kindly creditor (see Lk 7:36-50). So much is this parable part of its context that any attempt to interpret it must not separate one from the other.

As a guest of Simon the Pharisee, Jesus is greeted with courtesy but restraint. Impressed, perhaps, by a sermon the young Rabbi preached in the Synagogue, Simon has invited Him to a banquet. But his manners show that he has not made up his mind about this man who, admittedly, speaks like a prophet; thus he waits for what the next few hours will disclose. According to Simon's code, his famous guest commits a dreadful faux pas. The naive ignorance He seems to betray is enough to turn the host's open reserve into secret scorn: "This man, were He a prophet, would surely know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner" (Lk 7:39). Though this judgment is made in the stillness of the heart, Jesus the Prophet knows it and wishes to correct it. Thus He tells of two men who run into debt, and yet are forgiven.

The marvel of their release compels Simon to admit that the greater the guilt that is forgiven, the deeper the love that renders thanks. But does he realize that the woman at Jesus' feet, bedewing them with tears, wiping them with her hair, kissing and anointing them, is no longer a sinner; that grace has made her truly just in the sight of God? Having been pardoned, she is overwhelmed with a boundless gratitude welling up in gestures showing that nothing can express the love she is allowed to show him.

"Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little" (Lk 7:47).

The coolness with which Simon encounters with Jesus is not without a reason. When Jesus reproaches Simon and lavishly as did the despised sinner. His reproach to Simon's fell short of his own conception of the learned Pharisee, his bridal nation as a whole failed to recognize this right to expect: "Thou gavest me no kiss... This woman, as soon as she entered in, hath anointed my feet with ointment..." (Lk 7:44-46).

But the woman who was of the "poor" in Israel and the others fail, she does not: In spring's first flower, shy yet bold, her love wins where others fail (see Sanh. 27b; cf. B. Talmud, Sanhedrin, pp. 161-163.)
been pardoned, she is overwhelmed by the compassion of the Master; a boundless gratitude wells up from her heart and overflows into gestures showing that nothing matters but the love shown her and the love she is allowed to show. Gladdened, Jesus turns to His host: "Wherefore I say to thee, her sins, many as they are, are forgiven her, and thus she abounds in loving gratitude" (Lk 7:47). 56

The coolness with which Simon meets his guest proves that his encounter with Jesus is not what it should be: an encounter with the Messiah. Convinced that he is without guilt, he deprives himself of the wonder of forgiveness and the inner freedom and joy it brings. When Jesus reproaches Simon for not having treated Him as warmly and lavishly as did the despised woman, He may also be directing His reproach to Simon's fellows and friends, as He no doubt directs it to all those of the same mind in ages to come. Cautious is the reception of the learned Pharisees. Because of their influence, God's bridal nation as a whole fails to offer the gifts His Anointed has every right to expect: "Thou gavest me no water for my feet... Thou gavest me no kiss... Thou didst not anoint my head with oil" (Lk 7:44-46).

But the woman who was a sinner makes luminous the hidden role of the "poor" in Israel of whom the first beatitude speaks. 57 Where others fail, she does not: Her tenderness in receiving Jesus is like spring's first flower, shy yet bold. Truly converted, she is one of the

56. In rendering this saying of Jesus I have followed the lead of the Jerusalem Bible. Canon Osty's translation there reads: "Since she has shown me so much love." (L'evangile selon saint Luc, La Sainte Bible, trans. E. Osty, Paris: Cerf, 1953, pp. 71-72). The Vulgate, however, and all the vernacular editions based on or guided by it, translate: "Because she has loved much." The Greek original permits both versions, the one giving the clause a causal meaning and the other giving it an explicatory one. The context, however, seems to demand the one I have adopted.

57. The role of Yahweh's poor, Israel's elite, the holy remnant that is in every way God's own, is superbly treated by Albert Gelin in Les pauvres de Yahvé (Paris: Cerf, 1953) and Barnabas M. Ahern, C.P., "Mary and the Poor of Israel," Cross and Crown, II, 3 (September 1959), pp. 278-292.
"publicans and harlots" who are among the first to enter the kingdom of heaven. May she not also be the model of the Israel of the last days who, aglow with love, will return to her Messiah?

In those days, at that time...
the men of Israel and of Judah shall come,
weeping as they come, to seek the Lord, their God;
to their goal in Zion they shall ask the way.
"Come, let us join ourselves to the Lord
with covenant everlasting never to be forgotten."

(T Jer 50:4-5)

THE PHARISEE AND THE PUBLICAN

The parable of the two debtors tells how forgiveness enriches the soul, the parable of the Pharisee and the publican what the soul needs in order to be forgiven. Obviously, the two are akin; both reproach, both demand.

Two men went up to the temple to pray, the one a Pharisee and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and began to pray thus within himself: "O God, I thank thee that I am not like the rest of men, robbers, dishonest, adulterers, or even like this publican. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I possess." But the publican, standing afar off, would not so much as lift up his eyes to heaven, but kept striking his breast, saying: "O God, be merciful to me the sinner!" I tell you, this man went back to his home justified rather than the other.

(Lk 18:10-14)

There were men in the Israel of Jesus' time, as there were later and are today in the Christian world, who did not heed the prophetic message of pardon by sheer grace, expressed in images like those of washing and purification, infusion of a new spirit and creation of a clean heart. Instead, they relied too much on their own efforts, assuming their own good deeds would wipe out their sins. It is such self-confidence, blind to human insufficiency, that animates the Pharisee of the parable. A self-reliant himself as the cause of his own justice of the Law. No wonder he exerts themselves as he does the commandments.

Yet it would be grossly incorrect to regard Him as a men far more correct to contrast the Pharisees, and by nature, "Jesuitry," or better, "pharisaism," as we must do to regard Him as a men in the Israel of Jesus' time. If "Jesuitry" that makes truth and history in any age to make a Christian and an arrogant, self-seeking man, is what true Jesuits have done, then is an arrogant, self-seeking man, a man who sits in the street corner, rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk; I rise early and they rise early for frivolous talk.
of the parable. A self-made man in matters of the spirit, he thinks of
himself as the cause of his salvation; he is convinced that the righteous-
ness of his life is his own work, the fruit of unrelenting observance
of the Law. No wonder he feels justified in despising those who do not
exert themselves as he does, not to speak of those who openly transgress
the commandments.

Yet it would be grossly unfair to see in this particular Pharisee the
prototype of the pharisaic brotherhood or the embodiment of Jewish
spirituality. We must never forget that Jesus found disciples among
the Pharisees, and by no means the worst, and that, were it possible
to regard Him as a member of one faction or another, it would seem
far more correct to consider Him a Pharisee than a Sadducee or
Qumranite. Moreover, we must distinguish between Pharisees and
"pharisaism," as we must distinguish between Jesuits and their carica-
ture, "Jesuitry," or between clerics and the "clericalism" that might
tempt them. If "Jesuitry" be a Machiavellian use of mental reservation
that makes truth and lie look alike, then it is the very opposite of
what true Jesuits have ever thought or practiced. And if "clericalism"
is an arrogant, self-seeking rule by the clergy, then it contradicts the

60. That this self-reliant man was not unreal and his existence not confined to
the parable, is clear from a talmudic passage of the first century A.D. There the
rabbis teach that on leaving the Bet ha-Midrash, the house of study, a man should
say: "I give thanks to thee, O Lord my God, that thou hast set my portion with
those who sit in the Bet ha-Midrash and thou hast not set my portion with those
who sit in [street] corners [that is, the shopkeepers or the unlettered], for
I rise early and they rise early, but I rise early for words of Torah and they rise
early for frivolous talk; I labor and they labor, but I labor and receive a reward
and they labor and do not receive a reward; I run and they run, but I run to the
life of the future world and they run to the pit of destruction." (Ber. 28b; cf.
B. Talmud, Berakoth, p. 172.)

61. In an essay on biblical themes of Mariology, Louis Bouyer, Orat., remarks
that some Christians cannot rid themselves of the notion that the Judaism of Christ's
time was the very opposite of His gospel. To make the figure of Jesus stand
out, they portray Judaism as dead legalism or as a carnal religion. Had Jewish
life really been thus we should be forced to assume that Jesus and His teaching
were dropped into Palestine like a meteorite; we should also be compelled to hold
a monophysitic view of the Incarnation and thus imagine the human nature of
the Christ to have been absorbed in, indeed abolished by, the divine nature. A
religion purely legalistic could never have produced a being so full of faith and
generosity as was Mary. As a matter of fact, in the postexilic era an ever-growi ng
spiritual current moved through the Jewish world, which little by little detached
Israel's hope from the earth and gave mystical overtones to the piety of the Law.
Unfortunately, they are not appreciated by the majority of Christians. (See "Les
thèmes bibliques de la théologie mariale," Bible et vie chrétienne, VII, Septem-
ber–November 1954, 16–17.)

very calling of those who are to serve God and man, who are singled out, not to lord over their fellow Christians but to be co-workers of their joy (see 2 Cor 1:23). "Pharisaism," too, when content with façade and gesture, when preoccupied with unessentials and thus forgetting the heart of the spiritual life, is the betrayal of an ideal: An originally pure and earnest zeal for the Law has grown overweening and become excessive. Who would dare assert that "pharisaism," so understood, was confined to the days of the gospel? True, it spoke an important word at the trial of Jesus, but it also inspired the synod that deposed and exiled St. John Chrysostom as it guided the court that condemned St. Joan of Arc to the stake. It wearied the lives of St. Francis of Assisi, of St. Teresa of Avila, of St. John Bosco, and of many others; throughout the history of Christendom it unwittingly sought to hinder the work of the Spirit.

When one remembers the omnipresence of "pharisaism," one can hardly see in the Pharisee of the parable the image of the Jew, and in the publican the image of the Gentile-become-Christian. The first, bookkeeper of his soul and accountant of his merits, is rather the symbol of perpetual self-righteousness, a vice that seeks its victims everywhere, while the second, beggar before the face of God, is the figure of the "poor" who live by trust. Convinced that they have nothing to offer, they expect everything from Him and thus are made the heirs of heaven (see Mt 5:3).

THE PRODIGAL SON

We have journeyed through the realm of parables, and our pilgrimage ends best at what we may call, with Charles Péguy, the "gate of hope." Arranged freely, here are some of the poet's lines:

All parables are beautiful, my child, all parables great, all parables lovely.
All parables are the word and the Word. . .
All come from the heart, all go to the heart,
They speak to the heart.
Yet first among them are the three parables of hope. . .
And among these, it is the third parable that walks ahead. . .
It touches a unique spot in the heart of men, a secret spot, a hidden spot. . .
The spot of pain, the spot of misery, the spot of hope.

See ibid., pp. 237-238.
who are singled be co-workers of ten content with entsials and thus al of an ideal: has grown over that "phari- seed" of the gospel? True, it also inspired asm it guided e. It wearied the St. John Bosco, stendom it un- isiasm," one can of the Jew, and Christian. The first, eas, is rather the seeks its victims re of God, is the they have noth- us are made the of our pilgrimage "gate of hope."

All parables are beautiful, my child, all parables are great. . . . But over this one, men have wept, hundreds, thousands, Hundreds of thousands. And if someone hears the parable for the hundredth time It is as if he heard it for the first time: "A man had two sons. . . ." 64

The story of the son who was lost (see Lk 15:11–32) needs no explanation; in fact, it is the explanation of all other parables, indeed of the whole gospel. It is the ever-open door, the never-silent cry for man's return, the sweet utterance of unbounded mercy. As for all men, so for Israel the parable is "a ray that will not be snuffed out." 65

But who is the elder son, so ill-tempered and jealous of his younger brother? The exegetes of antiquity, even the majority of moderns, have no doubt: The son who has toiled in his father's fields season after season, year after year, who is correct in every way but craves recognition and rank, stands for the Pharisees or, better still, for the people of Israel anxiously seeking to preserve its prerogatives. Only in recent times have exegetes suggested another interpretation. 66 According to them, the elder son, very much like the first-called workers in the vineyard, is little more than a supernumerary. His presence in the parable is, above all, to set off the role of the younger, though as the representative of common sense, baffled, indeed angered, by the foolishness of mercy, he also points to the otherness of God. The principal actors in the drama, then, are the father and the son who was lost.


65. Ibid., p. 168. In the early second century A.D. Rabbi Meir sought to illustrate the mercy God offers His people by a father's appeal to his dissolute son: "This can be compared to the son of a king who took to evil ways. The king sent a tutor to him who appealed to him saying: 'Repent, my son.' The son, however, sent him back to his father [with the message]: 'How can I have the effrontery to return? I am ashamed to come before you.' Thereupon his father sent back word: 'My son, is a son ever ashamed to return to his father? And is it not to your father that you will be returning?' Similarly, the Holy One, blessed be He, sent Jeremiah to Israel when they sinned, and said to him: 'Go, say to my children: Return.'" (Deut. R. 2:24; cf. Midrash Rabbah, VII, 53.)

A rabbinical parallel to the story of the prodigal son, Rabbi Meir's parable has the beauty of restraint. Jesus' parable, however, vibrates with life. The father's patient and unwearied waiting; the son's disgust with his wasted life, his sorrow at his wrongdoings, his readiness to take the lowest place in his father's house; finally, the joy, indeed, merriment over the son's return—all these warm and impassioned features make the hearer eager to act.

66. See Fréisler, loc. cit., p. 723, and Oesterley, op. cit., pp. 183, 188.
Who is this lost son? Who else but the sinner, every sinner, whatever the outrage that estranges him from God, whether he lived a thousand years ago or lives today.

When the sinner departs from God, my child,
The farther he departs, the farther he travels into abandoned lands, the more he loses himself.
Away among bushes and rocks he throws,
As something useless, cumbersome and boring, the most precious goods.
But there is one word of God which he must not throw away.

When the darkness increases
And veils his eyes there is one divine treasure which he must not throw among the thistles by the road.
For there is one mystery that follows, one word that follows.
Even into the farthest farness.
There remains within him a spot that pains, a spot of reflection, a spot of restlessness. A bud of hope.
The third word of hope, "A man had two sons."

Every son who has fled from home knows that he can return at any moment, that the Father always awaits him. But there is one son, particularly favored, for whom the arms of heaven are opened even more widely.

Is Ephraim not my favored son
the child in whom I delight?
Often as I threaten him,
I still remember him with favor;
My heart stirs for him,
I must show him mercy, says the Lord.
(Jer 31:20)

SUMMATION

While a reading oblivious of the rules that must guide the interpretation of parables may find in them a wholesale condemnation of Israel,

68. In figurative and prophetic language Ephraim, because of its dominant influence among the other tribes, often stands for the whole of the Northern Kingdom. (See, for instance, Is 7:2–8 and Os 5:6.) The Lord’s “feelings” toward the Israelite kingdom, as expressed by Jeremiah, apply to the Israel of all times.

an objective and dispelling voice of alarm but leaders are rebuked or disguises of love. In the

All the gospel narratives and parables do so in a spirit of fulness unimpeachable and refresh their imagery and language of the land in which parables of the ancient parables of the land are placed, their refreshing vigor, their dimension. Yet as the parables of things they also manifest Jesus’ care for angels, so inseparable from God.

In the parables Jesus’ heart towards the people. Like them and yearning existence up to the very day with the “eternal” He sees the portents of the day through the immediacy of His humanity, He was the Prophet of

THE “HARDENING”

There is a passage in that Jesus came to speak to His disciples inquire of Luke which have Jesus say:

‘Seeing and hearing you do not understand (Is 6:9–10). Ever since patristic

69. For other synopsis 13:13–15.
very sinner, whether he lived a
abandoned
most precious
brow away...
which he must
not follows.
out of reflection,
h can return at
that there is one son,
reopened even

IIsrael in the Parables

an objective and dispassionate exegesis hears in them, no doubt, the
voice of alarm but no less the voice of hope. Even when Israel's
leaders are rebuked or the people threatened, rebuke and threat are
disguises of love. In unveiling this love, exegesis cannot fail to con-
tribute to the work of reconciliation between Church and Synagogue.
All the gospel narratives disclose Jesus as a son of Israel; the
parables do so in a special way, for everything about them bears the
unmistakable imprint of His native Palestine. Their literary form,
their imagery and language plainly reflect the conditions and customs
of the land in which He chose to be born. Though sisters to the
parables of the ancient rabbis, the parables of Jesus excel them by
their refreshing vigor, their compelling drama and their eschatological
dimension. Yet as they reveal the mysteries of the kingdom of God,
they also manifest Jesus' humanity, His reverence for the least of
things, His care for all that is, His feeling for the seemingly absurd
so inseparable from our dignity.

In the parables Jesus spoke as a prophet, the greatest of the proph-
ets. Like them and yet unlike them, He lifted the darkness of human
existence up to the everlasting light and confronted the events of the
day with the "eternal now" of God. He knew that He was called to
awaken Israel in the most critical hour of her history so that she might
see the portents of the time, and act. Hence the urgency, the clarity,
the immediacy of His words. No apocalypticist lost in mist and obscu-
ritv, He was the Prophet come to cast fire on the earth.

THE "HARDENING" OF ISRAEL

There is a passage in the Gospels, however, that seems to say precisely
that Jesus came to spread the pall of night over His own people. When
His disciples inquire into the meaning of the parable of the sower, St.
Luke has Jesus say: "To you it is given to know the mystery of the
kingdom of God, but to the rest in parables, that

'Seeing they may not see,
and hearing they may not understand.'

(Lk 8:10; Is 6:9) 69

Ever since patristic days this "logion of obduration" has been a per-
petual crux to exegetes; it seems to contradict the very nature of

69. For other synoptic versions of Jesus' answer see Mk 4:11-12 and Mt
parables whose purpose it is to ease understanding, not hinder it. Thus St. John Chrysostom remarks that had Jesus wished to go unrecognized by His people, He would have had to remain silent rather than speak in parables. 70 Hilaire Duesberg, too, holds that a literal interpretation of the words of Jesus, as St. Luke and St. Mark transmit them, would subvert all pedagogy, even deny the very meaning of God’s coming in the flesh. 71 For who could possibly conceive of the everlasting Word having become audible so as not to be heard, of Jesus speaking for no other purpose than to harden the hearts of His hearers?

No doubt, at first sight, Jesus’ mission was, like Isaiah’s, a failure: In His as in the prophet’s days, many were insensible to things divine and indifferent to the call of repentance. Small wonder, then, that Jesus should have used Isaiah’s castigation of the people’s dullness to foretell the fate of His gospel. It may well be, as some modern exegetes believe, that Jesus quoted Isaiah in another context and that the Synoptics attached His saying to the parable of the sower in order to answer a question that vexed the infant Church. Frequently Jews of the dispersion as well as gentle Christians would ask how it happened that Israel’s Messiah was not understood by so many of His kinsmen, that He was even rejected by the Scribes, and this in the name of Scripture. The Church answered that what happened was simply what Scripture had foretold:

Seeing they may see, but not perceive;  
and hearing they may hear, but not understand;  
Let perhaps at any time they should be converted,  
and their sins forgiven them.  
(Mk 4:12; Is 6:9-10)

“Divine foreknowledge,” then, is the mysterious answer that Scripture and Church give to the mystery of a gospel ignored, even resisted. For biblical perspective likes to shorten distance, shut out what is to the left and the right of the viewer, and focus on no other than God, the Lord of history. The “that” with which St. Mark introduces the Isaiah utterance may therefore have the same meaning as St. Matthew’s frequent formula fulfilled what was spoken.

Whereas St. Mark has treated in parables that (4:11-12), St. Matthew changes to “because,” in purpose of Jesus’ parable this change, St. Matthew’s heirs of Greek precision, impetuosity of Hebrew speech.

In his commentary on Lagrange points out that the Septuagint and not to the

Père Lagrange continues, it seems to have softened the future and the past tense, Hebrew imperative, less the people’s obduration.

It was Isaiah’s burden, to their undoing. He was, however, that even this last were: “Get on with your and forcefully! Harden

72. See, for instance, Mt 14.
Israel in the Parables

Matthew's frequent formula: "This was done that thereby might be fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet."  

Whereas St. Mark has Jesus say: "To those outside, all things are treated in parables that seeing they may see, but not perceive" (4:11-12), St. Matthew takes some of the sharpness out of these words when he gives them in this form: "This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see" (13:13). "That" is changed to "because," in other words, what one evangelist calls the purpose of Jesus' parables, the other calls their reason. In spite of this change, St. Matthew's passage remains bewildering to us who are heirs of Greek precision, a quality so different from the fervor and impetuosity of Hebrew speech.

In his commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew, Père Lagrange points out that the Evangelist quotes Isaiah according to the Septuagint and not to the Hebrew version, which reads:

Listen carefully, but you shall not understand!  
Look intently, but you shall know nothing!  
You are to make the heart of this people sluggish,  
to dull their ears and close their eyes;  
Else their eyes will see, their ears hear,  
their heart understand,  
and they will turn and be healed.  

(6:9-10)

Père Lagrange continues that, by using the Septuagint, St. Matthew seems to have softened the "thrust" of the Hebrew original; for the future and the past tenses in the Greek text, taking the place of the Hebrew imperative, lessen what seems to be the divine causality of the people's obduration. In presenting to Greek readers God's powerful call to the prophet, the Septuagint had to mitigate the violence of biblical language, a language unspoiled by reflection.

It was Isaiah's burden to have his people discern between God's ways and their own, between the following of His will and the road to their undoing. He was sent to make a last effort. Knowing, however, that even this last effort would be in vain, God bids him, as it were: "Get on with your task! Don't mince your words! Speak freely and forcefully! Harden them! Destroy them!" Strange as it may
sound, this bidding is, in the words of Père Lagrange, "the language of love, Mercy's uttermost plea: 'Look at what you are doing! You compel me to renounce what my heart desires for you, your healing.'" To St. Matthew, then, Isaiah's passion prefigures that of Jesus.\textsuperscript{73}

As I have said, biblical speech is different from our own. But is it always so? Is not the "logion of obduration" akin to words born of grief, of a grief that will not accept defeat? A father or mother, for instance, might say to a son about to embark on a career of crime: "Just go ahead! Keep on stealing! Rob, murder! Till they send you to the electric chair!" It is loving fear for their wayward son that disguises itself as a command; dreading the future, they feel they have no other weapon than irony with which to prod the shiftless. May we not say, then, that the prophet, despairing of an unrepentant people, yet hoping against hope that they would understand, change, and be healed, presented the seemingly inevitable disaster as if it were the purpose of his preaching? And may we not say that Jesus sought to stir His kinsmen with the same supreme irony so that they might see, hear, understand, turn, and be healed?

THE RESPONSE OF ISRAEL

It was not the will of the Master of parables to turn His own kinsmen into obdurate men, without vision and without the life of grace; rather was it His will to disclose "the mystery of the kingdom of God" (Lk 8:10). But in doing so He made known which heart was open and which closed, who was of good will and who was not. Thus the parables brought pardon or judgment, communion or estrangement.\textsuperscript{74}

And this was the secret of God's kingdom: He who differed greatly from the expected Redeemer was the expected Redeemer; His advent marked the coming of the true Seed to efface not only the Creator's judgment to which the devils were condemned, but to efface the effable, ultimate bliss Israël was marked to enjoy in this world as the betrothed wait for the days of the Messiah to take place as the engagement, the kinship was consummated. The Advent, however, he shows to the people as the bridegroom's desertion, the departure from the promise, as the thorns of the bridal tree. The fruit was to be in heaven, then, is this our gift, it neither obeys the laws of valence nor the laws of nature. None can come to Me unless My Father draw him. From the first moment, the prophets had foretold the coming of the true Seed, which would not only be obdurate men, but men who had vision and brought the life of grace. It was the will of the Father to show the true coming of the Son, the true Messiah, the true Redeemer, the true beginning of time.


\textsuperscript{74} See also the opinions of Jeremias (\textit{The Parables of Jesus}, pp. 12–13) and Oesterley (\textit{op. cit.}, pp. 51–56). In the course of his discussion, Oesterley quotes Claude G. Montefiore as saying that the fundamental idea of the "logion of obduration" was not unknown to the ancient rabbis. (\textit{Cf. Rabbinic Literature and Gospel Teachings}, London: Macmillan, 1930, pp. 252–253.) There is, for instance, the rabbinical saying that the ways of the Holy One, blessed be He, differ from those of flesh and blood. While a mortal can pour something into an empty vessel, but never into a full one, God can pour more into a full than into an empty vessel. If a man listens once he will keep listening; if he deadens his ear the first time, it will remain deadened. Again, if he hearkens to the old he will hearken to the new, but if his heart turns away he will hear no more. (See Ber. 40a; cf. B. Talmud, Berakhoth, pp. 247–248.)
marked the coming of the kingdom of heaven. In Him there appeared not only the Creator's claim upon creation, not only God's government to which the devout Jew readily submitted, but also that ineffable, ultimate bliss Israel craved. An ancient Jewish tradition sees this world as the betrothal of a king and a maiden and likens the days of the Messiah to their wedding and its delights. At the time of the engagement, the king's promises are few; at the time of the nuptials, however, he showers his bride with treasures. The reign of heaven, then, is this outpouring of grace. A free and overwhelming gift, it neither obeys the principles of arithmetic nor follows the laws of nature. None can calculate, predict, earn, or force its coming.

From the first moment of her history, Israel was called to this kingdom. She was planted like a noble fig tree, invited to the king's wedding feast, given the stewardship of a fruitful vineyard, and urged by the Father to cultivate it—all these images unfold Israel's singular election as the bridal nation of God's magnanimous love. But at the appointed hour, the whole of Israel was not ready. Like stubborn children who could not be pleased, her leaders withdrew into a corner and sulked. And if this were not enough, they did everything to choke the seed of faith in the hearts of many. Not only did they ignore the call to the wedding but they mistreated the king's messengers and slew his only son. Like foolish builders, they rejected the chosen stone; mere hearers of the word, they let their lips say Yes while their lives said No. If the opposition of the leaders prevailed, the parables warned, the people too would come to grief.

Still, the parables did not announce a never-ending doom. The Palestinian farm land offered to the sower not merely stony ground, but good soil, the best soil, a soil that promised fruit a hundredfold. Alongside the willful children, there dwelt in Israel children of wisdom; close by the barren fig tree grew the rich and heavy branches of the true vine. No sooner had Jesus been given a chilly reception by Simon, the man sure of his justice, than He experienced the abounding gratitude of a woman from whom the burden of sin had been taken. Again, the publican in the Temple, representative of the poor in Israel, became the forerunner of all true disciples; his prayer expressed the true beginning of Christian perfection, and will do so till the end of time.

75. See Ex. R. 15:31; cf. Midrash Rabbah, III, 204.
Beyond these instances of copious growth and total response, there are in the parables intimations of a great turning to come. Is it not possible that unwavering care will make the barren fig tree bear fruit again? Is it not possible that patience will, at long last, see the children stop their quarreling and join, hand in hand, in a happy dance? Could not the idle son be suddenly gripped with shame and speed to his father’s vineyard? Could not a bountiful rain change the hard ground into fertile soil? Nowhere do the parables speak of a final and irrevocable rejection of Israel; on the contrary, they imply that God’s last word is unmeasured love. The parable of the two debtors, as well as that of the publican and Pharisee, makes clear that where offense abounds, grace abounds yet more (see Rom 5:20). The story of the laborers in the vineyard shows that God does all He does because He is good. Finally, the tale of the prodigal son speaks of God’s everlasting compassion, anxious for the return of the beloved child, eager to lavish on him an affection even greater than before.

As the entire gospel, so do its parables proclaim the message of mercy, offering pardon to Israel and, through Israel, to all men. “Through Israel,” because in her history there is mirrored the history of mankind. Her election, her failure, her suffering, and her reconciliation are image and likeness of grace, sin, pain, and forgiveness everywhere. Indeed, Israel herself is one great living parable.

Barry Ulanov

THE SONG OF SONGS

THE RHETORIC OF

RHETORIC knows special trite whatever persuasion one appro deal with it rhetorically. The spe is highly artificial. It is packed are marvelously lucid in them Some are of an intrinsic opac questionabe: One must seize th them by a conviction of the what their surface simplicity patently of an ambiguity of cl allow no less than two mean or more, going as far as the rh and the poetic graces of the

One cannot fight shy of th One sees the book as an unp of praise of sexual union, it calls a cheek a cheek, a breast calls a cheek a piece of pom a weapon that wounds, and of love one hair on the neck whole neck to “the tower of thousand small round shields men” (4:4)—the literal-mir in this formidable piece of object.

But the Song of Songs is thin as they read, by the bride’s description of her beh
Israel in the Parables

Come, eat of my food,
and drink of the wine I have mixed!
Forsake foolishness that you may live;
advance in the way of understanding.
(Prov 9:5–6)

It may well be that wisdom’s banquet inspired Jesus’ story of the wedding feast:

The kingdom of heaven is like a king who made a marriage feast for his son. And he sent his servants to call in those invited to the marriage feast, but they would not come. Again he sent out other servants, saying: “Tell those who are invited: Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and fatlings are killed, and everything is ready; come to the marriage feast.” But they made light of it, and went off, one to his farm, and another to his business; and the rest laid hold of his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them.

But when the king heard of it, he was angry; and he sent his armies, destroyed those murderers, and burnt their city. Then he said to his servants: “The marriage feast indeed is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy; go therefore to the crossroads, and invite to the marriage feast whomever you shall find.” . . . For many are called, but few are chosen.

(Mt 22:2–9, 14)

Once more we breathe the air of allegory. The king, the king’s son, the marriage feast—all these are biblical images rich in meaning. No more wondrous way to describe the glory of the messianic era than by images of wedding and banquet, images of love and joy. The5

Those invited to the banquet are the children of Israel whom, at Sinai, 35. Marriage is one of the great prophetic images for Yahweh’s covenant with His people, a covenant to be kept faithfully and renewed ardently. (See, for instance, Os 2:19; Is 54:4–8; 62:4–5; Ez 16:7–14.) The image is no less familiar to rabbinical literature. When Rabbi Jose (150 A.D.) read the verse: “The Lord came from Sinai” (Deut 33:2), he understood it to mean that the Lord went forth to receive Israel as a bridegroom goes forth to meet his bride. (See Mekillta, Bahodesh on Ex. 19:10–17; cf. Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, trans. J. Lauterbach, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1933–35, II, 218–219.) Again, in the sayings of Rabbi Eliezer we read that the day the Torah was to be given to Israel, Moses went into the camp and roused her from sleep: “Rise! The Bridegroom is coming and desires Israel, His bride, in order to lead her into the nuptial chamber and give her the Torah.” (See Strack-Billerbeck, op. cit., I, 970.) In these and similar rabbinical passages God is the Bridegroom: In the New Testament it is Jesus, the Redeemer, who lovingly ransoms His bride, the Church, so that she may enter into the fullness of glory (see Eph 5:25–28).