

## The Reign of God in the Parables of Matthew 13

'What shall we look for and what shall we see?' asked Frodo, filled with awe.

'Many things I can command the mirror to reveal', she answered, 'and to some I can show what they desire to see. But the Mirror will also show things unbidden, and these are often stranger and more profitable than things which we wish to behold. What you will see, if you leave the Mirror free to work, I cannot tell. For it shows things that were, and things that are, and things that yet may be. But which it is that he sees, even the wisest cannot always tell. Do you wish to look?'<sup>1</sup>

Interpreting the 'kingdom' parables of Jesus can feel like peering into Galadriel's mirror. Do we project onto them our own conception of the kingdom of God/heaven, seeing merely 'what we desire to see'? What timeframe can we discern - do we see past, present, future or something else? This essay is one look into the mirror. It hopes to suggest some unbidden-yet-profitable insights into Jesus' message of the kingdom and our response to it.

### Parable and Prophecy

Our word 'parable' comes from the Greek *parabolē*, which corresponds to the Hebrew *mashal*. Neither term refers to a single literary genre, but both are conceptually close to the literal Greek meaning, 'to set beside.'<sup>2</sup> A parable is something that stands beside something else, and points to it in some way. In OT literature, *mashal* is sometimes a proverbial saying found in wisdom literature, but it can also be a *prophetic device*.<sup>3</sup> *Meshalim* speak symbolically into a particular situation at a particular time. As Wright argues, 'the parables can and must be understood as falling within precisely the *Jewish prophetic tradition*.'<sup>4</sup> This prophetic dimension is our 'way in' to the 'kingdom' parables in Matthew 13.

### Prophecy and Authenticity

The above helps to address some of the problems of authenticity that have plagued redaction critics of Matthew. Gundry rejects many of the Matthew 13 parables as

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<sup>1</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, (London: Grafton, 1990), 469.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard B. Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 7, 19.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>4</sup> N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, (London: SPCK, 1996), 177.

'inauthentic' since, for him, they bear too many of the hallmarks of the early church.<sup>5</sup> If, however, we accept Wright's historical portrait of Jesus the itinerant prophet (a designation not limited to, but *including* some element of knowledge of the future) these features are less problematic.<sup>6</sup> If a *true* prophet, Jesus conceivably had insight into the present *and* future story of the kingdom. His parables, then, point to this kingdom story, asking: what is it like?

### Kingdom Expectations

Mark Saucy writes: 'neither John, Jesus nor the disciples defined the kingdom at the outset of their ministry. They simply proclaimed it.'<sup>7</sup> This, he argues, is because they didn't have to. Jews knew what they were expecting the kingdom to be: a sovereign intervention of Yahweh which would result in the restoration of Israel's national and political fortunes, the overthrow of her enemies, and a new age of peace and justice. This was the Jewish hope in Jesus' day, the 'basic, irreducible meaning' of the expression 'kingdom of God'.<sup>8</sup> However, as many scholars point out, to announce that such a kingdom was actually *arriving*, was potentially highly explosive, given the unstable political situation of Roman-occupied Israel. Jesus began to be seen as a provocative revolutionary.

### Opposition and Turning Point

In Matthew 11-12 we see an intensifying of opposition to Jesus, principally from the religious leaders of the day.<sup>9</sup> In part this comes from the fact that these leaders were dependant on Rome for power and wealth; Jesus' movement threatened the status quo.<sup>10</sup> They finally plot to kill him (Matt 12:14), and the fervour of their opposition culminates in the charge that Jesus is in league with Beelzebul (Matt 12:24). This antagonistic situation, in Matthean chronology at least, becomes the scenario into which Jesus speaks 'many things in parables.' (Matt 13:1). For Saucy, this is a turning point - what was once proclaimed openly, now becomes a 'secret' (Matt

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<sup>5</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2nd Ed., 1994.), 252-284 *passim*.

<sup>6</sup> Wright, *Jesus*, 170.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Saucy, 'The Kingdom-of-God Sayings in Matthew', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151 (April-June 1994): 175-197, p.178.

<sup>8</sup> Wright, *Jesus*, 204, 224.

<sup>9</sup> Saucy, *Kingdom-of-God Sayings*, 182.

<sup>10</sup> Marcus Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (London: SPCK, 2006), 90-91.

13:11).<sup>11</sup> It seems Jesus' veiled his message in parables in the first instance, for pragmatic reasons; had he spoken openly, he risked a riot.<sup>12</sup> However, the kingdom that Jesus announced, while rooted in the Jewish paradigm, would also radically redefine it. This comes into view as we look at Jesus' audience.

### Whose Kingdom?

A key element of Jesus' redefinition of the kingdom concerned the question of whom the kingdom was *for*. In the story told by many Jews, their unique inherited religio-cultural identity as the People of God virtually guaranteed them a place as the first-fruits of God's kingdom.<sup>13</sup> Therefore it is surprising that Matthew 13 appears to *exclude* certain Jews from the coming kingdom. The parables themselves, by their cryptic nature, appear to be agents of that exclusion (13:13). Judgement falls, not on Romans, but on Jews. For Gundry, chapter 13 is simply about 'understanding'. It is *Matthew's* message to a post-Easter church of both true and false disciples; understanding (apparently the ability to decode the parables) will be the arbiter between them.<sup>14</sup> But we do not need to resort to this, if we accept Jesus' words in this chapter as an authentic prophetic discourse, given, in part, against those who were opposing him.

### Reject Jesus, Reject Kingdom

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of Jesus' redefinition of kingdom was that it centred on allegiance *not* to the formal systems of Second Temple Judaism, but allegiance to Jesus himself.<sup>15</sup> The parables then become 'hidden and multilayered invitations to faith in Jesus as "The Kingdom of God" in person.'<sup>16</sup>

By quoting Isaiah, Jesus implicitly places his identity in the Jewish prophetic succession.<sup>17</sup> A Jewish prophet did not merely 'tell the future' but rather critiqued the present, calling people to repentance, and pronouncing blessings or woes as a result – often using parabolic images or narratives.<sup>18</sup> If, as is plausible, Jesus' present

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<sup>11</sup> Saucy, *Kingdom-of-God Sayings*, 186.

<sup>12</sup> Wright, *Jesus*, 179.

<sup>13</sup> Wright, *Jesus*, 243.

<sup>14</sup> Gundry, *Matthew*, 250, 255

<sup>15</sup> Wright, *Jesus*, 274.

<sup>16</sup> Ratzinger, Joseph, Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 188.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>18</sup> E.g. Isaiah 5; Ezekiel 17; Jeremiah 24.

audience included those very scribes and Pharisees who were plotting against him earlier that same day (12:38, 13:1), then Jesus is using the designation 'them' (13:11) as shorthand for those enemies who have infiltrated the crowd as a whole. In this context, the parable of the Wheat and Weeds (vv24-30, 36-43) has immediate relevance. Though veiled in metaphor, it tells the story of Jesus' audience as a 'mixed' community (to reappropriate Gundry's phrase), wherein the devil has 'sowed his seed'.

#### Haves and Have-nots

Drawing these threads together we can explain v12 – 'those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away'. The religious leaders of Israel are the very people who *ought* to have recognised the kingdom, as announced in the word, deed and very person of Jesus.<sup>19</sup> But they reject him, and by extension, the kingdom itself. The crux of Jesus' message in verses 10-17 then, is *not* that a group of insiders (the twelve disciples) have been given some *gnosis* of the kingdom, while the peasant masses remain unenlightened. This view (not to mention contradicting Matthew's overriding portrait of the disciples as, in Borg's amusing phrase, "not getting it") runs against the whole tenor of Jesus' kingdom proclamation as 'good news' for the poor.<sup>20</sup> The message is rather that the supposed spiritual shepherds of Israel have shown themselves to 'have nothing', and therefore their human authority ('even what they have') will be taken away. They have already excluded themselves from the kingdom, and their incomprehension of the parables merely seals this exclusion.<sup>21</sup> The twelve disciples on the other hand, stand for all those who 'have' (v12) even a little faith (v31-32, cf.17:20) and so are given more. From a basis of simple faith and recognition of Jesus, kingdom understanding bears fruit (v23).

#### Reign Beyond Judgement

We have discussed briefly the Jewish expectations of the kingdom of God/kingdom of heaven as vindication of Israel under Yahweh's rule. Matthew's *basileia ton ouranou* (*basileia tou theou* elsewhere in the NT), while perhaps still carrying some

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<sup>19</sup> Wright, *Jesus*, 240-1.

<sup>20</sup> Borg, *Jesus*, 179; 135.

<sup>21</sup> For a further dimension to the Pharisees and exclusion cf.23:13.

notion for the Jews of a geographical 'realm', is more accurately described as 'God's kingly rule' or reign, at work dynamically in the world.<sup>22</sup> But what does this 'reign' look like, according to Matthew 13? We have already seen that, for Jesus, the kingdom meant allegiance to himself. The above-mentioned theme of judgement and exclusion, (directed primarily at the temple system and its adherents), is another developing theme in Jesus' kingdom inauguration; indeed Matthew 13 is sometimes summarized (negatively) as being about 'judgement.'<sup>23</sup> But is this the whole picture? By discussing two of the Matthew 13 parables, The Wheat and Weeds (vv24-30, 36-43) and The Net (47-50), I hope to uncover a redemptive message pointing to a theology of the kingdom as 'embrace'.

### An Unexpected Embrace

The way that Jesus' parables 'work' is through the juxtaposition of the familiarity of ordinary events and things with a 'dissimilarity' - something unexpected which can be 'a way of redefining and subverting a hearer's vision of the referent [the kingdom] so as to redescribe reality'.<sup>24</sup> Approaching these two parables afresh, we can ask: what would have been puzzling or unusual about them for Jesus' Galilean audience? Where is the unbidden, yet profitable 'dissimilarity'? It is *not* the descriptions of divine judgement, which would have been expected in any Jewish view of God's kingdom (although Jesus radically overturned expectations of *who* the enemy to be judged *was*). What is really unexpected in these parables is the motif of divine 'gathering' or 'embrace' of the 'other'. This idea of 'embrace' in the work of Volf, as we shall see presently, describes something more revolutionary and transformational than the modern idea of blanket 'inclusion'.<sup>25</sup> In the parable of the Wheat and Weeds then, the unexpected element of 'embrace' is found in the fact both the Wheat and Weeds grow *together*, i.e. that evil should be allowed to coexist with good *in God's kingdom*. Similarly, in The Net, the unexpected element is not the final 'sorting' of the fish, it is the fact that, as the net is cast, the good and bad are 'gathered' together *in God's kingdom*. The explanation in verse 41 also applies here: 'The Son of Man will

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<sup>22</sup> Joel Marcus, 'Entering into the Kingly Power of God', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107/4 (1988): 663-675, p.664.

<sup>23</sup> Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 27.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>25</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 64.

send his angels and they will *collect out of his kingdom* all causes of sin and all evildoers.' Logically, for 'causes of sin and evildoers' to be 'collected out of his kingdom', they must have been in it in the first place.<sup>26</sup> What is going on here?

### The Cross as The Embrace of the Kingdom

Volf's theology of 'embrace' focuses Jesus' kingdom mission on the mystery of the cross. Through the cross, God embraces and forgives the world, redefining victory in the process: 'The arms of the crucified are open – a sign of the space in God's self and an invitation for the enemy to come in.'<sup>27</sup> The secret of the kingdom of heaven is this: *the reign of God looks like self-emptying, self-giving love; it looks like Jesus*. In Matthew 13, neither disciples, nor crowds, nor Pharisees 'understand' this – but some will later.<sup>28</sup> Pope Benedict sees that 'the mystery of the Cross is inscribed right at the heart of the parables' - indeed the parables only truly make sense as prophecies that become 'unlocked' on Calvary.<sup>29</sup> In the parable of the Wheat and Weeds, it is Jesus himself (who is both sower and seed<sup>30</sup>) who is 'sown' into humanity and through dying, draws all people into his love. In the parable of the Net, Jesus himself is 'thrown into the sea' (an image of curse cf. Matt 18:6) in order to gather all people to himself.

### Judgement and Response

Is there room still, then, for judgement? In Jesus' parables, as we have seen, the tragic but unavoidable answer is yes. But this judgement must be seen in the light of God's self-emptying embrace. By *limiting* his sovereign power in order to embrace humanity, God creates 'space' for us to accept or reject him, just as Jesus did with his audience. Volf writes,

'if evildoers experience God's terror, it will not be because they have done evil, but because they have resisted to the end the powerful lure of the open arms of the crucified Messiah.'<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> For an even more explicit example see Matthew 22:1-14, especially v10.

<sup>27</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 126.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Luke 24:44-46.

<sup>29</sup> Ratzinger, *Jesus*, 194, 190.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 190. Cf. John 12:24.

<sup>31</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 298.

If we are to avoid this fate - if ours is to accept, indeed reciprocate the embrace of God, what then should our response be? Jesus *does* want his true disciples to 'understand' his prophetic parables - in the shadow of the cross and the light of resurrection. But principally, he wants us to 'understand' the kingdom by *enacting* it in our lives. As Borg has so simply and profoundly stated, true kingdom eschatology is *participatory* eschatology.<sup>32</sup> As people whom God has embraced, our mission is to extend the divine embrace to the whole of humanity (Matt 28:16-20).

### Extending the Embrace

The embrace of God, as extended through his children, is needed in as many lives and as many situations as there are grains of sand on the seashore. Indeed, to she who would take up her cross and follow in the way of Jesus, the needs of this world can seem overwhelming in their manifold complexity. Where can we begin to discover our participatory role in the mission of God? Practically speaking, the faithful steps of Jesus (as faithfully recorded by the Evangelists) provide us with the pattern of a life lived in perfect partnership with the self-giving rule of the Triune God: it is a life lived in obedience to the Father, in intimate knowledge of Sonship, and in submission to the leading of the Spirit in each encounter. Each time we obey the prompting of the Spirit to give Jesus' love to those around us, the self-giving rule of God is enacted and advanced in the world. Like Jesus' Spirit-led embrace of those he encountered during his lifetime, our localized acts of faith may seem as small and insignificant as the parabolic mustard seed. Yet the promise of Jesus is, as we grow up more and more into his likeness, that our open arms of embrace will become the branches of the great and mighty Tree of Life, where all may find space and shelter.

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<sup>32</sup> Borg, *Jesus*, 260.

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