

Ancient Texts *for* New Testament Studies

*A Guide to the
Background Literature*

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coming of an eschatological era of jubilee. Indeed, 4Q521, a passage that makes explicit reference to God's Messiah, alludes to words and phrases from Isa 61:1–2 and related passages. It is therefore very probable that many Jews of Jesus' time understood Isaiah 61 as not only eschatological but also messianic.

In understanding Isa 61:1–2 in an eschatological sense the author of 11QMelchizedek agrees with Jesus, who had proclaimed to his audience: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). But in emphasizing the judgmental nature of the passage the author of 11QMelchizedek moves in a completely different direction. The very line that Jesus had omitted from his quotation, "and the day of vengeance of our God" (cf. Isa 61:2), seems to hold the key to Qumran's understanding, not only of the jubilee of Lev 25:13, but even of the "good news" passage, Isa 52:7. The Hebrew text, which consists of consonants, not vowels, has been revocalized, so that it not only promises "peace" (*šālôm*) to the faithful, but "retribution" (*šillûm*) to Qumran's enemies.

If Qumran's understanding of Isa 61:1–2 approximated the understanding of the audience of the Nazareth synagogue, we are able to appreciate much better the dynamics at work. When Jesus quoted Isa 61:1–2 and announced that it was fulfilled, he and his audience would have drawn two opposing conclusions. For Jesus the eschatological jubilee meant forgiveness and mercy for all, but for his kinsmen and long-time friends it meant blessings for them and judgment for their enemies. Jesus' omission of the line, "and the day of vengeance of our God," might have initially slipped by unnoticed. But when he illustrated his understanding of the prophetic passage by appealing to the examples of mercy Elijah and Elisha showed Israel's enemies, his audience clearly understood his position and they did not like it. They viewed Jesus' interpretation as a betrayal of their messianic hopes.

Bibliography: M. P. MILLER, "The Function of Isa. 61, 1–2 in Melchizedek," *JBL* 88 (1969): 467–69; P. RAINBOW, "Melchizedek as a Messiah at Qumran," *BBR* 7 (1997): 179–94; J. A. SANDERS, "From Isaiah 61 to Luke 4," in *Christianity, Judaism, and Other Greco-Roman Cults* (ed. J. Neusner; M. Smith FS; Leiden: Brill, 1975), 75–106.

The Parable of the Talents

Can the apocryphal gospels (cf. ch. 8 and appendix 3) shed light on the NT Gospels? Sometimes. Consider the parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14–30; roughly paralleled by Luke 19:11–27). Commentators have usually assumed that Jesus intended his hearers to understand that the heroes of the parable are the servants who doubled their master's money. These servants are models for Jesus' followers: "All of this constitutes an appeal to good works as demonstrating the reality of professed discipleship" (Gundry, 505). The servant who hid his master's money, and did not even lend to bankers for interest, is understood to be a poor model: "Thus the parable closes on a threatening note concerning the punishment Jesus

will mete out to disciples who falsify their profession by failing to do good works” (Gundry, 510).

The traditional interpretation runs into problems when we are mindful of the biblical principles and economical realities by which the majority of Palestinians in Jesus’ day lived. The first problem has to do with the master. He expects exorbitant profits, he is a “hard” man, he reaps the fields of others, gathers the grain that others have threshed, and has no difficulty with usury (Matt 25:24–27). Moreover, he is merciless (Matt 25:30). At the very least this is a hard-nosed businessman who does not observe the law’s express prohibition against the practice of usury (cf. Exod 22:25; Ps 15:5). But it is more probable that the picture is worse. This man may be an oppressive gouger and a thief. In any case, it is hard to imagine how an agrarian audience, for the most part peasants, could have heard this parable and understood the master in a favorable sense. This observation has been made recently by Richard Rohrbaugh (Rohrbaugh 1993).

The second problem has to do with the actions of the servants. The first two double their master’s money. In the minds of first-century peasants such margins of profit were not fair, but could take place only through high interest rates, excessive returns from tenant farmers, taxation, or outright theft. However these profits were obtained, the peasants knew that it would be at their expense. (For a recent study that treats this subject, see Oakman.) The third servant neither cheated anyone, nor made a profit at anyone’s expense. He kept his master’s money safe and returned it to him. Although guiltless in the eyes of the peasants, this servant is “worthless” in the eyes of his master and is punished.

For these reasons one may well wonder if the parable as we now have it in the canonical Gospels has been misunderstood. Eusebius wondered this also. Commenting on the Matthean version of the parable he discusses the different perspective of the *Gospel of the Nazarenes* (*Gos. Naz.* §18; cf. Eusebius, *Theoph.* 22 [on Matt 25:14–15]):

But since the Gospel in Hebrew characters which has come into our hands enters the threat not against the man who had hid [the talent], but against him who had lived dissolutely—for he [the master] had three servants: one who squandered his master’s substance with harlots and flute-girls, one who multiplied the gain, and one who hid the talent; and accordingly one was accepted (with joy), another merely rebuked, and another cast into prison—I wonder whether in Matthew the threat which is uttered after the word against the man who did nothing may refer not to him, but by epanalepsis to the first who had feasted and drunk with the drunken.

The parable of the *Gospel of the Nazarenes* seems to be a combination of the parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14–30) and the parable of the Wicked Servant (Matt 24:45–51; Luke 12:45–48). But what is interesting is Eusebius’s thought that perhaps the word of rebuke was originally uttered against the man who made huge profits.

Additional problems arise when we consider the Lukan form of the parable (Luke 19:11–27), the so-called parable of the Pounds (or Minas). Not only is the

man (called a “nobleman”) harsh and demanding, but he is hated by his subjects who do not want him to reign as king over them (Luke 19:14). After his return, he settles with his servants, much as in the Matthean version. But he appears even more harsh, for he demands that those who did not want him to be king be brought before him and be slain in his very presence (Luke 19:27). The traditional interpretation of this form of the parable is not unlike the interpretation of the Matthean version (e.g., Fitzmyer, 2:1232–33; C. A. Evans, 284–87). The evangelist Luke, as the evangelist Matthew, probably understood the parable along the lines that modern commentators interpret it.

There is a second problem with the Lukan version. It appears that the unique parts of the parable, that of the nobleman’s quest to receive a kingdom and the citizens’ sending a delegation in the hope of frustrating this goal, are based upon the experience of the hated Archelaus not too many years before. (He ruled Judea from 4 B.C.E. to 6 C.E.) This is suggested by the numerous parallels between the parable’s nobleman and Archelaus (whose experience is recounted in Josephus): The nobleman went to a far country (v. 12), just as Archelaus went to Rome (*Ant.* 17.9.3 §219); the nobleman hoped to receive a kingdom (*basileia*) and to return (v. 12), just as Archelaus hoped (*Ant.* 17.9.3 §220: *basileia*); the nobleman left household instructions to his servants (v. 13), just as Archelaus did (*Ant.* 17.9.3 §219, 223); the nobleman’s citizens hated (*misein*) him (v. 14), just as Archelaus’s subjects hated him (*Ant.* 17.9.4 §227: *misos*); an embassy (*presbeia*) is sent after the nobleman (v. 14), as one was sent after Archelaus (*Ant.* 17.11.1 §300: *presbeia*); the citizens petitioned the foreign country against the nobleman’s rule (v. 14), just as the envoys petitioned against Archelaus (*Ant.* 17.11.1 §302); the nobleman slaughtered (*katasphazein*) his citizens who opposed him (v. 27), just as Archelaus had done before his journey (*Ant.* 17.9.5 §237, 239: *sphazein*); when the nobleman returned as ruler, he collected his revenues (vv. 15–19), just as Josephus notes that Archelaus was to receive 600 talents as his yearly tribute (*Ant.* 17.11.4 §320); and finally, when the nobleman returned, he settled accounts with those who had opposed him (v. 27), which parallels Archelaus’s settling with Joazar the high priest for having supported the rebels (*Ant.* 17.13.1 §339). Since Herod Antipas also traveled to Rome to press his claim to the throne, and was also opposed, his experience loosely fits the experience of the parable’s nobleman. But it is Archelaus who offers the closest match.

Why would Jesus tell a parable whose hero is supposed to be law-breaking, despised tyrant? In what sense does such a man model Jesus? In what sense are the servants who work for this man and assist him in his oppressive activities models for Jesus’ followers? But perhaps this is not what Jesus originally intended. Following the lead of Eusebius’s discussion of the form of the parable in the *Gospel of the Nazarenes*, it is possible, if not probable, that Jesus originally told his parable(s) to illustrate how *not* to be a master and how *not* to be servants. This idea coheres with his teaching elsewhere (Mark 10:42–44):

You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you;

but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.

In its original context, the parable may have presented a contrast between Jesus' style of kingship and that of the Herodian dynasty. The latter was known for its oppression and ruthlessness. But Jesus wished to present a new way and expected his followers to practice it as well.

It is easy to see how the original point of the parable(s) came to be confused with teaching concerned with stewardship and responsibility (cf. Matt 24:45–47; Luke 12:35–38; 17:7–10). The servant that is wise and faithful, doing what he is expected to do, such as treating the members of the master's household properly (not profiteering at his neighbors' expense) will be rewarded. It is possible, then, that the theme of reward drew these parables together, so that the servants of the oppressive master and nobleman came to be interpreted much as the servants of the other parables. But whereas the latter were held up as worthy models, the former were not.

Bibliography: C. A. EVANS, *Luke* (NIBC 3; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1990); J. A. FITZMYER, *The Gospel according to Luke X–XXIV* (2 vols.; AB 18, 28A; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981–1985); R. H. GUNDRY, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982); D. E. OAKMAN, *Jesus and the Economic Questions of His Day* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen, 1986); R. ROHRBAUGH, "A Peasant Reading of the Parable of the Talents/Pounds: A Text of Terror?" *BTB* 23 (1993): 32–39.

~~The Parable of the Wicked Vineyard Tenants~~

~~The parable of the Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:1–11=Matt. 21:33–46=Luke 20:9–19) is clearly based on Isaiah's Song [or Parable] of the Vineyard (Isa 5:1–7, esp. 5:1–2; cf. Mark 12:1). Whereas Isaiah's parable is directed against the "house of Israel and the men of Judah" (Isa 5:7), Jesus' parable is directed against the religious authorities: "they perceived that he had told the parable against them" (Mark 12:12). How could the chief priests (cf. Mark 11:27) so readily perceive that the parable was directed against them? If Isaiah's parable was aimed against the people as a whole, why should Jesus' allusion to it be perceived as a threat against one particular group within Jewish society? The explanation is suggested by *Targum Isaiah*, which inserts "sanctuary" and "altar" in place of tower and wine vat. This would seem to indicate that in the time of Jesus (for *Targum Isaiah* clearly contains traditions that derive from the first century) Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard had come to be understood as directed against the temple establishment. Tosefta's explicit identification of the tower with the temple, and the wine vat with the altar (cf. *t. Me'il.* 1.16 and *t. Sukkah* 3.15) shows that this interpretation was not limited to the synagogue, where the Targum evolved, but seems to have been known in the rabbinic academies as well.~~

~~The Targum plays a further role when Jesus quotes Ps 118:22: "The stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner." According to the~~