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Ideology and Ideological Readings of the Parable of the Tenants

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I am honoured to have been nominated and elected as president of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies. The real work of the Society, as most will know, is carried on not by the president but by other officers, in particular the executive secretary, the treasurer, the program coordinator, and the publications officer. The only duties of the president are to preside at various meetings and to give this address. But knowing what I know about the many distinguished presidents of this society and the learned addresses that they have given, this latter duty is a weighty and rather daunting one.

In this paper I would like to discuss two problems in interpretation: first, the role of ideology in the production of texts and commentaries; and second, the impressive effect that ideology has on inclining exegesis to particular explanations and the sidelining of others.

Let me begin with a personal anecdote. It is twenty-five years, perhaps to the day, that I became a member of the CSBS and attended my first meeting, coincidentally, à la Université Laval. I was then a graduate student, brimming with optimism and hybris about what could be known, the certainty with which it could be known, and the proper way to go about doing this. There was in attendance a scholar of a rather conservative, perhaps fundamentalist, stripe who read a paper defending the view that the early Church—or rather, the New Testament—taught that the Parousia would occur after the tribulation (or perhaps it was before it, I can't remember). In the discussion period there was only one question put to this scholar, wondering whether he thought that there was any difference between Paul's views as expressed in the letters and those of the "Paul" of Acts. The somewhat puzzled reply was in the negative, and then we moved on to the next paper.

From the standpoint of the profound expertise that one gains from a year or two in graduate school, I immediately dismissed the paper as crude and unscientific. Today, I hope that I would not be so hasty. It is not that I

now believe that the Bible is an internally coherent document from which it is possible to extract unambiguous and unified views on any given topic. It is not that I think that historical criticism is bankrupt. On the contrary, the several announcements of its demise that we all have heard are, I think, a bit premature. But the view of the Bible as a unified and coherent communication from the divine interests me, not because it is right but because it is persuasive to many and is part of a large and effective cultural and political rhetoric. We might not learn much about what Paul or Luke thought about the Parousia and the tribulation, but we will learn a great deal about how views of the text of the Bible function within certain ideologies.

One does not have to travel to the world of fundamentalism to see ideology at work. In the course of working on the history of the Synoptic Problem in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I came face to face with the fact that eminent and eminently skilled practitioners of historical criticism invoked, and were persuaded by, arguments and evidentiary appeals that would hardly be countenanced nowadays. The late William Farmer complained repeatedly and rightly that the arguments advanced by Holtzmann in favour of Markan priority are mostly reversible, inconclusive, or downright vacuous. What then accounts for the hegemony of the Two Document Hypothesis? It was disconcerting for me to see the likes of Lessing, Schleiermacher, F.C. Baur, Holtzmann, and Jülicher embracing views, not, it seemed to me, on the strength of good argument and evidence, but because they served rather extrinsic theological and apologetic interests. Meanwhile, the more “obvious” features of the text were ignored.

None of these observations is new or particularly daring. But the fact that distinguished predecessors were often convinced by quaint or flimsy arguments, and that their concerns with the text often seem tangential at best should be sobering on two points. Not only must we caution ourselves against too much confidence in *our own* methods—for these will perhaps seem quaint and flimsy to the next generation, but we should attend carefully to the problem of *ideology* in texts. There are at least two respects in which ideology works on texts: in the manufacture and framing of the texts themselves—the ways the text inscribes certain values and beliefs about the world—; and in the history of interpretation of the text—the elements of the text which commentators and other “consumers” of the text understand as central, key, unimportant, and trivial—judgments that have at least something to do with the ideological environment of these consumers.

By “ideology” I mean a set of beliefs, meanings, and values that encode the interests of particular social groups, classes, or sectors, and which have, or are intended to have, a regulatory or prescriptive function within the

group and often outside it. The term ideology has descriptive, pejorative, and positive senses¹: in the descriptive or anthropological sense, ideologies are “belief-systems characteristic of certain social groups or classes, composed of both discursive and non-discursive elements.”² On the pejorative definition, ideologies are in principle flawed, for they function to buttress oppressive forms of social power, often by generating false or distorted beliefs. But positive definitions are also possible, according to which ideologies encode values and goals of which we approve. On each definition, ideology has both a theoretical and a practical orientation: theoretical, insofar as it is a representation of the imaginary *relations* of people to their real conditions of existence,³ and pragmatic or instrumental, and thus “action-oriented,” furnishing adherents with motivations and goals.

Ideology in its pejorative sense is perhaps the most common, the most pernicious, and the easiest to spot. These are the kinds of constructs which, as Edward Said noted in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), in their worst forms convinced colonized Africans of the inferiority of their culture to that of their European colonizers, or closer to our home, those that persuaded exegetes such as Jeremias of the basically dishonest and indolent character of the “orientals” who populate Jesus’ parables. But there are also more productive and progressive forms of ideology, such as socialism. The basic point is that ideology is a feature of texts and their interpretation which is impossible to avoid and best taken cognizance of.

The parables ascribed to Jesus are good places to illustrate and examine the influence of ideology on the production and interpretation of texts for at least two reasons. First, because the parables trade in aspects of ordinary life: agricultural production, domestic relations, labour relations, hospitality, travel, and so forth. Because these activities are inevitably subject to ideological valuation, they offer a laboratory for examining both how the ancient text inscribed these everyday relationships in the narrative, and how

¹ Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of Critical Theory* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), chap. 1.

² Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 43.

³ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” in *Essays on Ideology* (London: Verso, 1984), 32-33.

the history of interpretation has re-inscribed them. And second, since we have a more or less continuous history of interpretation from the patristic to the modern periods, we are in a position to examine and contrast interpretations and to set each in its own ideological context.

For both reasons, the story of man who leased his vineyard to uncooperative tenants found in Mark 12:1-12 and *GThom* 65 is a good place to examine the role of ideology in the production and interpretation of a text. In this paper I wish, first, to track some of the ideologically-laden uses to which the Synoptic version has been put; second, to ask about the ideological freighting of the Synoptic text itself; third, to show that there is evidence in patristic literature of a very different reading, one that reads most of the key elements of the parable in a diametrically opposed fashion; and finally, to wonder aloud which of the construals of the parable is the earliest. Let me stop at three stations on the history of interpretation, beginning with two relatively recent readings, and then one early patristic one.

1 / Some Readings of the Tenants

In 1662 the *Book of Common Prayer* was authorized by the Convocation of the Church of England and the British Parliament and came into compulsory use throughout the Church of England. For January 30th it mandated a penitential service accompanied by a national fast for the crime of regicide. The act in view was the execution of Charles I, beheaded on that day in 1649, having been found guilty of treason by the Rump Parliament. The reading prescribed for the Communion Service was Matthew 21:33-46, the Parable of the Tenants. The lections for Morning Prayer were 2 Samuel 1—David's lament for Saul and Jonathan—, Matthew 27—the portion of Matthew's passion account that narrates the execution of Jesus—, and 1 Peter 2:13-22, which deals with submission to civil authority.⁴

The effects of this thoroughly monarchist alignment of the Parable of the Tenants are obvious: not only do the events of 1649 cast their shadow over the main figures of the story—the owner, the Beloved Son, and the tenants—, but the text aligned in this way inscribes a set of divinely-ordained (and therefore “objectively” true) relations between King and subjects which

⁴ Although technically enjoined by law, the service had probably fallen out of general use when it was removed from the Book of Common Prayer in 1837 by a royal warrant of the new Queen Victoria. [I owe this information to my colleague, Dr. David Neelands].

approve submission to a social hierarchy and which authorize the use of deadly force in punishing disobedience.

Two centuries later we can observe what Sri Lankan exegete Rajiah Sugirtharajah has termed “imperial critical commentary.”⁵ William Arnot’s 1884 exposition of the parables used British India as an interpretive paradigm, explaining that the situation presupposed by the Markan parable was much like that of colonial India, with the tenants forming a kind of “joint stock company” that leased from the nonresident owner the right to conduct business—rather like the system of subsidiarity practiced by the East India Company after 1818. The revolt of the peasants was, in Arnot’s view, the predictable result of the fact that “the central government was paralyzed.”⁶ He cites no ancient evidence of this paralysis and one wonders whether Arnot was rather speaking of the inability of the British government to put down the Mutiny and Great Revolt of 1857-59. The lesson of the parable, Arnot avowed, is that the people of Israel, “necessarily passive in the hands of their priests and rulers,”⁷ were betrayed by their rulers who usurped a lordship over God’s heritage and systematically ignored the “extraordinary ambassadors” sent by God to demand the stipulated tribute.

I do not wish to belittle Arnot’s commentary or to suggest that his ideological lens blinded him to all the features of the text. On the contrary, much more clearly than many subsequent commentators, Arnot, sensitive to the English class structure and the caste system of India, understood the social logic of the sending of the son. Where later exegetes from Jülicher to Tolbert⁸ found the sending of the son to be foolhardy and irresponsible, Arnot rightly saw this manoeuvre as the trump card, the owner’s confident belief that the peasants could be brought to heel by the appearance of a family member bearing all of the emblems of high social status.⁹ But in general, the Jesus of

⁵ Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah, “Imperial Critical Commentaries: Christian Discourse and Commentarial Writings in Colonial India,” *JSNT* 73 (1999), 83-112.

⁶ William Arnot, *The Parables of Our Lord* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1884), 239.

⁷ Arnot, *The Parables of Our Lord*, 244.

⁸ Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark’s World in Literary-historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 236.

⁹ Arnot, *The Parables of Our Lord*, 239.

Arnot's commentary comes off as a "gentle and gentrified Christ"¹⁰ and the tenants are demonized as refractory, unable to calculate the remote consequences of their deeds, and dominated by the passions¹¹—the sort of ideological portrayal that was used to legitimize the colonial project: governing those who could not decently govern themselves.

For the first thousand or so years of Christian interpretive history, the parable was read rather differently, not as justifying colonialism or condemning regicide, but as a text that gave an account of the very existence of a Gentile church and its situation vis à vis the Jews. In patristic exegesis—our third station—, the dominant line of interpretation read the parable as an historical allegory of God's dealings, first with Israel and, following the death of the Son, with Christians. The basic lines of the allegory are obvious: the owner is God; the servants, the prophets; the Son is Jesus; and new tenants are the Christians. After Eusebius (who follows a rejected interpretation of Origen, which in turn reflects Jewish exegesis), the first elements of Mark's parable were micro-allegorized: the tower with the sanctuary and the vat is the altar of the Solomonic or Herodian Temple. As Athanasius notes,¹² the breaking down of the vineyard wall and destruction of the vat=altar and tower=Temple allowed for the building of multiple sanctuaries and altars elsewhere. In other words, the text now inscribed the Christian triumph over the Jews and the building program of post-Constantinian Christendom.

2 / Ideology in the Intracanonial Gospels

It was of course the editing of the parable in Mark itself and its subsequent redaction by Matthew and Luke that set the interpretive course pursued by Eusebius and his successors. In all three Synoptics, despite some variations, the parable is told "against" the chief priest, scribes and elders (Mark) or chief priests and Pharisees (Matthew), or scribes and chief priests (Luke). In Mark and Matthew, and less strongly in Luke, the initial description of the vineyard highlights Isa 5:1-7 as an intertext and this connection renders unavoidable the identification of the owner as God, which in turn aligns the servants and the (beloved) Son with God's purposes, and the destruction of the tenants as God's doing.

¹⁰ Sugirtharajah, "Imperial Critical Commentaries," 93.

¹¹ Arnot, *The Parables of Our Lord*, 239-40.

¹² Athanasius, *Expositiones in Psalmos* on Ps 8 (MPG 27:80) .

Analysis of the form of the allusion to Isa 5:1-7, however, makes it abundantly clear that the quotation is a secondary import into the parable. In the first place, it is Septuagintal in its formulation and, as I have argued elsewhere, betrays the characteristically *Egyptian* aspects of viticulture that are reflected in the LXX's rendering of the Hebrew text.¹³ And second, the introduction of the Isaiah quotation creates a legal and horticultural incoherence into the story.¹⁴ Despite the heroic attempts of some recent commentators to save Isaiah in the parable, the reference is undoubtedly secondary.

As most commentators note, the addition of a quotation of Ps 117:22-23 LXX supplied a post-mortem vindication for the beloved son, who is left for dead in the parable proper. This vindication, since it is said to be *para* kurību, reinforces the identity of the beloved Son as belonging to God and his purposes. Ever since Dodd, the comment of Mark 12:5b, "and (he sent) many others, some who were beaten and others killed," is also normally regarded as an addition, overburdening the folkloric triad of servants that precedes it.

The editing of Mark's parable by Matthew and Luke did not change the fundamental direction of Mark's story: Matthew further assimilated Mark's allusion to the LXX of Isa 5:2; he reduced Mark's multiple missions of individual slaves to two sets of slaves, all of whom were either beaten, killed or stoned, thus providing Origen with the license to identify the first group as pre-Exilic prophets and the latter as the prophets after Jeremiah (Origen, *Comm. in Matthaeum* 17.6). Matthew also provided an interpretive comment after the citation of Ps 117:22-23, "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to an *ethnos* that produces its fruits," further aligning the commodity in question with God. Luke's editing is less inventive, but the basic lines of the Markan story are nonetheless confirmed.

¹³ John S. Kloppenborg Verbin, "Egyptian Viticultural Practices and the Citation of Isa 5:1-7 in Mark 12:1-9," *NovT* 44/1 (2002) forthcoming.

¹⁴ John S. Kloppenborg Verbin, "Isaiah 5:1-7, the Parable of the Tenants, and Vineyard Leases on Papyrus," in *Text and Artifact: Religions in Mediterranean Antiquity: Essays in Honour of Peter Richardson*, ed. Stephen G. Wilson, and Michel Desjardins (Studies in Christianity and Judaism / Études sur le christianisme et le judaïsme 9; Waterloo, Ont.: Canadian Corporation for the Study of Religion, by Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2000), 111-134.

It is worth noting the effects of this editing and, in particular, aspects of ideological *coercion* and *concealment*. Here I borrow from the work of David Penchansky.¹⁵ Ideological coercion takes place in several ways: first, by stripping events of their particularity and referring the resulting abstractions to some generalized schema. To take an example current in Israel: Aryeh Deri, Israeli Knesset member and leader of a religious party Shas was recently arrested and imprisoned on fraud and bribery charges. When my Yeminite friend says that his imprisonment is a matter of Ashkenazi Jews ganging up on Sephardic Jews, some kind of ideological move is taking place. It is not that there may not be some truth in the claim. But to put things in this way dramatically narrows and effaces the particulars of the Deri case. Similarly, Mark's version of the parable introduces elements of the Deuteronomistic view of history and of the role of the prophets, and by this means promotes certain features of the parable to importance (the owner's justified claims to the produce) and reduces other elements of the parable to insignificance (possible reasons for the tenants' reaction to the owner's extractions).

A second mode of ideological coercion happens by *cross-reference* and *analogy*. The drawing of a parallel between *x* and *y* or the adducing of a cross-reference inevitably draws attention to certain features of the text and obscures others. Sometimes this has the effect of *manufacturing* data in the target account, as seems to have occurred in Arnot's claims about the governmental paralysis that allegedly infected Roman Palestine. In the case of Mark, we have at least three cross-references: the text cites or alludes to Isaiah's vineyard (Isa 5:1-7), the story of Joseph in Genesis 37, and Psalm 117 (118). Each cross-reference comments certain lines of interpretation, and forecloses others.

Finally, the account can be reconfigured by *framing* it in such a way that certain elements are foregrounded and others backgrounded, and by creating a narrative syntax that implies causal relationships between discrete elements. For example, the Deuteronomist's framing of the story of Ehud in Judg 3:12-30 connects the account of this Israelite hero to a larger theological narrative that relates repeated episodes of apostasy, punishment, repentance

¹⁵ I am indebted in a general way to the useful discussion of the ideological criticism of Judg 2:10-23 by David Penchansky, "Up for Grabs: A Tentative Proposal for Doing Ideological Criticism," *Semeia* 59 (1992) 35-41.

and deliverance. The particulars of the Ehud story recede and the imposed Deuteronomistic pattern dominate.

In the canonical version of the Tenants, *abstraction* can be seen in Mark's generalizing comment in 12:5b. As many commentators point out, Mark probably has in mind the prophets and their fate.¹⁶ The comment adduces the template of Deuteronomistic theology, according to which God continually communicates with his obdurate people via prophets, who are regularly abused and even murdered.¹⁷ (Matthew, it should be noted, further cements the connection with Deuteronomistic theology by his addition of εὐαγγελιστῶν ἡσῶν, which creates a lateral link with Matt 23:37-39 / Q 13:34-35, a *locus classicus* of Deuteronomistic theology). The insertion of the comment in Mark has another effect, that of dividing the narrative into two portions, the first having to do with the initial attempts of the owner to recover his loss, and the second with the sending of the Beloved Son. This division naturally shifts more attention to the second main sequence, the Son and his death.

Matthew introduces further abstractions by his addition of 21:43, for the reader's attention is now directed to the Kingdom of God and those who are qualified to receive it. His use of *ethnos* (people) means that the imaginative dividing lines in the story are not between owners and tenants, or between persons of one social class and another, but now between *ethne*.

Three citations and allusions—or “cross references”—in the Markan story affect its reading. First and most obvious, the citation of Ps 117:22-23 at the end, supplies a missing vindication for the dead son, aligning him with “the Lord.” The choral declaration, “it is wonderful in our eyes,” now lifts the parable from the context of Jesus' story about agrarian conflict to a level of theatrical performance, where the last and definitive word is supplied by the chorus. Naturally, the tenants and the priests are on the losing side.

Mark's use of the allusion to Isaiah's vineyard (Mark 12:1, 9) creates an *analogy* between the two texts, causing one to be read in connection with

¹⁶ C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Revised ed.; London: James Nisbet & Co., 1961), 96; Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (Revised ed.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons; London: SCM Press, 1963), 71 and many others.

¹⁷ See Odil H. Steck, *Israel und das gewaltsame Geschick der Propheten: Untersuchungen zur Überlieferung des deuteronomistischen Geschichtsbildes im Alten Testament, Spätjudentum und Urchristentum* (WMANT 23; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1967).

the other. One can only see the owner as God and, therefore, the tenants as somehow opposed to God's interests. A similar effect is produced by Mark's phrases, δευτε ἀποκτείνωμεν αὐτὸν and καὶ ἀβοήτεν ... αὐτὸν, lifted verbatim from the story of the planned murder of Joseph by his brothers in Gen 37:20, 24 (LXX). This, like the quotation of Ps 117, aligns the son with Joseph and with divine purposes. Just as Joseph is eventually exalted before his brothers, so Mark's tenant story ends with the exaltation of the Son.

Finally, the framing of the Tenants in Mark, especially his concluding comment that "they (the chief priests, scribes and elders) tried to arrest him (but) they feared the crowd because they knew he told the parable against them" aligns the crowd with the choral declaration from Psalm 117, and set Jesus' parable firmly into the causal network that begins in Mark 3:6, with the scribes wanting to kill Jesus, and ends at the trial and crucifixion.

The text is not only subject to ideological coercion; ideology conceals itself in the text. As Pechansky comments, one is much less likely to remember the explicit statement of Deuteronomistic theology given in Judg 2:10-23, but one is likely to remember the juicy and lurid story of left-handed Ehud stabbing Eglon in the latrine. But this story has already been edited in such a way that it carried the ideological freight of the Deuteronomist, as the Greeks' horse at Troy also concealed a different cargo.

In the case of Mark, the dramatic story of the man and his tenants, thus coerced, is made part of a larger narrative in which priestly animosity is traced back to Jesus' telling of the tenants; their homicidal animosity can be read in the terms provided by the parable, as attended by jealousy, fear of the people, and their fear of being exposed. The reader remembers the juicy details of the story of a murder, but is mostly unaware of the cargo of ideology that it carries.

All of this is reasonably self-evident. But we might ask further, are other values inscribed in the parable of the Tenants as it appears in the Synoptics? It is clear that there are. The alignment of the figures in the parable for and against God and God's son also buttresses at least five other affirmations.

First, the sanctity of ownership of land and a presumed stability in patterns of ownership is reinforced by the narrative line of the story and by its lateral connections with Isaiah's vineyard. This represents a somewhat different view of land tenure than that represented, for example, by the Naboth story in 1 Kings 21 (LXX 20). There, Naboth refuses to sell his vineyard to Ahav, probably because of the traditional prohibition against the sale of patrimonial lands (Lev 25:23). Elijah's taunt, τῆρι Μῆω τῶν κρῶν,

“have you murdered and also inherited?” (1 Kgs 21:19) underscores the irony and injustice of Ahav’s subversion of Old Israelite inheritance patterns. In this case, land tenure is protected by God’s commandments. In the theology of the Deuteronomist, God, its ultimate owner, gives the land to Israel. But for the Deuteronomist, the land can be taken away too, especially in the case of apostasy or disobedience of the terms of the covenant. In the case of Mark, however, land tenure is made *analogous* or *parallel* to God’s ownership of Isaiah’s vineyard. The man owns his vineyard and is entitled to its produce just as surely as God owns vineyard Israel. Moreover, because his ownership of the vineyard is analogous to God’s ownership of Israel, it admits none of the potential ambiguities that Deuteronomistic theology creates, for example, that God might expel *him* from his land for unfaithfulness or sinfulness. Rather, in expelling the tenants from the vineyard, the owner stands in the place of God, whose ownership can never be in question.

Second, the story in Mark takes for granted a pattern of absentee ownership rather than direct cultivation of patrimonial lands.¹⁸ Thus Mark’s story is in contrast to the message of the Naboth story, which takes aim precisely at Ahav living in Samaria dispossessing a local owner of a vineyard in the Jezreel. The pattern of ownership and land tenure that Mark presupposes fit well with urban elites, who employed slaves or tenants to farm their estates in the countryside. But it represents a transformation of older patterns of direct cultivation by smallholders. Of course, the story of the tenants cannot work without the owner being at some distance from the tenants. But once the principle of ownership is enshrined by the story of the tenants, the legitimacy of absentee ownership follows in its train.

Third, the mechanisms of inheritance are inscribed and undergirded by Mark’s narrative. The futility of the tenants’ efforts to disinherit the son is underscored by the owner’s destruction of them, and by the quotation of Ps 117, which declares that in some unspecified manner, the Son is exalted, his position secure. Land tenure and inheritance stand fast, despite the best efforts of the tenants.

Fourth, the parable as it stands in Mark also inscribes the feckless nature of the tenants’ use of violence to secure their ends, and the complete legitimacy of violent means for retaining or regaining one’s property, and in retaliating against aggressors. Matthew’s next parable extends this motif when he declares that the king, rebuffed by the invitees to his son’s wedding

¹⁸ I owe this observation to Stephen J. Patterson.

banquet, will “destroy those murderers and burn their city” (Matt 22:7). While the tenants of Mark’s story are dispatched with a single verb, ἀπολέσει, the effect is powerful, for it knits together various ideological strands having to do with land tenure, inheritance, and justified modes of protection of self-interest.

Finally, the train of Mark’s story, and its conclusion with the citation of Ps 117, underscores the legitimate place for the demonstration of social status. As Arnot rightly saw, the sending of the son is not an act of parental madness but a predictable and perfectly appropriate strategy in cultures where status displays are part of the lexicon of power arrangements. Despite his death, the son, at the end of Mark’s story, has his status confirmed and, indeed, enhanced.

These ideologically-freighted features of the story—the legitimacy and normality of land ownership and absenteeism, the normalcy of inheritance and status-displays, the irrationality of violence when it is employed against ownership, and its rationality when used in support of ownership—are the features of the story that made the story so appealing to monarchists after the Restoration, or to British colonialists in India (and no doubt, to many others as well). The parable, as it has been coerced by Mark, does what successful ideologies do: in the words of Terry Eagleton, they “render their beliefs natural and self-evident, [identifying] them with the ‘common sense’ of a society so that nobody could imagine how they might ever be different.”¹⁹

3 / Another View on the Tenants

An examination of the history of exegesis from Irenaeus or Hippolytus to Cornelius a Lapide in the seventeenth century shows that by far the dominant trajectory of interpretation is the one set by Mark. But it is not the only one.

In the mid-second century CE Heracleon produced an allegorizing commentary on the Fourth Gospel. Commenting on the royal official’s household John 4:46-54, he equated them with the angels of the demiurge, contrasting them with the son who is healed (*apud* Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 13.426). The existence of such ‘alien children’, as he calls them, is attested elsewhere in the Bible: in Isa 1:2, ‘sons have I begotten and raised up but they rejected me’ and in ‘the vineyard that produced thorns’, alluding to Isa 5:2b.

¹⁹ Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 58.

Thus it seems that Heracleon read Isa 5:1-7 in the light of his dualistic cosmogony and as evidencing activities of the inferior being.

We might be satisfied to see this negative view of Isaiah's vineyard owner and the vineyard as an aberration were it not for the fact that a few decades later Tertullian also employed Isaiah's "vine of Soreq" (Isa 5:2) typologically, to connote inferior moral achievement. (This is in sharp contrast to exegetes after Origen, who consistently use the typology positively, contrasting the vine of Soreq with the vine of Egypt or the vine of Sodom). Tertullian's comments appear in his tractate against Marcion, who seems also to have referred to Isaiah's vineyard in negative terms. Tertullian, of course, was keen to refute Marcion's view that the deity of the Hebrew Bible betrayed himself as an inferior, capricious and vindictive being, incompatible with the God proclaimed by Jesus. But in his actual use of Isaiah 5, Tertullian also interpreted the vineyard negatively in his moral typology, in contrast to the view of Isaiah's vineyard that is encountered in Jewish and Christian exegesis from the third century on.

Marcion himself did not interpret Isa 5:1-7 or the parable of the Tenants as did his contemporary, Heracleon, as a cosmological allegory. His interests, like those of Tertullian, were ethical: texts expressed the *ethos* or character of their speakers and hence, authorized a kind of *Sachkritik* of biblical texts, which permitted him to parcel out biblical texts by their putative transcendent author. Texts such as Isa 5:1-7 belonged to a type of belief and behaviour characteristic of an inferior deity; the authentic preaching of Jesus typified another sort of behaviour and belief.

It is of more than passing interest that Marcion's expurgated version of Luke omitted Luke 20:9-19 (the parable of the Tenants), though not the texts on either side.²⁰ Since Marcion regularly deleted elements which seemed to

²⁰ See Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: das Evangelium vom fremden Gott: Eine Monographie zur Geschichte der Grundlegung der katholischen Kirche* (2 Aufl.; TU 45; Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1924 <1921>); ET *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God* (Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth Press, 1990) 37-41; Ernest Evans, *Tertullian adversus Marcionem* (2 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 2:644. It is well known that Marcion omitted Luke 1—2 and most of chaps. 3 and 4 (so that his gospel began with 3:1, then 4:31). The gospel continues until 8:18 but then begins to omit various elements, sometimes entire verses (e.g., 10:12-15; 11:29-32, 49-51). Later on, entire pericopae are omitted: 13:1-9, 29-35; 15:11-32; 18:23-30, 31-33; 19:29-46;

be influenced by the Hebrew Bible or which represented the supreme God in the attire of the inferior deity, that is, with the characteristics of judgment or retaliation, it is not difficult to surmise why Luke's Parable of the Tenants, with its reduced allusions to Isa 5:2 LXX, would be objectionable: it depicted God in the role of a vindictive, even capricious, overlord. This omission appears to confirm the suspicion that Marcion saw both Isa 5:1-7 and Luke 20:9-19 as expressive of the characteristics of the inferior deity.

Marcion's negative estimation of the parable of the Tenants, and in particular, presumably, the role of the owner, is anticipated by at least several decades in the Gospel of Thomas. Thomas uses the parable of the Tenants as the conclusion of a triad of parables, the Rich and Foolish Farmer (*GThom* 63), the Feast (*GThom* 64) and the Tenants (*GThom* 65). In each instance, figures who seek or possess wealth or who strive for status among their peers through status-displays at banquets are criticized and their pursuits lampooned. The opening line of *GThom* 65 is consistent with this tendency, if the small lacuna is restored, not as Guillaumont and Layton have done, as *ourwme n̄rh[sto]s*, "a good man," but, following Dehandschutter,²¹ as *ourwme n̄rh[sth]s*, "creditor" or "userer." (This restoration has been adopted by Berliner Arbeitskreis and is printed in the 15th edition of Aland's *Synopsis*.²²

The ideological shaping of Thomas' version of the parable is clear. The designation of the main character as an *ourwme n̄rh[sth]s* is already an ideologically laden type-casting of a person who is in violation of old Israelite

20:9-18; 21:21-24; 22:35-38, 42-46, 49-51; 23:43; 24:44-46; 24:48-53). For a complete list, see Evans, *Tertullian*, 643-44.

²¹ Boudewijn Dehandschutter, "La parabole des vigneronnes homicides (Mc., XII, 1-12) et l'évangile selon Thomas," in *L'évangile selon Marc: tradition et rédaction*, ed. Maurits Sabbe; (BETL 34; Leuven: Leuven University; Gembloux: Duculot, 1974), 203-219, here 218.

²² Kurt Aland, *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum. Griechische Vier-Evangelien-Synopse*, 15th ed., revised (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1996), 536. See also Stephen J. Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus* (Foundations & facets: Reference series; Sonoma: Polebridge Press, 1993), 142.

laws concerning loans.²³ And the parable of the Feast, which immediately precedes it, concludes with the redactional comment, “Dealers and merchants [will] not enter the places of my father.” While there are no cross-references or allusions to biblical texts in the triad of parables, their framing as a group, and the juxtaposition of Thomas’ Tenants with the two other stories of foolish or unproductive behaviour lends a negative cast to the owner in the Tenants as well.

It should also be noted that Thomas lacks all of the features which in Mark carry the freight of Deuteronomistic theology and which coerce the auditors to identify the owner as God, the slaves as the prophets, and the son as a vindicated Joseph figure. Thomas lacks any hint of Isa 5:1-7; there is no parallel in Thomas to Mark’s generalizing statements about the “many other” slaves that were sent to collect the rent; and Thomas ends, not with the owner asserting his property rights by destroying the tenants, but merely with the death of the son and heir. The enduring problem presented by Thomas’ version is that the next saying gives a version of Ps 117:22, though this is not attached grammatically to the parable of the tenants, existing instead as a discrete saying of Jesus.

Because Thomas lacks these elements, it would also be a rather poor choice as a Book of Common Prayer reading for January 30th, or to illustrate the brilliance of British rule in India, or as a text that justifies the dispossession of the Jews in the economy of salvation. None of the values that Mark’s parable inscribes are supported by Thomas: the self-evident importance of wealth, the legitimacy of absenteeism, the appropriateness of mechanisms of inheritance; or the justification of retaliatory violence in support of ownership claims. The one value that Mark and Thomas share has to do with status displays. Thomas, like Mark, represents the owner as musing to himself, “Perhaps they will show respect for my son.” But the outcome of Thomas’s story only shows that status-displays intended to cow inferiors into submission are at times every bit as ineffective as rich farmers’ attempts to ensure their eternal happiness and satisfaction by filling their barns, or élites ensuring their position and status by inviting their peers to spectacles of conspicuous consumption. Thomas’s parable, then, is either indifferent to the key ideological values inscribed by Mark’s parable, or highly critical of them.

²³ Cf. Ps-Phocylides 83: “never be a relentless creditor to a poor man.” See Exod 22:25; Lev 25:36-37; Deut 23:20; Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 4.74-80.

4 / The Ideology of the Tenants and the Historical Jesus

From one point of view, we have done our job in describing the ideological texture of these two divergent readings of the story of the tenants. We have also plotted some of the points on the line of the interpretive history for each reading and in doing so, shown that the history of interpretation itself provides some justification for contemporary divergent interpretations of the parable. The shorter of the two lines is that found in the Gospel of Thomas, whose negative reading of the story finds reverberations a century later in Heracleon and Marcion, and a bit after that in opponents of Irenaeus. From the point of view of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, Mark's reading is clearly the more powerful and long-lived line, with a nearly continuous history of elaboration from the time of Irenaeus to the present. Despite the respective interpretive inertias of the two readings, it is clear that at some point, the story's wax nose has been bent, one way or the other.

As an historian, I am also compelled to ask about the earliest ascertainable meaning of the parable, assuming that it came from the historical Jesus. Whose reading has the straight nose, and whose is bent?

This question can be approached in two ways, one that looks at some of the *realia* of ancient viticulture, and one that places the ideological features of the two readings in the context of the ideological texture of Jesus' discourse about the kingdom.

One of the features that usually escapes the attention of commentators has to do with the operation and management of actual vineyards in antiquity. This is perhaps because, despite Mark's express mention of the specific features of an operational vineyard—the palisade, collecting vat, and watchtower—, these have no role to play in the course of the narrative itself. The realistic aspects of the story have been overpowered by the theological reading that Mark or Mark's predecessors gave to it.

The fact that it is a vineyard that is involved provides one of the warrants for Mark's citation of Isa 5:1-7. But the mention of a vineyard would normally conjure up other associations to the ancient auditor. Viticulture was one of the most capital intensive of agricultural enterprises, requiring land with a sufficiently good water supply to merit its cultivation, various livestock and equipment (oxen, draft donkeys, ploughs, amphorae, etc.), and a range of installations including a palisade, terracing, a reed plantation for stakes, sources of manure, pressing installations, storage rooms for amphorae, a watch-tower, and farm houses for the workers and supervisors. And since such agricultural estates were normally self-sufficient, they required grain-producing land to support the workers.

Viticulture was also the most labour intensive of pursuits. By Cato's estimate a typical vineyard of 100 iugera (25.3 ha.) required an overseer, a housekeeper, 10 labourers, a ploughman, a mule-driver, a willow or reed-worker, and a swineherd—16 in all (Cato, *de Agri Cultura* 11.1). Only about one-third of that number was required for the operation of an olive grove, and even fewer for grain producing land of the same size.²⁴ Moreover, viticulture required specialized labour capable of maintaining a valuable perennial crop that needed constant attention, expert pruning, grafting, trenching, irrigation, transplantation, and so forth, in order to insure maximum productivity. Columella insists that it is well worth the investment to pay a high price for an expert vinedresser-slave (*De re rustica* 3.3.8), since neglected vineyards “use up many days of toil and put a constant drain on the coffers of the proprietor” in order to rehabilitate (*De re rustica* 3.3.5).

Despite the costs, ancient estimates of normal productivity and prices suggest that vineyards yielded significantly higher profits than wheat farming.²⁵ Roman gentlemen such as Cato and Columella both rate viticulture as the best and most lucrative form of agriculture. For it to be profitable, however, vineyards had to be located nearby urban centres where their product was consumed, or sufficiently close to seaports from which wine could be exported.²⁶

²⁴ Richard Duncan-Jones, *The Economy of the Roman Empire: Quantitative Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974) 327-33 points out that the calculations given by Cato and Columella are not always internally consistent, do not always take into account normal variation in soil types (and hence the amount of labour required) and at times exclude other costs and necessary operations. Thus they cannot be used with great confidence. See also K.D. White, “The Productivity of labour in Roman agriculture,” *Antiquity* 39 (1965) 102-107.

²⁵ For an analysis of the sometimes conflicting ancient reports, see Duncan-Jones, *The Economy of the Roman Empire*, 33-59; Tim Unwin, *Wine and the Vine: An Historical Geography of Viticulture and the Wine Trade* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991) 107-110.

²⁶ Unwin, *Wine and the Vine*, 131 argues that the large number of amphorae with Spanish wine discovered at Monte Testaccio by the Tiber indicates that Spanish wine probably had a price advantage and was therefore imported to Rome. Daniel Sperber, *Roman Palestine, 200-400, Money and Prices*, 2d ed., with a supplement (Bar-Ilan Studies in Near Eastern

Without giving the size of the vineyard in question, Jesus' parable provides sufficient indications of the kind of operation involved. Since the average labour requirements for viticulture are about one labourer for every six iugera (or aroura), the fact that the story imagines several tenant-labourers implies a vineyard of somewhat more than the average size of seven iugera.²⁷ The owner, evidently, was sufficiently well off not to have to farm the operation himself. His communication with his tenants via slaves is also an indicator of at least modest wealth.

Both elaborations of the story, by Thomas and by Mark, are consistent with the supposition that the owner is wealthy. Thomas's designation of the owner as a "creditor" or "usurer" implies a degree of wealth beyond that of the ordinary agriculturist. And in the other interpretive stream both the identification of the owner with God (via Isa 5:1-2) and his ability to overpower and "destroy" the tenants imply an owner of considerable wealth and power. The supposition that the owner is rich, then, is the starting point both for Mark's identification of the man with God, and for Thomas' negative evaluation of the man as the villain of the piece.

Which of the versions of the story accords best with ideological texture of other sectors of the Jesus tradition, in particular, those usually thought authentic? It is not difficult to see that Thomas's implied criticism of wealth, his rejection of the mechanisms of ownership and inheritance, and his inversion of the mechanism of status-displays, accords quite well with other portions of the Jesus tradition.

Not only is the early Jesus tradition pervaded by sayings that appear to privilege poverty over wealth (Q 6:20b; 7:22; 12:22-21; 16:13; Mark 12:41-44; James 2:5); there is also direct criticism of wealth and the wealthy: Q [6:24]; 12:16-20; Mark 10:24-25; James 1:10-11; 2:6; 5:1). The self-evident appropriateness of landholding patterns and the stability of inheritance are brought into question by the question about resurrection (Mark 12:18-27), as

Languages and Culture; Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1991) 251 n. 28 has shown that at the time of Diocletian's price edict (301 CE) Egyptian wine had a considerable price advantage over than wine produced elsewhere.

²⁷ Columella's productivity and price calculations are based on a vineyard of 7 iugera (*De re rustica* 3.3.8). This corresponds generally to the size of vineyard mentioned in *POxy* XLVII 3354 (257 CE) [6 arourae]; *POxy* LV 3803 (411 CE) [8 arourae]; *PRyl* IV 583 (170 CE) [6 arourae], though smaller vineyards of 1.0 or 1.25 arourae are also attested.

Horsley has shown,²⁸ and by injunctions such as Q 12:22-30, which counsels against acquisitiveness, and Q 12:33-34, which suggests that earthly treasures—the kinds of things that can be passed on to progeny—are fragile and transient. Mark's comment that those who have left all for Jesus' sake can expect to receive one hundredfold similarly undermine the usual expectations about the durability of land tenure and the stability of mechanisms of inheritance. The story of Lazarus and the rich man, regardless of its authenticity, presupposes that the wealthy and their families are ultimately without resources *coram Deo*. Of course, Luke has transformed this message into one that encourages Christian euergetism.²⁹ But beneath Luke's editing one can still see a much more biting criticism of wealth and the wealthy.

The assumption of Mark, moreover, is that the absentee, city-dwelling landowner possesses interests that ought to be defended against the rural, dangerous, and unpredictable tenants. Thomas makes no such assumption about the validity of absenteeism, since the owner is never vindicated. But Mark's view is at odds with many other aspects of the Jesus tradition, which interpret the city and its denizens negatively: urban institutions such as the agora (Q 7:31-34), plazas (Q 13:26), the courts (Q 12:58), and palaces (Q 7:25) are places of rejection, danger, or simply the last place one would go to find revelation. On the contrary, one "goes out" to see John the Baptist (Q 7:25-26). And the city, especially Jerusalem, is a place where prophets can expect death (Q 11:49-51; 13:34-35).

It perhaps goes without saying that the use of retaliatory violence is hardly authorized by the early Jesus tradition. It might be pointed out as well that sayings such as Q 12:58, on settling quickly with one's creditor, point to a profound lack of confidence in quotidian mechanisms of legal redress. For the admonition does not even imagine that the hapless debtor might have a case to make in his defence. It is simply assumed that once one arrives at the court—of course, located in a city—and once the judicial wheels have begun to turn, imprisonment and loss will be inevitable. Q 12:58 makes precisely the

²⁸ Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 236-37.

²⁹ See Anna Janzen, *Der Friede im lukanischen Doppelwerk vor dem Hintergrund der Pax Romana* (Ph.D. diss., University of St. Michael's College, 2001).

same assumptions about the effectiveness of mechanisms of debt-recovery that Mark's parable does, but it does so from precisely the opposite socio-economic perspective, that of the small agriculturist. Both agree that violence of various sorts are part and parcel of economic extraction, but Q 12:58 hardly looks with favour on the mechanism.

Finally, the way in which status-displays are assumed to be effective and, in the end, reinforced by Mark's use of Ps 117 is in stark contrast to the ideological texture of much of the early Jesus tradition. Not only do we have express admonitions that counsel against status display and status maintenance (Q 6:29; 14:11; Matt 6:1-4, 5-6, 16-18; Luke 14:7-11) and criticism of those who engage in such practices (Q 12:43; Mark 12:38-39), but the topic of several of Jesus' parables have to do with the ineffectiveness of status displays.³⁰

On every register, the ideological texture of the Synoptic version of the parable of the Tenants is remarkably out of keeping with that of other sectors of the early Jesus tradition, while the texture of Thomas' version seems much more coherent with it. It is in fact the Synoptic version's endorsement of ownership, inheritance, retaliatory violence, and status display that made it so serviceable for other ideological purposes, and which created so overwhelming an inertia. Thomas's resistance to these values perhaps accounts for the relatively swift disappearance of his line of interpretation, which fared badly in a post-Constantinian environment where ownership, inheritance, violence, and status were part of the normal order of things. And yet, I suggest, it is Thomas' story of the failure of status and privilege at a crucial moment that best accords with the general ideological texture of the early Jesus tradition. Despite the Synoptic account and the interpretative inertia that sustains it, it is Thomas' nose that is the straighter.³¹

³⁰ John S. Kloppenborg, "The Dishonoured Master (Luke 16,1-8a)," *Bib* 70 (1989) 474-495; David Landry and Ben May, "Honor Restored: New Light on the Parable of the Prudent Steward (Luke 16:1-8a)," *JBL* 119 (2000) 287-309; Willi Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric in Luke 14* (SNTSMS 85; Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

³¹ I would like to thank William Arnal, Ron Cameron, Stephen J. Patterson, and Hami Verbin for helpful criticisms of this paper.