

Mark 12:1-12

by Derek Thompson

www.5icm.org.au

Introduction

Jesus' **Parable of the Wicked Tenants**¹ appears to be a straightforward allegory, even though a parable is usually more than this. Adolf Jülicher, in 1888, rejected the allegorical interpretation of parables altogether, saying that parables contained one main point. Consequently, Jülicher thought the parable of Mk 12:1-12 was inauthentic because it resisted a non-allegorical reading (van Eck, 2007, p. 910). Scholars today think Jülicher was going too far, and see the parables as being much richer in meaning (Stanton, 2001, p. 62). A detailed exegesis of the passage is needed to fully interpret this parable, but first, an aside on narrative criticism.

Narrative Criticism

Biblical criticism offers various tools for use in exegesis. These are not all of equal value in interpreting every passage. For example, in studying Mk 12:1-12 source criticism would be useful because there are the three synoptic versions of the parable and one in the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas, but textual and historical criticism, do not have as great a bearing on the interpretation because the meaning is located in the story and narrative. Here “story” relates to the contents, while “narrative” refers to its literary expression (AGT, p. 83). Narrative criticism is a form of literary criticism which approaches “the Bible as literature” (Weitzman, 2007, p. 191). It investigates a narrative's “plot, conflict, character, setting, narrator, point of view, standards of judgment, the implied author, ideal reader, style, and rhetorical techniques” (Rhoads, 1982, p. 412). This could be expected to yield useful insights into the interpretation of a parable told by Jesus in a biographical narrative.

Narrative analysis is not so much a methodology as a focus of inquiry (Soulen & Soulen, 2001, p. 119). The focus is not on individual story fragments, but on the way the author has combined them to tell a story. Each pericope is analysed to see how it relates to the overall narrative. The emphasis is shifted to the story-world itself (Rhoads, 1982, p. 413). This does not mean that there is no true history behind the story, but that the author has something to say about that history.

The narrator is differentiated from the author. The narrator can be part of the story (Rhoads, 1982, p. 420). The author uses the narrator to tell the story, and to tell it in certain way. In Mark's Gospel, the narrator expresses the story in terms of Jesus as the divine Son of Man and makes explanatory asides to the reader (e.g. Mk 7:3-4). The “implied reader”, also, is part of the narrative which assumes a receptive response of the “implied author's” beliefs and world view (Soulen & Soulen, 2001, p. 120).

AGT identifies the following six elements of narrative analysis (pp.84-86).

1. Establish the fundamental aim of the narrative.
2. Establish the sequence of events as they are arranged in the text.
3. Analyse the timing of the events in the narrative.
4. Characterisation.
5. Analyse the point of view from which statements are made.
6. Establish the presuppositions the narrative makes about its audience and those within the narrative itself.

¹ Various called the “Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen”, “The Tenants in the Vineyard”, “Parable of the Vineyard” or “Parable of the Tenants”.

Unfortunately, getting agreement on any of these elements is not so straightforward. One problem is that narrative structure is not simply defined, resulting in a diversity of opinions on many passages, e.g. Mark 11:1-13:2 (Smith, 1989, p. 104). The subjective nature of our understanding of a narrative means that this is not a scientific investigation. Other forms of Biblical criticism will need to be taken into account. But the application of valid reasoning using these commonly accepted investigative techniques will provide us with the parameters for a cogent interpretation of a passage. They are also useful in recreating a text as Jesus might have originally taught it.



Contextual Analysis of Mark 12:1-12

Historical Background

The passage recounts Jesus' teaching in the temple during the week leading up to his crucifixion (30-33 CE). The parable portrays the religious leaders who, in their rejection of Jesus, were being like their forebears who rejected the prophets. At this time, Judah was under Roman authority, and the religious leaders did not have authority to execute Jesus, which explains the drawn-out antagonism of the leaders.

The author's audience appears to have been primarily Jewish Christians, since (1) he warns Christian Jews not to follow in the path of the Jews, and (2) non-Christian Jews would not have accepted the claims to Jesus' authority² (Smith, 1989, p. 124). Of course, Mark might have made this claim anyway.

Authorship and Date

This gospel is traditionally attributed to Mark because of a comment by Papias, bishop of Hierapolis, that the Elder John said that the gospel was written by Mark who did not have first hand knowledge of Jesus' life on earth but wrote the gospel from hearing the preaching of Peter. The Elder John said the gospel was accurate but not necessarily in chronological order (Lane, 1974, p. 8). Since Peter died in about 65 CE, and it is probable that Mark would have wanted to make a written record before the generation that witnessed Jesus' life on earth had died, Mark's gospel is thought to have been written in about 65 CE.³

2 Such as in Mk 11:27-33.

3 This is also thought to be the case because if it was written after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, it could have referred to this as fulfilment of prophecy.

Literary Context⁴

Jesus said that he taught in parables so that his disciples could understand while others would not (Mk 4:10-12). Jesus' parables usually concealed his Messiahship (Burkill, 1956, p. 249). Mark implies that Jesus did not want his disciples to reveal his identity until after his resurrection (Mk 9:9-10). But Jesus' messianic claim is plain to see in this parable. In Mark's narrative, chapters 11 & 12 provides the explanation of why the Jewish leaders arrested Jesus (Burkett, 2002, p. 171).

Formal Analysis of Mark 12:1-12

Literary Form

The gospel genre⁵ is a combination of biography and parable (Perrin, 1972, p. 362). Mark's literary style has been called "unrefined" but his style can be seen to support his literary and theological purpose (Lane, 1974, p. 26). Mark does not want spectator readers. He tries to involve the reader by inviting the use of the imagination and using literary devices such as rhetorical questions: "What then will the owner of the vineyard do?" (Mk 12:9a) (Lane, 1974, p. 28).

The parable was a feature of Jesus' teaching designed to convey some spiritual truth in a memorable way that was not overly dependent on the precise wording. Parables would have circulated orally at first and later in written form prior to their inclusion in the gospels. It is possible that in some cases the parables could have gone straight from oral tradition to written gospel. Parables are metaphors extended into a narrative that express Jesus' vision of reality⁶, his world view (Perrin, 1972, p. 370).⁷ As such they are intensely personal and, regardless of Mark's literary use of the parable, Jesus' vision and intent still confronts the reader (Perrin, 1972, p. 374). George Brooke pointed out that when Jesus delivered the parable, there would have been more than one kind of hearer in the audience who needed to be addressed, so we are dealing with a mix of metaphors (Brooke, 1995, p. 282).

Parables are often confused with allegories, but to do so is to risk losing the original point (Perrin, 1972, p. 367). This is not to say that some parables, including Mk 12:1-12, do not have an allegorical element.⁸ Some think the action of the vineyard owner in the parable, sending his son into the hands of the murderous tenants, is irrational and, therefore, the parable is only capable of being understood as an allegory (De Moore, 1998, p. 63).⁹ However, the narrative world of the parable is concerned to reveal the other-worldly nature of God's Kingdom where the

4 It was James Denney who said, "A text without its context is nothing but a pretext" (Hope, 1952, p. 306).

5 The literary form known as "gospel" was brought into being by the writing of Mark's gospel (Boring, 1988, p. 326). This assumes that Mark was the first of the gospels to be written.

6 "The parables of Jesus ... embody a distinct and distinctive vision of reality" (Perrin, 1972, p. 362).

7 Norman Victor Hope said, "The parables are only one – although of course a highly important one – expression of Jesus' mind, which is set forth throughout the whole of the New Testament; and to be properly interpreted, they must be considered in the light of the rest of the New Testament revelation of his mind and spirit" (Hope, 1952, 307).

8 The parables of the Sower (Mk 4:1-9; Mt 13:1-9, 18-23; Lk 8:4-8, 11-15), the Wheat and the Weeds (Mt 13:24-30, 36-43), and the Dragnet (Mt 13:47-50) have a strong allegorical element (Hope, 1952, p. 304).

9 Huffman thought that the parable used atypical actions in an otherwise credible narrative. The atypical actions of the owner were his incredible patience followed by the extreme judgement of taking the law into his own hands (Huffman, 1978, p. 218). The atypical features would have been rendered more acceptable by the oral delivery style of Jesus (p. 220).

grace of God refuses to take revenge but overcomes evil with good (Rom 12:21) (Huffman, 1978, p. 219).

Literary Structure and movement

Stephen Smith saw in Mark the structure of a Greek tragic drama (Smith, 1995, p. 209). He thought that Mk 12:1-9 was an example of a denouement where the shadow of the cross looms large (p. 218) and verse 12 was a kind of choral comment used to urge the reader to consider who Jesus is (p. 227). Mark's use of the literary conventions of the day would have made it more accessible to its first hearers (p. 230).

Within Mark 10:46 to 12:12 the material is arranged into a three-day scheme (Smith, 1989, p. 112). The first day represents the end of the journey from Galilee to Jerusalem (Mk 11:11). The second day has Jesus cursing the fig tree and cleansing the temple of traders (11:12-19). On the third day, Jesus teaches the lesson of the withered fig tree, his authority is questioned by the chief priests, scribes and elders, and he taught the parable of the Wicked Tenants. Note that both the fig tree and the tenants are judged for their failure to bear fruit (Smith, 1989, p. 115). The passage that follows the parable (the question about paying taxes) appears to be on a subsequent day, since the leaders send a different group to try to trap him (Mk 12:13).

Parallel Passages (Matthew and Luke)

The parable of the tenants is also found in Matthew 21:33-46, Luke 20:9-19, and the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas (saying 65). Some have sought to recover Jesus' original parable behind the synoptic versions arguing that the allegorical elements are later additions (Crosson, 1971, p. 457). The allegorical nature of the parable is quite clearly seen in Matthew where it too, marks the first time Jesus reveals his identity as the Son of God in his teaching (Kingsbury, 1986, p. 643).¹⁰ Another possibility is that the allegorical elements are original but not intended to be allegorical.

Detailed Analysis

Mark 12:1-12. The Parable of the Wicked Tenants.

The religious leaders had rejected Jesus and were planning to kill him. They were well aware that the parable was directed against them. The parable has traditionally been interpreted as an allegory in spite of the assertion in the text that it is a parable (Mk 12:1). Elements of the parable have been taken by many to be allegorical, but these do not exhaust the parable's meaning.

¹⁰ In the Gospel of Thomas, the parable of the wicked tenants has less allegorical elements, eliminating the reference to Is 5, and referring to Ps 118:22, but not vs 23 (Morrice, 1987, p. 104).

The allegorical images used in the parable.

Image	Represents
vineyard, inheritance	<p>Israel.</p> <p>The vineyard image was used by Isaiah (Is 5:1-7)¹¹ and others in Scripture (Jer 8:13; Hosea 9:10; Micah 7:1).</p> <p>Scripture refers to Israel as God's inheritance (Ps 78:1; 1 Sam 10:1) (De Moor, 1998, p. 77). The tenants in the parable might have assumed the owner had died and the son had come to claim the inheritance.¹² If the land was owner-less, the occupants could claim it.</p> <p>Some have taken the vineyard metaphor in this parable to represent the House of Judah¹³, the Temple¹⁴, Kingdom of God¹⁵, the elect¹⁶, or humanity generally¹⁷.</p>
watch-tower	The temple (Micah 4:8).
tenants	<p>Religious leaders.</p> <p>Nehemiah 9:25-26 records Israel's confession of being disobedient vineyard tenants and killing the prophets (De Moor, 1998, p. 73), although it is the leaders (the priests, scribes and elders) who are in view here.</p>
owner	God. ¹⁸
slaves/servants	<p>Prophets.</p> <p>This would include John the Baptist who is mentioned in the immediately preceding passage (Mk 11:30-32) (De Moor, 1998, p. 72).</p>

11 John Kloppenborg Verbin thinks that the allusions to Is 5:1-7 in Mk 12:1-12 are from the Septuagint rather than the MT (Verbin, 2002, p. 159) and therefore, since Jesus probably spoke mainly Aramaic or Hebrew, the reference to Isaiah's vineyard, where the owner is God and the vineyard is Israel, is an interpretation placed on the parable by Mark (pp. 134-137). However, Craig Evans has argued against this because of the Semitic flavour of the passage in Mark (Evans, 2003, p 110).

12 Cole points out that in the parable, it was **because** the tenants recognised the son, that they killed him (Cole, 1961, p. 185).

13 See (Brooke, 1995, p. 283).

14 See (Brooke, 1995, p. 293).

15 See (Moloney, 2002, p. 232).

16 See (Brooke, 1995, p. 285).

17 See (Thielicke, 1960, p. 104-114)

18 Absentee land owners were not well thought of in occupied Israel at the time. Some have pointed out that this might make the hearers of this parable more sympathetic to the tenants.

Image	Represents
the beloved son	Jesus. The quotation in Mk 12:10-11 of Ps118:22-23 gives the parable its christological application and shows that Mark knew of the resurrection (Painter, 2005, p. 156).
judgement	Destruction of the temple and giving the vineyard to the gentiles (N.B. the parable does not mention the gentiles).

Parables do not fit neatly into a systematic theology (Hope, 1952, p. 302). Our theological bias might colour our understanding of a parable. E.g. this parable does not lend support to satisfaction atonement theories because the death of the son has no implications for the salvation of anyone.¹⁹ The sacrificial love of God for his people comes to the fore in this parable.

The surrounding passages are about Jesus' authority. In Mk 11:27-33 the religious leaders question Jesus authority and in Mk 12:13-17 Jesus is questioned about paying taxes to Caesar. Although the author uses the narrative structure to accentuate Jesus' authority, this does not exhaust Jesus' teaching contained in the parable.

Helmut Thielicke, in his sermons on the parables of Jesus (1960, p. 104-114) passes over the allegorical interpretation and instead focuses attention on the underlying truth which is relevant to all people, not just to first century religious leaders, saying that we can all be guilty of usurping ownership of God's creation. Thielicke says, "We reject Christ when we practice justice instead of love" (p. 110) and, on the level of personal relationships, this is an ongoing challenge.

Conclusion

The parable of the wicked tenants is a classic parable displaying different levels of meaning. The surface allegorical meaning exposes the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of the day and accuses them of rejecting the son of God. The message to Jesus' followers provokes them to see themselves and all creation as belonging to God. The unlikeliness of a land owner risking the life of his son for the sake of overdue payment, provokes the hearer to suspend belief in the reality of the story and consider the graciousness of God in sending his son to save those who have rejected him.

¹⁹ The lack of support for the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement does not mean that it is incorrect, but it should not bias its proponents from seeing the parable's teaching on sacrificial love and grace.

References

- AGT Achtemeier, P. J., Green, J. B., & Thompson, M. M. (2001) *Introducing the New Testament: Its literature and theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Boring, M. E. (1988, June). [Review of book *Gospel against parable: Mark's language of mystery*, by J. G. Williams]. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 107(2), 324-325.
- Brooke, G. J. (1995). 4Q500 1 and the use of scripture in the parable of the vineyard. *Dead Sea Discoveries*, 2(3), 268-294.
- Burkett, D. (2002) *An introduction to the new testament and the origins of Christianity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Burkill, T. A. (1956). The cryptology of parables in St Mark's gospel. *Novum Testamentum*, 1(4), 246-262.
- Cole, R. A. (1961). *The gospel according to St Mark: an introduction and commentary*. Leicester, England: IVP.
- Crossan, J. D. (1971). The parable of the wicked husbandmen. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 90(4), 451-465.
- De Moor, J. C. (1998). The targumic background of Mark 12:1-12: the parable of the wicked tenants. *Journal for the Study of Judaism: In Persian Hellenistic & Roman Period*, 29(1), 63-80.
- Evans, C. A. (2003). How septuagintal is Isa. 5:1-7 in Mark 12:1-9? *Novum Testamentum*, 45(2), 105-110.
- Hope, N. V. (1952). Bases for understanding: the interpretation of Christ's parables. *Interpretation*, 6(3), 301-307.
- Huffman, N. A. (1978). Atypical features in the parables of Jesus. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 97(2), 207-220.
- Kingsbury, J. D. (1986). The parable of the wicked husbandmen and the secret of Jesus' divine sonship in Matthew: some literary-critical observations. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 105(4), 643-655.
- Lane, W. L. (1974). *The gospel according to Mark*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Moloney, F. J. (2002). *The gospel of Mark: a commentary*. Peabody, MS: Hendrickson Publishers.
- Morrice, W. G. (1987). The parable of the tenants and the gospel of Thomas. *The Expository Times* 98(4), 104-107.
- NRSV** New Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible.
- Painter, J. (2005). *Mark's gospel*. Retrieved from ebrary Academic Complete.
- Perrin, N. (1972). Historical criticism, literary criticism, and hermeneutics: the interpretation of the parables of Jesus and the gospel of mark today. *The Journal of Religion*, 52(4), 361-375.
- Powell, M. A. (1990). The religious leaders in Luke: a literary-critical study. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 109(1), 93-110.

- Rhoads, D. (1982). Narrative criticism and the gospel of Mark. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 50(3), 411-434.
- Smith, S. H. (1989). The literary structure of Mark 11:1-12:40. *Novum Testamentum*, 31(2), 104-124.
- Smith, S. H. (1995). A divine tragedy: some observations on the dramatic structure of Mark's gospel. *Novum Testamentum*, 37(3), 209-231.
- Soulen, R. N. & Soulen, R. K. (2001). *Handbook of biblical criticism*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Stanton, G. (2001). Message and miracles. In M. Bockmuehl (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Jesus* (pp. 56-71). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thielicke, H. (1960). *The waiting father*. Cambridge: James Clarke.
- van Eck, E. (2007). The tenants in the vineyard (GThom 65/Mark 12:1-12): a realistic and social-scientific reading. *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, 63(3), 909-936.
- Verbin, J. S. K. (2002). Egyptian viticultural practices and the citation of Isa 5:1-7 in Mark 12:1-9. *Novum Testamentum*, 44(2), 134-159.
- Wallace, R. S. (1960). Parable. In E. F. Harrison (Ed.), *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* (pp. 391-393). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.
- Weitzman, S. (2007). Before and after the art of biblical narrative. *Prooftexts* 27(2), 191-210.

Other Works Consulted

- Burkill, T. A. (1958). St Mark's philosophy of the passion. *Novum Testamentum*, 2(3/4), 245-271.
- Graham Swift, C. E. (1970). Mark. In D. Guthrie & J. A. Motyer (Eds.), *The New Bible Commentary Revised* (3rd ed.) (pp.851-886). Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press.
- Guthrie, D. (1970). *New testament introduction*. (3rd ed.). London: Inter-Varsity Press.
- Hunter, A. M. (1973). *The work and words of Jesus*. (2nd ed.). London: SCM Press.
- Kloppenborg, J. S. (2004). Isa 5:1-7 LXX and Mark 12:1-9, again. *Novum Testamentum*, 46(1), 12-19.
- SG** Charles Sturt University Study Guide for "Introduction to New Testament Studies".
- Tasker, R. V. G. (1962). Parable. In J. D. Douglas (Ed.), *The New Bible Dictionary* (pp. 932-934). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.