

# The Parable Of The Ten Virgins

## (Matthew 25:1-13)

### *The Integrity Of Identity And Activity*

#### Herman C. Waetjen

Of all the parables attributed to Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels, none is more ambiguous in terms of its origin and meaning than the Parable of the Ten Virgins. Everything depends on the correspondence between content and context, and especially the issue of literary form and function, regardless of whether the story is interpreted in terms of its present location in Matthew's Gospel or in an earlier setting.<sup>1</sup> No one denies that the parable appears to have a certain allegorical character, but is it an allegory in its form and function? And is the content of the story so completely determined by the crisis of the delay of the Parousia that its conception as an allegorical illustration must be allocated in the context of Matthew 24-25 or the early Church?<sup>2</sup> The application of 25:13, an admonition that concludes the story, supports such a possibility, but, as everyone recognizes, it is a Matthean redaction. If, however, the narrative is pre-determined by its apparent Christian motifs, its dismissal as an allegorically fashioned story originating within the context of the early Church would appear to be justified.

On the other hand, the features of the story only appear to be allegorical because of the narrative's placement in the context of Jesus' eschatological discourse in Matthew's Gospel. Originally the story may have been a parable of Jesus and therefore without an allegorical

---

<sup>1</sup> Illustrative of an investigation of the correspondence between content and context is the redaction-critical analysis of Wolfgang Schrenk, "Auferweckung der Toten oder Gericht nach den Werken: Tradition und Redaktion in Matthäus 25:1-13," *Novum Testamentum* 20/4 (1978) 278-298, who concludes that the original tradition of the parable consisted of verses 1, 2, 6, 7, 10, and intended, in the dialogue related to 1 Thes 4:15-17, to give an answer to the problem of the resurrection of the dead in the context of the delay of the Parousia. Matthew, on the other hand, redacted that tradition to illustrate the beatitude of 5:6 and at the same time to forewarn that there will be no awakening from the sleep of death for those who do not have a store of good works. See especially pp. 294-298.

<sup>2</sup> The literature on this story may be classified under two distinguishing perspectives. First, those who ascribe the allegorical features of the story to Matthew's redaction or the early Church but nevertheless acknowledge its authenticity as a parable of Jesus: Adolf Julicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2 vols. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1899. Reprinted, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963) 456-459; C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1935) 172; Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, rev. ed. 1963) 51-52, 171-175; Dan Otto Via, Jr. *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967) 123; Wolfgang Schrenk, "Auferweckung der Toten oder Gericht nach den Werken," 294-298; Armand Tarrech, *La parabole des dix vierges*. *Analecta biblica* 28. (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1983) 143-179; Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000) 176-177. Second, those who consider the story to be an allegorical formulation of Matthew or early Christianity: Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. by John Marsch (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972) 119, (3<sup>rd</sup> German edition, p. 125), "This is a church formulation completely overgrown by allegory..." Günther Bornkamm, "Die Verzögerung der Parusie: Exegetische Bemerkungen zu zwei synoptischen Texten," *In Memoriam Ernst Lohmeyer*, ed. by Werner Schmauch (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1951) 125; Erich Grässer, *Das Problem der Parusieverzögerung in den synoptischen Evangelien und in der Apostelgeschichte* (Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1960) 125-127; Eta Linnemann, *Jesus of the Parables* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) 126-127, claims that the parable is a creation of the early Church but refuses to regard the story as an allegory; Karl P. Donfried, "The Allegory of the Ten Virgins (Mt 25:1-13 as a Summary of Matthean Theology)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93/3 (1974) 415-428; James Breech, *The Silence of Jesus: The Authentic Voice of the Historical Man* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) 217; Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989) 70-72. William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994) omits the parable.

orientation of its content to the futuristic eschatology of the Parousia. Consequently, its function as a parable would be unlike that of an allegory, and, if the characterization of parable formulated by C.H. Dodd is adequate, it would “arrest the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application ... tease it into active thought.”<sup>3</sup>

One criterion that has been posed to determine whether the story is a parable, and therefore most likely authored by Jesus, or whether it is an allegory originating in the early Church, is the question of the authenticity of the wedding customs that the story conveys.<sup>4</sup> If those details correspond to the cultural conventions of a Palestinian wedding at the time of Jesus, the story is very likely a genuine parable of Jesus. If, on the other hand, those elements are unrealistic, the story should be regarded as an allegorization of the early Church’s expectations of the Parousia.

Features of narrative, however, whether realistic or unrealistic, are not necessarily valid criteria by which the literary genre of a story is to be determined. Empirical narrative, such as history and biography, has an allegiance to reality, while fictional narrative tends to be oriented to the ideal and to ideology.<sup>5</sup> “The eye [of the writer of fiction] is not on the external world but on the audience which he [she] hopes to delight or instruct, giving it either what it wants or what he [she] thinks it needs.”<sup>6</sup> Fictional narrative that employs figurative language, such as parable, allegory and myth, functions metaphorically by referring to one subject and intending another. But two different functions are involved, and it is precisely those functions that separate parable from allegory. As John Dominic Crossan has observed,

“One is to illustrate information so that information precedes participation. The other is to create participation so that participation precedes information. The former function produces allegories and examples, pedagogic devices which are intrinsically expendable. The latter produces *metaphor* on the verbal level and *symbol* on the nonverbal level. At their best they are absolutely inexplicable and even at their worst they are dormant rather than dead.”<sup>7</sup>

Accordingly, if the narrative of the Ten Virgins is an allegory, the information that is already known to its audience, and therefore precedes their participation, is the scheme of apocalyptic eschatology that is presented in Matt 24.<sup>8</sup> Consequently the story is illustrative of Jesus’ exhortation in 24:42 and 44 “to watch” and “to be prepared”. In response to his disciples’ question of 24:3, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?” Jesus cites the apocalyptic portents that will precede the reconstitution of all things. But he culminates his apocalyptic discourse with an emphasis on the unknowability of the end-time and the coming of the Son of the Human Being:

“Keep on watching, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the householder knew in what watch of the night the thief comes,

---

<sup>3</sup> Dodd, *Parables*, 16. Dan Otto Via, Jr.’s characterization of parable is also worth citing in this context; “The parable is not a literal description of what is literally and finally true for all men but is a hypothetical and imaginative work with existential implications. See *The Parables*, 125.

<sup>4</sup> John H. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988) 101. In his judgment the story is an allegory by which “Matthew summons his community to responsible discipleship in the face of the delay of the parousia.”

<sup>5</sup> Robert Scholes & Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966) 13-14.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 14.

<sup>7</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 15.

<sup>8</sup> So also Karl Paul Donfried, “The Allegory of the Ten Virgins,” 419.

he would watch and would not permit his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of the Human Being is coming at an hour you do not expect.” (24:42-44)

In view of the unknowability of the end-time, Jesus confronts his disciples with the existential question, “Who then is that ‘faithful and wise slave’ who serves as a responsible householder?” It is, as he submits in a response to his own question, the one who discharges the duties and obligations of the household in fulfillment of the Master’s will. In contrast, “the wicked slave” is the one who takes advantage of the Master’s delayed return by behaving unethically towards his fellow slaves and by dissolute living.

It appears that it is the coincidence between the delay of the Parousia and the delay of the bridegroom that establishes a circumstantial relationship between the story of the Ten Virgins and its context. Concomitantly, the tenable allegorical identifications of the bridegroom as the Christ, the marriage feast as the messianic banquet, and the exclusion of the five foolish virgins as the final judgment, all Christian motifs of the early Church, enhance the possibility that the story belongs to the genre of allegory and illustrates the information that the Christian community already possesses.

But the correspondence between the narrative and its Matthean context is flawed by the absence of watchfulness in the story.<sup>9</sup> Jesus’ admonition to watch is not observed by the ten virgins as they wait for the bridegroom: “Now as the bridegroom was delayed, they became drowsy and fell asleep.” Moreover, the conduct that Jesus prescribes in view of the delay of the Parousia is to be fulfilled *prior* to the coming of the Son of the Human Being. The failure of five of the ten virgins to serve as bearers of light occurs *after* the bridegroom has arrived and is to be escorted to the wedding feast. Coincidentally there is nothing unethical about their conduct. They are victims of their own lack of foresight and preparation.

In all probability, therefore, the narrative of the Ten Virgins, in spite of its apparent allegorical character is a parable and not an allegory.<sup>10</sup> The verb of the introductory formula in 25:1, “Then the reign of the heavens *homoiôthêsetai* (will be like),” has been cast in the future passive indicative in order to accommodate the story to its Matthean setting.<sup>11</sup> But if the story had a similar introductory formula during its transmission as a tradition of Jesus in the early Church, its more original form may have been the adjective of comparison, *hômoiôthê* (similar, like) or the aorist passive indicative, *homoiâ* (it is like) both of which have been used in the formulations of Jesus’ parables in earlier contexts of the Gospel.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, if Eta Linnemann is right, parables, as “freely composed stories” that tell of “interesting particular cases” or recount an event that happened only once, may have been introduced without any formula at all.<sup>13</sup> Typical of many such parables is the beginning of the story of Luke 15:11-32,

<sup>9</sup> But it may be conceded that “watching” metaphorically signifies “being prepared”. So Wolfgang Schrenk, “Auferweckung der Toten oder Gericht nach den Werken, 282.

<sup>10</sup> So also Jeremias, *Parables*, 52. Hultgren, *Parables*, 177, is hesitant to identify the story as a parable of Jesus because of its allegorical elements, yet he appears to embrace that conclusion.

<sup>11</sup> This verb *homoiôthêsetai* (it will be like) is used in a similar manner. So also Jeremias, *Parables*, 52. Hultgren, *Parables*, 177, is hesitant to identify the story as a parable of Jesus because of its allegorical elr in Matt 7:24 and 26, but nowhere else in Matthew’s Gospel.

<sup>12</sup> Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 176; (3<sup>rd</sup> German edition, pp. 190-191), attributes this introductory formula as well as the others of the parables in the Gospel to Matthew. For other occurrences of *homoiâ* (like), see 13:31, 33, 44, 45, 47 and 20:1. For other uses of *homoiôthê* (it is like), see 13:24; 18:23 and 22:2.

<sup>13</sup> Linnemann, *Jesus of the Parables*, 3-4, in her differentiation between ‘similitude’ and ‘parable’ characterizes them as follows: “What the similitude gains from the authority of what is generally known and recognized, the parable replaces by perspicuity. The parable is even a higher form, because it is more subtle, and its bias less obvious. The similitude uses words like ‘no one’, ‘no...’, ‘everyone’, ‘whenever’, ‘as often as’, etc.; it tries to overwhelm the

“A certain human being had two sons.”<sup>14</sup> The story of the Ten Virgins may have been introduced in a similar fashion, without the formula.

A parable, in contrast to an allegory, creates audience participation by “articulating a referent so new or so alien to consciousness that this referent can only be grasped within the metaphor itself.”<sup>15</sup> In its function as an extended metaphor, the parable conveys “a new possibility of world and of language so that any information one might obtain from it can only be received *after* one has participated through the metaphor in its new and alien referential world.”<sup>16</sup> In that process, however, a parable not only opens up the possibility of “a new world;” it simultaneously subverts the “world” of the present social construction of reality.<sup>17</sup> In this respect, it is the opposite of myth.<sup>18</sup> While myth builds “world,” parable subverts “world.” “Myth proposes, parable disposes.”<sup>19</sup> “To live in parable means to dwell in the tension of myth and parable.”<sup>20</sup>

The parable of Matt 25:1-12 begins with a tantalizingly significant number of virgins who are to function in the story as bearers of light for a wedding procession: “The rule of the heavens is like *ten* virgins.” Ten is not simply “a favorite round number to describe a fair-sized group of people.”<sup>21</sup> It is the number of the *minyan*, the quorum of ten required for the establishment of a synagogue, the basic Jewish community of fellowship in prayer, liturgy, Scripture reading and interpretation.<sup>22</sup> But, at the time of Jesus and indeed to the present day, a synagogue congregation, in order to be a legally constituted body of Israel, must be established by ten men. “Women could not be counted to make up a quorum (*minyan*) for public worship in the synagogue, for which ten free adult males were required.”<sup>23</sup> At the very beginning of the parable there is already a shattering of expectations, indeed, a subversion of the legality of constituting a synagogue. Ten women have replaced men as a *minyan* to form the basic religious community in Judaism, the institution of the synagogue.

It is this subversion that may have contributed to the introduction of another reversal, namely the substitution of the coming of the groom and groomsmen in place of the procession of a bride to the home of the groom. According to S. Safrai and M. Stern,

---

listener by the weight of its generalizations... The parable gently gives up this use of force, it says: “Listener, let me tell you just one story; if it doesn’t win you over I will be silent...”

<sup>14</sup> See also Mark 12:1; Matt 21:28; Lk 10:30; 12:16; 13:6; 14:16; 16:1, 19; 18:2.

<sup>15</sup> Crossan, *In Parables*, 13.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* (Niles, IL: Argus Communications, 1975) 59. There is a later edition of this book bearing the same title (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1988) 42.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., Argus edition, 55; Polebridge edition, 38.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., Argus edition, 64; Polebridge edition, 47.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., Argus edition, 59; Polebridge edition, 42.

<sup>21</sup> Linnemann, *Jesus of the Parables*, 124; also A. Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 450, “... die Zehnzahl ist bloß gewählt worden, um der Anschauung festes Material zu bieten; hier war es wohl die kleinste für solche Umstände mögliche Zahl.

<sup>22</sup> As far as I can determine, only one other scholar has related the number *ten* to the legal quorum of the *minyan* to constitute a synagogue: J. Massingberde Ford, “Parable of the Foolish Scholars: Matt 25:1-13,” *Novum Testamentum* 9/2 (1967) 115-116. Unfortunately she does not let this reversal lead her further into the parable. Working from the early rabbinic traditions on Canticles, she claims that the parable is directed against the Jewish teachers who are symbolized by the ten virgins and whose study of the Torah is represented by the lamps but who lacked the oil of good deeds. See pp. 113-114 and 116-117.

<sup>23</sup> George Foote Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954) II, 131 and I, 300. On the synagogue and the quorum of ten men, see also S. Safrai and M. Stern, in cooperation with D. Flusser and W. C. van Unnik, *The Jewish People in the First Century* (Assen: Van Gorcum & Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987) II, 908-944.

“The principal stages of the wedding celebration were: 1) preparation of the bride, 2) transfer of the bride from her father’s house to that of the groom, 3) the bride’s introduction into the home of the groom, and 4) blessings and festivities within the husband’s home.”<sup>24</sup>

The bride was accompanied on her journey to the groom’s home by “the most highly respected people” and “the sages even interrupted their study so that they and their students could meet a bridal procession and dance before the bride.”<sup>25</sup> “Wedding processions and festivities were held towards evening, and it was customary to accompany the bride with torches to the festivity.”<sup>26</sup>

If this was the general protocol of weddings at the time of Jesus, the story of the Ten Virgins is an unusually “interesting case.” It is a freely composed narrative, perhaps of an incident that occurred only once, “whether or not other people would do it the same way,” and Jesus tells it in order to achieve his purpose of subverting a particular feature of contemporary ideology.<sup>27</sup>

The identification of the women as virgins must also be significant, for there is no reason why the task of providing light for a wedding procession requires the employment of virgins. Women and men of all ages would have participated. Their identification therefore, as “virgins,” intimates a symbolic identity that links them to the prophetic representation of the people of God.<sup>28</sup> They are the embodiment of the true Israel. They are “the Daughters of Zion” who are admonished and denounced, pitied and lamented by the prophets.<sup>29</sup> They can be faithful or faithless in their allegiance to God and their observance of the regulations of the covenant. Whatever they may be: disobedient, willful, recalcitrant, or dedicated, loyal, stalwart; they remain “the virgin daughter of Zion;” and although they may be disciplined, they are never abandoned by God. As virgins, then, they constitute an inimitable *minyan*.

Disturbing, however, is the immediate distinguishing characterization of the virgins as “foolish” and “prudent”. The narrator is committing the mistake of “telling” rather than “showing,” a literary technique that appears to be foreign to the art and style of Jesus’ storytelling.<sup>30</sup> Most, if not all the parables of Jesus in the Synoptic tradition “show” rather than “tell” and consequently permit the audience to make the implied determinations.<sup>31</sup> On the basis of the

---

<sup>24</sup> *The Jewish People in the First Century*, II, 757.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 758.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* But see Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 170-171, whose delineation of the two stages of Jewish marriage customs is somewhat similar to that of S. Safrai and M. Stern, but he apparently assumes that the procession of the groom to the wedding feast was the usual protocol of Jewish weddings.

<sup>27</sup> Here again I am subscribing to the characterizations of parable in Linnemann, *Jesus of the Parables*, 3-4; and Crossan, *The Dark Interval*, Argus edition, 59; Polebridge edition, 42.

<sup>28</sup> For prophetic references to Israel as the ‘virgin’, see Am 5:2; Is 37:22; Lam 2:13; LXX Is 7:14. Jeremiah particularly referred to Israel as “the virgin;” see Jer 14:17; 18:13; 31(38): 4, 21. Sometimes the designation ‘virgin’ is combined with “the Daughter of Zion,” as in Is 37:22 and Lam 1:6; 2:13.

<sup>29</sup> References to “the Daughter of Zion” in the singular and the plural, or “Daughter of Jerusalem” or “Daughter of My People” abound in the prophets: Mic 4:8, 10, 13; Zeph 3:14; Is 1:8; 3:16-17; 4:4; 10:32; 16:1; 22:4; 37:22; 52:2; 62:11; Jer 4:31; 6:2, 23, 26; 8:19, 21, 22; 9:1; 14:17; Zech 2:10; 9:9; Lam 1:6, 15; 2:1, 4, 10, 11, 13, 15, 18; 4:22.

<sup>30</sup> Dan Otto Via, Jr., *The Parables*, 124, notes, “This is one of the few cases in Jesus’ parables (cf. also Luke 18:6) where a figure is characterized directly by the narrator’s use of an adjective – “wise” and “foolish” – rather than by simply relating his deeds and words.

<sup>31</sup> Any example will suffice to establish this. The Parable of the Father and the Two Sons in Luke 15:11-32 is especially illustrative of this principle. Nothing is said about the alienation between the two sons, but it is already intimated at the beginning of the story when the older son does not interfere as the younger son asks his father for the share of the inheritance, gains the right of disposition and proceeds to turn his assets into cash. See Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant: A Literary Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976) 163-169.

earlier differentiation between “the prudent man who built his house on the rock” and “the foolish man who built his house on sand” that is attributed to Jesus in Matt 7:24, 26, it seems valid to assign this parable to Matthew. But there is no need for it, and very likely Jesus did not include it in the story. The foolishness of the five who did not take an additional supply of oil with them will be manifested soon enough.<sup>32</sup>

The ten virgins have a calling, a vocation. They are to serve as bearers of light in the festive celebration of a marriage. The circumstance of marriage as the context for the exercise of this vocation also appears to have a symbolic significance. Both pre-exilic and post-exilic prophets utilized marriage as a metaphor to envision a new relationship between God and Israel.<sup>33</sup> Hosea anticipates a time in the future when God will enter into a marriage union with Israel.

“And in that day, says Yahweh, you will call me, ‘My Husband,’ and no longer will you call me, ‘My Baal.’ For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be invoked by name no more. And I will make a covenant for you on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and the bow, the sword, and war I will abolish from the land; and I will make you lie down in security. And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know Yahweh.” (Hos 2:16-20)

In his vision of a new heaven and a new earth, Third Isaiah characterizes the new conditions that will result when God and Israel will be united in marriage.

“You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of Yahweh, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. You shall no longer be named ‘Forsaken,’ and your land shall no longer be named ‘Desolate’. But you shall be called, ‘Hephzibah’ (My delight is in her) and your land ‘Beulah’ (Married). For Yahweh delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a virgin, so shall your Builder marry you; and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.” (Is 62:3-5)

Israel’s future of a union with God in marriage denotes a new creation, the inauguration of a new moral order. It corresponds to Daniel’s vision of the reign of God (2:44-45) and the ascent of “one like a human being” to receive dominion, glory and the reign of God. If, as Jesus asserts in his introduction to this parable, “the reign of God is like ten virgins who, taking their lamps, went out to meet the bridegroom,” the marriage feast in which the parable culminates signifies the actualization of this long-awaited eschatological reality of God’s reign. Consequently, the responsibility that is entrusted to these virgins is momentous. As virgins, and therefore the embodiment of the true Israel, they are serving in this eschatological moment as the bearers of light. That is their identity. But will they fulfill their identity in activity? Will they provide the needed light that will enable the bridegroom to arrive at his destination and enter into the marriage feast?

---

<sup>32</sup> According to Gunther Schwarz’ analysis of the story’s vocabulary in, “Zum Vokabular von Matthäus XXV. 1-12,” *New Testament Studies* 27/2 (1981), 270-273, but especially 270, n. 5, the word *elaion* does not refer to olive oil but to butter. Olive oil was used for the lamps in the temple, but butter for lamps like those in the parable. But see also Safrai and Stern, *The Jewish People in the First Century*, II, 745-746, “All oils may be used in the lamp, but olive oil is preferred.”

<sup>33</sup> See J. Massingberd Ford, “Parable of the Foolish Scholars,” 113-115, for rabbinic texts that interpreted Canticles in terms of the nuptial relationship between Yahweh and bride Israel.

As the ten women await the arrival of the bridegroom, they grow drowsy and fall asleep.<sup>34</sup> For some reason he has been delayed, but no account or excuse is given for his tardiness. In spite of the conjectures that have been offered: a lengthy dispute over the marriage settlement, or a disagreement over the bride price, no explanation is necessary.<sup>35</sup> The original audience would have been able to fill that gap from their own experience. A loud clamor in the middle of the night announces the arrival of the bridegroom and the women are awakened from their sleep: “Look, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!” All ten respond immediately. They arise and put their lamps in order by trimming the wicks and replenishing the supply of oil.<sup>36</sup> But five of them find themselves in a critical situation: their lamps are going out, and they did not make provision for such a contingency by bringing with them additional oil. They are obliged to ask the other five to share some of their extra oil, “Give us of your oil for our lamps are going out.”

It is at this point that another startling surprise occurs, a surprise that may evoke a painful disappointment and perhaps even disillusion, especially for women.<sup>37</sup> The five who brought an extra supply of oil in their flasks refuse to share with the five who did not. As ten virgins, they are a community representing the institution of the synagogue. They are united, therefore, in a common calling as women to serve as bearers of light. It would seem that the natural inclination would be to share their supply of oil with each other. But they refuse with a response that is reinforced by a triple negative: *mêpote ou mê arkesê hêmin kai hymin*. “Certainly there never would be enough for us and for you.”<sup>38</sup>

There is, however, another manuscript tradition of their reply in which only a double negative is used: *mêpote ouk arkesê hêmin kai hymin*. In this reading the negatives would neutralize each other, and the negation would be weakened to such a degree that their initial use of *mêpote* would introduce something conjectured, a *probably* or a *perhaps*.<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, the women’s reply to the request to share oil would express a degree of uncertainty: “There is probably not enough for us and for you.”

The manuscript tradition is more or less evenly divided between the two readings: *mêpote ou mê arkesê hêmin kai hymin* and *mêpote ouk arkesê hêmin kai hymin*. Of the two, however, the former may be the more difficult reading, and therefore also the preferable one. It is the reading of the 27<sup>th</sup> edition of Nestle-Aland’s *Novum Testamentum Graece*. Accordingly,

<sup>34</sup> A. Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 453, appears to be alone in recognizing that one does not let oil lamps burn hours long needlessly. Moreover, he adds, “How can one fall asleep with a burning lamp in hand?” Yet, the story requires that the lamps continue to burn while the virgins are sleeping so that the supply of oil in the lamps will be diminished, and a crisis will result.

<sup>35</sup> Jeremias, *Parables*, p.p. 172, 174. According to Safrai and Stern, *The Jewish People in the First Century*, II, 752-753, “Both families had the responsibility of helping the young couple to establish its household; it seems, however, that it was particularly the groom who was interested in his in-laws’ accepting the obligation, as it was in the household of the groom’s parents that the couple would begin its married life and the major expenses therefore fell upon the groom and his father.”

<sup>36</sup> The employment of the resurrection verb, *egeirô* (arise), leads Donfried, “Allegory of the Ten Virgins,” 424-425, to conclude that the language of 25:5-7 is allegorical and “refers to the death and resurrection of the virgins.” It is another factor in his treatment of the parable as an allegory composed by Matthew.

<sup>37</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Cornelia Cyss-Wittenstein for elaborating this perspective.

<sup>38</sup> This is the translation offered in Walter Bauer’s *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition revised and edited by Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 649. See also F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, A Translation and Revision of the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> German edition by Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961) 223.

<sup>39</sup> *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 649; and *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 223.

the conviction of the five who have extra oil is that sharing the oil would make it impossible for the ten of them to fulfill their vocation as light bearers, and therefore the groom and his party would be unable to find their way to the marriage celebration. Nevertheless, as Adolf Jülicher contends, the alternative phrase, *mêpote ouk arkesê* is more sensitive and solicitous and fits appropriately into the situation, and it may well have been the original reading.<sup>40</sup> The only alternative is for the others to obtain more oil from another source: “Go rather to those selling and buy [some] for yourselves.” Evidently, in spite of the time of night, it is presupposed that oil will be obtainable even if the shop-owners will have to be roused out of bed in order to sell oil to these five women. Somehow the five succeed in acquiring the oil they need, but it is too late to enable them to serve as light-bearers for the wedding procession.

In the meantime the groom and the groomsmen appear, and the five, who were prepared with an extra supply of oil, are able to provide the light that is required to enable them to reach their destination. Together they enter into the marriage feast, “and the door is shut.” Somewhat later the other five virgins arrive, and, as they proceed to knock on the door, they call out, “Master, Master, open for us!”

In view of Jesus’ encouragement to his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount (7:7-8), the expectation, at least of the readers of Matthew’s Gospel, would be the opening of the door for admission to the marriage feast.

“Keep on asking, and it will be given to you; keep on seeking, and you will find; keep on knocking, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks, it will be opened.”

When, however, the door is opened to these five who did not provide light for the wedding procession, it is only to inform them that they are inadmissible to the wedding festivities. Unable to recognize them because they were not among the virgins who provided light for the wedding procession, the Master, who must be the bridegroom, turns them away with an asseveration, “Amen, I tell you, I don’t know you!”<sup>41</sup>

Five of the ten virgins who represented the institution of the synagogue and who in their virginity embodied the true Israel are excluded from the wedding feast and simultaneously, therefore, from participation in the reign of God that is symbolized by the wedding feast. Their use of the double address, “Master, Master” (or “Lord, Lord”), as they knock on the door, expresses their desire to be admitted to the celebration. Its employment here recalls another saying of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ (or ‘Master, Master’) will enter into the reign of God, but the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.”

If God’s reign is comparable to ten virgins, its concrete reality is not being manifested by all of them. Only five fulfill the purpose of their calling, specifically those who had prepared for contingency by taking with them an extra supply of oil that subsequently enabled them to provide the light that was needed to escort the groom and his wedding party to the marriage feast. But it is not the sufficiency of oil that constitutes their integrity, or that symbolizes their obedience to God’s will and therefore admits them to the marriage feast.<sup>42</sup> It is the integrity of identity and activity! It is the identity of discipleship within the eschatological reality of God’s

<sup>40</sup> A. Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 451.

<sup>41</sup> As noted by D. O. Via, Jr., *The Parables*, 123, the solemn declaration, *Amen*, generally does not appear in Jesus’ parables, but there are some exceptions. Compare Matt 18:13 and Lk 12:37 with Lk 11:8; 14:24; 18:14. In view of the 31 uses of *Amen* in Matthew’s Gospel, it seems likely that it was added by the Evangelist.

<sup>42</sup> As claimed by Donfried, “Allegory of the Ten Virgins,” 423, 425; and W. Schrenk, “Auferweckung der Toten oder Gericht nach den Werken,” 294.

reign that is validated by the activity of bearing light. But that integrity can only be established individually in and through individual performance. It would seem, therefore, that the only rationale for sharing oil would be a carefully calculated amount that would suffice to enable all ten virgins to fulfill their vocation as bearers of light and thereby establish their integrity individually. But such a determination is impossible in this context. Yet even if it were possible, co-dependency cannot establish the integrity of individual personhood. No one can claim or appropriate the integrity of identity and activity from another human being. Participation in the wedding feast, and therefore the reign of God that it symbolizes, requires the individual human being to express the identity of being a bearer of light in terms of concrete activity. If Jesus entrusted God's reign to his disciples, as Matt 16:19; Luke 12:32 and 22:29 attest, the response-ability of exercising that rule involves both the identity of being God's surrogate and the activities it requires for the fulfillment of that identity. That, in fact, is the identity that Jesus conferred on his disciples in Matt 5:14, "You are the light of the world."

John the Baptizer, in Matt 3:9, had already proclaimed that identity in and of itself cannot qualify for participation in the reality of God's reign: "And do not think to say in yourselves, 'We have father Abraham'. For I say to you, God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones." The true character of Israel as God's people who participate in the reign of God must be manifested in incarnational activity.

The story of the Ten Virgins proves to be a parable, an extended metaphor drawn from common life that arrests the hearer by its vividness and strangeness, and teases the mind into active thought.<sup>43</sup> It is an "interesting particular case," perhaps "freely composed," and all of its reversals function as a parable that subverts the world of male domination and its nationalistic ideology of ethnic identity as God's elect people.<sup>44</sup> Attendantly, in a mirror-like fashion it compels its hearers – and readers – to scrutinize their discipleship within the eschatological reality of God's reign in order to determine if and to what extent their identity is validated by their activity.<sup>45</sup> And finally, at the same time, the parable discloses "a new possibility of world" that is symbolized by the marriage feast in which the bearers of light participate. But all that this new possibility signifies, depends of course on the individual hearer – or reader – and the extent to which that eschatological reality is construed in the light of the prophetic expectations of texts like Hos 2:16-20 and Is 62:3-5.

---

<sup>43</sup> From Dodd, *Parables*, 16.

<sup>44</sup> From Linnemann, *Jesus of the Parables*, 3-4 and Crossan, *The Dark Interval*, Argus edition, 59; Polebridge edition, 42.

<sup>45</sup> As far as I have been able to determine, the mirror-like character of parable was introduced by Anntoinette Clark Wire, *The Parable is a Mirror*, 1983-84 Bible Study Book (Atlanta: The Office of Women, General Assembly Mission Board, Presbyterian Church, U.S., 1983).