

# Intimations of the Year of Jubilee in the Parables of the Wicked Tenants and the Workers in the Vineyard

Herman C. Waetjen

Robert S. Dollar Emeritus Professor of New Testament

San Francisco Theological Seminary and the Graduate Theological Union

**The reader and the Biblical text are partners collaborating as co-creators in an aesthetic event of understanding that, by generating an experience of meaning, originates something that did not exist before. The more acutely the actual reader can perceive that “network of response-inviting structures” of the reader implied by the author, and fulfill that role as designed by the author, the more adequate the construal of meaning will be.**

The institution of jubilee and its economic regulations, detailed in Leviticus 25, may never have been put into practice in the history of Israel. But the ideals of redemption and restoration, which it envisioned for the nation's covenantal relationship with God and its attendant establishment of justice, were appropriated and applied by Israel's prophets to the social, economic and political conditions of their times. Jesus' ministry also appears to have been oriented toward the fulfillment of these jubiliary ideals. Indeed, his actualization of the eschatological reality of "the kingdom of God" expresses vital aspects of the redemption and the ethics of the jubilee year. At least two of the parables, which the gospel tradition attributes to him, convey central features of this jubilee model and ascribe them to their referent, the rule of God. The parable of the Wicked Tenants functions as a mirror for the ruling elite confronting them with their eviction from God's vineyard and their replacement by the very people they oppressed and dispossessed, the poor. The parable of The Workers in the Vineyard subverts the world of the sub-Asiatic mode of production and its exploitative exchange value of labor.

## The Parable of the Wicked Tenants

Much of the confusion which scholarly interpretation has generated in its efforts to explain the parable of the Wicked Tenants has been dispelled by Klyne Snodgrass' investigation *The Parable of the Wicked Tenants*.<sup>1</sup> Many, if not most of the difficulties, which the individual features of the parable posed, have been resolved. Above all the plausibility of the story has been established.<sup>2</sup> The owner and planter of the vineyard may be identified as an absentee landlord. Whether he was a foreigner is not indicated; it is of no importance. The conflict in the story is an economic class struggle.

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<sup>1</sup> K. Snodgrass, *The Parable of the Wicked Tenants. An Inquiry into Parable Interpretation. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament 27* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1983).

<sup>2</sup> So also Snodgrass, 111; Wm. R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech. Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994, 99; J.D. Crossan, *In Parables. The Challenge of the Historical Jesus*, New York: Harper & Row, 1973, 86-96, considers the version in the Gospel of Thomas to be the authentic parable of Jesus. B.B. Scott, *Hear then the Parable. A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989, 245-246 appears to agree with Crossan that the Thomas version is more original than that of the Synoptics. The publication of the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels. The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, New Testament Translation & Commentary by Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, New York: Macmillan, 1993. Also a Polebridge Press Book, 1993. In both volumes the parable has been printed in gray, indicating doubt that the story is attributable to Jesus.

Historical records indicate that for many generations Galilee had been royal territory subject to the control of prebendal domains, that is "stipend" property or grants for income. The land was awarded to officials of the state who derived their income from it by leasing it to the peasantry for a stipulated rent to be paid in the form of agricultural produce, money or labor. The Zenon Papyri of the third century B.C.E. disclose that the Hellenistic monarch of Egypt, Ptolemy Philadelphus (283-246 B.C.E.) had granted property in Bet Anat in Galilee to his finance minister Apollonius.<sup>3</sup> The estate, which he owned as an absentee landlord, appears to have been a large holding of grainfields and a vineyard of 80,000 grapevines. It is estimated that a workforce of at least 25 people was required to carry out the work that was involved in such a large operation but this seems to be a minimal figure. Herod the Great furthered this kind of latifundialization during his reign in the first century B.C.E. by expropriating large tracts of farmland and selling them to wealthy landowners. Consequently the best agricultural lands of Galilee fell into the hands of a few landbarons who preferred to live in another part of Palestine or even abroad while their estates were managed by *oikonomoi* and worked by tenant farmers.<sup>4</sup>

Rostovtzeff offers a comprehensive view of land tenure in Palestine:

"Judaea, Samaria, and still more Galilee are studded with hundreds of villages inhabited by peasants, above whom stands a native aristocracy of large landowners, who are patrons of the villages... Still more opulent are the officials of the kings and tetrarchs, and the kings and tetrarchs themselves and their families. Lastly, we find estates of the Roman emperor himself and the imperial family, and even a military colony established by Vespasian at Emmaus after the Jewish War. Such were the conditions of life in Palestine, and in later times there was clearly no change, except that landed proprietors of other than Jewish origin, like Libanius, increased in number."<sup>5</sup>

Jesus' parable of the wicked tenants supports Rostovtzeff's socio-economic analysis, mirroring the institution of prebendal domains and its concomitant feature of absentee landownership which dominated Galilean agriculture. A landlord has established a vineyard: vines have been planted, a wall has been constructed, a vat has been dug, a tower has been built, the vineyard has been leased to tenants and the owner has withdrawn - most likely to his place of residence in another area of Palestine or possibly even abroad.

Four of these six initial activities are attributed to the singer of the Song of the Vineyard in Isaiah 5 who is metaphorically identified with Yahweh: that is, planting vines, constructing a wall, digging a vat and building a tower. The leasing of the vineyard to tenants and the departure of the owner move Jesus' story directly into the realities of Galilean agriculture in his own time. Even though the vineyard would not be profitable for at least five years, peasant labor would be necessary to tend the vines and to carry on the continuous process of cultivation and weeding.<sup>6</sup> The expenses that would be incurred during this period of time would be defrayed by growing grain and vegetables between the rows of vines. Rent might also be paid on this produce, but at

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<sup>3</sup> Sean Freyne, *Galilee from Alexander the Great to Hadrian: 323 B.C.E. to 135 C.E. A Study of Second Temple Judaism* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1980) 156-162.

<sup>4</sup> Richard A. Horsley & John S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs. Popular Movements at the Time of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985) 58-63.

<sup>5</sup> M. Rostovtzeff, *Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. 1957) 1, 270 and 663, n.32.

<sup>6</sup> Snodgrass, *Wicked Tenants*, 32-33.

least five years would elapse before a rent fund would be due on the fruit of the vines. Although no time period is specified in the story, the audience would infer a rather considerable period of tenancy before that first payment was required.

One of the features which convinces Klyne Snodgrass of the originality of Matthew's version of the parable is the landowner's sending of a number of slaves to collect the rent: "Now when the season of the fruit drew near, he sent his slaves to the tenants in order to receive his (share of the) fruit." A single slave, as stipulated in the Marcan version would hardly be adequate. Most likely several would be needed. However, their treatment at the hands of the tenants may reflect Matthew's allegorical intention to make the story correspond to the history of Israelite prophets: "One they beat, another they killed and another they stoned." Snodgrass denies such allegorical redaction of the story, but Jubilees 1: 12-13 and Hebrews 11: 35-38 indicate that traditions of the sufferings of the prophets, even though not included in the Hebrew Scriptures, were circulating in pre-Christian Judaism. The treatment of the individual slaves in Mark's version of the story also appears to have been informed by prophetic history. It is generally agreed that the verb *ekphalaiosan* refers to the fate suffered by John the Baptizer. Moreover, the great number of slaves sent by the absentee landlord may be intended to cover the entire history of Israel and hint at the immense patience of God. Of the Synoptics Luke seems to offer the most realistic account of the tenants' mistreatment of the owner's slaves: "And at the time he sent a slave to the tenants so that they should give him of the fruit of the vineyard. But beating him the tenants sent him off empty. And he sent another slave, but that one beating and dishonoring they sent off empty. And he sent a third, and wounding this one they cast him out." (Luke 20:10-12). The originality of the Lucan version of this feature of the parable is supported by the parallel account of the story in the gospel of Thomas: "They seized his servant, they beat him; a little longer and they would have killed him... He sent another servant; the tenants beat him as well." However, it is the absence of allegory, including the allusions to Isaiah 5:1-7 at the beginning of the parable, that convinces Crossan of the authenticity of the Thomas version over that of Luke.

“...its meaning is clear as a parable of action. It is a deliberately shocking story of successful murder. The story is certainly possible and possibly actual in the Galilean turbulence of the period. It tells of some people who recognized their situation, saw their opportunity, and acted resolutely upon it.”<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, in spite of the difficulties of the Marcan account, especially its allegorized features, it is probably closer to the original story of Jesus than any of the other versions. Unlike Thomas 93:1, the owner of the vineyard is not characterized as “a good man”. He is an absentee landlord, and, like most absentee landlords in advanced agrarian society, he probably exploited the labor of his tenants by contracting for rent funds of 40 to 50 per cent of their agricultural produce. Frustrated by his slaves’ unsuccessful attempts to collect the rent fund, he sends his son, most likely as his representative, to undertake legal action: "They will respect my son." All four editions of the parable attribute this expectation to the landbaron. Only someone who was involved in the ownership of the land could represent him and serve as a legal claimant.

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7 Crossan, In Parables, 96.

Perhaps as Snodgrass and others conjecture, the absentee landlord had "transferred a small portion of ownership to the son for this purpose."<sup>8</sup>

To prevent any legal action from being taken and to take possession of the vineyard the tenants kill the son. Perhaps the lapse of time between their entry into a contract with the owner and the murder of his son cover the period of tenure which the law requires for the acquisition of the land. The Mishnaic tractate, Baba Bathra 3:1, legislates that an individual who has no title deeds to lay claim to a property must prove three years of undisputed possession, but title to fields whose fertility is dependent solely on winter rain can be acquired in less time. However, Baba Bathra 3:3 forbids "tenants" as well as "jointholders and guardians to secure title by usucaption." Whether this prohibition was already law in Galilee during Jesus' lifetime is probably indeterminable.<sup>9</sup> At the very least it hints that seizure of land by tenants was being perpetrated. Snodgrass adds another factor that may have influenced the tenants:

"In rabbinic law, if one abandoned hope of recovering lost or stolen property, he renounced his claim to ownership. To this point the father had been unable to come to the vineyard, and the tenants must have felt that there was some chance that the owner would give up. If the father did come and could not produce evidence, the stronger of the two parties could take possession."<sup>10</sup>

How did the story originally end? The version in the Gospel of Thomas (65) closes with the murder of the owner's son, "...they seized him, they killed him." The son is killed because he is recognized as the heir, not in order to enable the tenants to take possession of the vineyard. Moreover, the question and answer of Mark 12:9, Matt. 21:40-41 and Luke 20:15-16, "What will the master of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others," are not included.<sup>11</sup> If the parable had been terminated with the murder of the owner's son, it would have ended inconclusively. There would be no surprise twist. There would be no subversion of world, no mirror of disclosure. The story would simply be an account of a violent act perpetrated by a group of oppressed and dispossessed peasants. The concluding question and answer: "What will the master of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants, and he will give the vineyard to others!" are essential for the integrity of the story as a parable. To object on the basis that Jesus did not end his parables with a question and answer, as Crossan does, is to limit the creativity of Jesus in his story-telling and to overlook similar instances in Matt.20:15 and Luke 12:20.

Jesus' concluding question and answer convey the unexpected reversal of the episode. Those who dispossessed the heir of the vineyard are dispossessed in turn by the owner, and the vineyard is leased to others. But this surprising twist must be understood in the light of the story's unusual beginning. While, on the one hand, the owner is an absentee landlord who is a member of the affluent upper class engaged in self-aggrandizement through the exploitation of

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8 Snodgrass, *Wicked Tenants*, 37.

9 Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 107, considers it unlikely that the tenants could stake a legal claim to the vineyard. The elites would institute laws that would protect them from the possibility of such a legal action. However, some laws are enacted after the fact of such attempts at land seizure.

10 Snodgrass, *Wicked Tenants*, 38.

11 If logion 66, following 93:1-14, can be considered to be the final outcome of the story, the heir in the Thomas version may be identified with the stone which the builders rejected but which has become the cornerstone, namely the murdered son of the good man, that is, Jesus himself.

the peasantry, the distinctive introduction of the parable indicates that Jesus is adapting a more or less common Galilean episode to the prophetic allegory of the vineyard in Isaiah 5:1-7.

The opening sentence, "A human being planted a vineyard and constructed a wall and dug a vat and built a tower" would almost certainly have evoked the memory of the Isaiah's "Song of the Vineyard" in the minds of Jesus' audience. This in and of itself suggests an irregularity, for it links the identification of the absentee landlord of the parable with the vineyard owner of Isaiah's allegory. That would be a disturbing anomaly for Jewish peasants but not necessarily for those who would tend to identify themselves with the absentee landlord and approve of his final action of killing the tenants, namely the ruling elite. They would be attracted to Jesus' story because they would have no difficulty in thinking of God as an absentee landlord.

But the introduction is all that Jesus' parable and the Isaiah's allegory of the vineyard have in common. The latter explicitly identifies Israel as "the vineyard of the Lord of hosts"(5:7), while the former focuses on the lease of the vineyard to tenant farmers and their contract with the owner to pay the rent fund. Jesus' upper class audience would find itself drawn into a story in which they would be forced to identify themselves with the lower class peasants. They cannot consider themselves to be the vineyard of Isaiah's allegory, which yields wild grapes, and in all likelihood they would not because they are convinced of their own righteousness. Since the absentee landlord is metaphorically intimated to be God on the basis of the intended association of the introduction with Isaiah's "Song of the Vineyard," the vineyard must necessarily symbolize Israel. The tenants therefore, can only be those to whom God has entrusted the vineyard, that is, the guardians of society. By being drawn into this identification with peasant farmers, the ruling elite ironically find themselves in an unaccustomed role. Jesus has lured them into identification with that segment of the lower class, which they exploit for the maintenance of their wealth and power by appropriating a grossly unjust proportion of their agricultural produce through exorbitant rent funds.<sup>12</sup> For a brief moment perhaps they may perceive the injustice of the socio-economic system which they themselves maintain. At the same time, they are obliged to see themselves as the tenants of God's vineyard who are not fulfilling the covenant to which they had bound themselves. This double disclosure which is conveyed to them through their participation in the story intimates a circular continuity of cause and effect. Their guardianship of Jewish society stands under divine judgment precisely because of their socio-economic exploitation of the peasantry. By being naturally inclined, as members of the governing class, to condemn the peasants for their illegal withholding of the rent fund and their violence of murdering the landlord's slaves and especially his male heir, they would have no difficulty in justifying his revenge, but ironically at the same time they would be pronouncing judgment on themselves for the injustice and violence which they were perpetrating as the tenants of God's vineyard.

Ingeniously, Jesus has succeeded in confronting the guardians of society with their own injustice. The retribution which the tenants suffer at the hands of the landlord and which they readily affirm will be inflicted on them. As they have dispossessed, so they will be dispossessed: "And he will give the vineyard to others." Without this ironic conclusion the story is incomplete and therefore cannot function parabolically.

Jesus does not identify those who will receive the vineyard. Within the context of Mark's gospel they are usually considered to be the Gentiles. But while this is true for Matthew's gospel, the "others" may, in fact, imply the disenfranchised lower classes to whom the evangelist

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<sup>12</sup> Mark, therefore, is quite correct in presenting Jesus addressing this parable to the guardians of society.

Mark addressed his gospel. Moreover, originally in the context of Jesus' own ministry, the "others" were probably intended to be the very people who were exploited by the ruling elite, the peasants whose agriculture produced the wealth which they were able to appropriate by their office and power.

Jesus' parable not only challenges the upper class; more importantly it subverts the understanding which its members have of their divinely legitimated office and position in society and therefore simultaneously the self-justification and self-worth which they derive from it.

### **The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard**

The recovery of the original function of "The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard" necessitates its extraction from its Matthean context. In its present location the parable serves as an illustration of the reversal which Jesus has enunciated to his disciples in 19:30, "But many (who are) first will be last and (the) last first." These words are repeated, but in an opposite order, as the conclusion of the parable; and it is generally agreed that it is a redaction of the evangelist and not the original ending of the story.

The parable of the Workers in the Vineyard reflects the same economic realities of Roman Palestine as the parable of the Wicked Tenants, but specifically the condition of widespread unemployment in Galilee.<sup>13</sup> Large segments of the population had been dispossessed and reduced to destitution as a result of Pompey's reorganization of Palestinian territory. At the same time Herod the Great's expropriation of large tracts of farmland, sold to wealthy landowners or distributed to the officials of his court, had intensified the process of latifundialization.<sup>14</sup> Consequently peasants and tenants, as well as the artisans, who depended on them, had only their labor to sell to anyone who wished to hire them.

Jesus' parable, however, focuses on a landlord who goes to the marketplace at 6 in the morning in order to hire laborers, probably, it is speculated, to pick the grapes in his vineyard. Because the harvest season has arrived, the work must be completed quickly, so he returns to the marketplace several more times. At 9 o'clock and at noon he finds others standing idle and waiting to be hired. He goes again at 3 o'clock in the afternoon and finally at 5 o'clock, one hour before the end of the workday, to hire more unemployed people. The explanation of the workers is always the same, "No one has hired us."

All of them are sent into the vineyard to work, and at 6 o'clock in the evening the landlord commands the manager to pay the wage. The law required such payment at the end of each day so that the workers could afford to buy food for their families. Those who were hired last are paid first. Herzog interprets this order to be an affront to those who labored twelve hours: "They have been shamed. By reversing the order of payment so that the last hired receive a wage equal to that of the first hired, (the owner) has told them in effect that he values their daylong effort in the scorching heat no more than the brief labor of the eleventh hour workers."<sup>15</sup> But the affront is not conveyed by the order of payment, but by the payment itself. It is aroused in those who have worked twelve hours and receive the same wage as those who labored only one hour. For the effect of the parable it is essential that those who were hired first will know

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<sup>13</sup> Luise Schottroff, "Human Solidarity and the Goodness of God: The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard," in W. Schottroff and W. Stegemann, eds., *God of the Lowly* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984) 133.

<sup>14</sup> Here also see S. Freyne, *Galilee*, 164, although he does not stress the process of latifundialization as Rostovtzeff and Horsley and Hanson do.

<sup>15</sup> Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 91, against Jeremias, Linnemann and Scott who maintain that those hired earlier are to witness the owner's action of payment.

what wage is being paid to those who worked for only one hour. As a result, their expectation is that they will receive more. But all of them receive the same wage, one denarius. Indignant at what they perceive to be an injustice, they protest, but the landlord reminds them that they had contracted for one denarius.

What kind of a landlord is this? Like others of his kind, he owns the means of production, the land. But unlike others of his kind, he does not exploit his laborers by depriving them of the surplus value of their work. "...not only is he just, but most agree that he has acted with generosity toward those hired last."<sup>16</sup> He develops productivity by hiring more workers; and that means more workers can earn a living for themselves and their families. But he does not increase his profit at their expense. Accordingly, the self-expansion that capitalism produces by depriving laborers of the surplus value of their labor is cancelled.<sup>17</sup>

William R. Herzog sharply disagrees with this assessment of the landowner. He rightly recognizes that no elite would go to the marketplace to hire workers; that would be the responsibility of the estate manager. Evidently Jesus is ignoring this class reality in order to focus directly on the landlord himself. But is he doing that in order to expose him as "an exploitative and ruthless landowner"?<sup>18</sup> Of course, the wage of a denarius for twelve hours of work is minimal, indeed, a subsistence wage. But as Douglas Oakman has estimated, a denarius could supply food for a family from three to six days.<sup>19</sup> It is, in fact, the wage that has been agreed upon by both parties, the owner and the unemployed. Generally speaking, of course, the unemployed would have no bargaining power, but if it is harvest time—and the landlord's need for many workers is apparent in the story—those who are being hired would have a degree of leverage in negotiating with the owner. The text indicates that the landlord came to an agreement with the workers, not that the workers reached an agreement with the landlord.

Those who worked longer than one hour are indignant. They believe that they have been treated unfairly, for, as they assert, "We have borne the burden and the heat of the day." Naturally they deserve more! Justice would appear to dictate that, in spite of the bargained-for denarius. But what they have forgotten is their own advantage of being hired at the beginning of the day. It is a stark reality that opportunity is not always equal for all people. Yet their needs are very much the same. The distribution of the housemaster is not according to opportunity and its advantages, but according to need. And among peasants needs are equal. They, however, are not concerned about the advantages of opportunity. They insist on distribution according to merit or achievement, the merit of having worked all day or at least longer than those who labored only one hour.

Those who grumble and accuse the landlord of being unjust disclose that they have been infected with the values that come down from the top of the socio-economic pyramid, values which the rich and the powerful foster in order to "divide and conquer" those on whom they are dependent for labor. But the principle that is at work here in this story is the one that Karl Marx formulated, "From each according to ability to each according to need..." Self-interest is invalidated. The needs of each member of the community cannot be ignored in the eschatological reality of God's rule. No advantages of noble birth, inheritance, achievement or merit of any kind determine participation in the justice and equality of God's rule.

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<sup>16</sup> Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 282.

<sup>17</sup> It is not necessary to identify God with this extraordinary landlord. It is the eschatological reality of God's rule that is like the landlord, who, by refusing to increase his own profit at the expense of his hired workers, subverts the exchange value of labor.

<sup>18</sup> Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 90.

<sup>19</sup> Douglas Oakman, "The Buying Power of Two Denarii," *Forum* 3, 33-38.

Jesus' parables violated the ordered system of land tenure and economic exchange in the world of his day. The rule of God, which his stories metaphorically disclosed, will inaugurate fundamental reversals of the ruling elite's socio-economic constructions of reality. The rich and the powerful will forfeit all their advantages because of their exploitation and dispossession of the peasants, the very people who produce the agricultural wealth which they extract by means of their power and position. The realities of redemption and restoration, which the year of jubilee envisioned, will be actualized, not only for Israel but for all the nations and peoples of the world.