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RECLAIMING THE MATTHEAN VINEYARD PARABLES

"The Dorshei Aggadot say, 'If you wish to know The-One-Who-Spoke-and-The-World-Came-Into-Being, study the Aggadah, for within it you will come to know The-One-Who-Spoke-and-The-World-Came-Into-Being, and then cleave to His ways.'" - Sifrei, Ekev XI.49

I. The Quest for the Historical Jesus

In his inaugural address as George Collard Professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, James Charlesworth concluded: "The search for the historical Jesus over the last two hundred years has been a rocky road with many dead ends and detours. Many scholars have served us well; and it is now obvious the journey is both possible and necessary...The search for the Jesus of history does bring us closer to the historical reality of Jesus of Nazareth and does awaken us with crescendoing interrogatives. The search and the questions free us to perceive more clearly the mysterium Christi."¹ The impact of this search is being felt beyond the parameters of New Testament scholarship; it is also influencing seminary education in Hebrew Scriptures, Christian Education, Systematic Theology, and Homiletics. For instance, ^{never} ~~six~~ of the eleven Episcopal seminaries in the United States presently offer electives in post-Biblical Judaism.² Major Christian publishing houses, most notably Paulist and Fortress Presses, regularly offer studies in Judaica among their publications. As Charlesworth says, "If two facts are unassailable today, they

are Jesus' deep Jewishness--he was a Jew--and his paradigmatic effect on Jews and gentiles."³

In searching for the ipsissima verba of the historical Jesus, scholars have traditionally turned their attention to his parables and his proclamation of the Kingdom of God.⁴ Yet the bias which many Christian scholars bring to their study of the parables of Jesus, a bias shaped by the anti-Jewish character given to most New Testament books by their final redactors, needs continuing questioning. Certainly, the "deep Jewishness" of Jesus can no longer be ignored; the question is whether Christian scholars are willing to accept the new critical tasks which this agenda mandates when it is faced in its most radical form. Approaches to the New Testament text range from the fundamentalist right, which insists that every word attributed to Jesus in the New Testament is indeed spoken by him, to the critical left, such as M. D. Goulder, who claims that none of the parables in the Gospel of Matthew is from Jesus, but rather that all of them are the composition of Matthew himself.⁵ Throughout this range of research, surprisingly few Christian scholars of the New Testament make use of traditional Jewish texts from the Second Temple and Early Rabbinic periods, or even of contemporary secondary research in those texts. Since Hebrew is now an easily-accessible language, thanks to its revival in modern Israel, the reason for this ignoring of traditional Jewish texts must lie elsewhere. Can it be that the anti-Jewish tone of the Christian Scriptures has so affected New Testament scholars that they cannot even grant the scholarly worth of Jewish documents contemporaneous with the Primitive Church and

the Patristic period as sources for possible identification of the teachings of Jesus which lay behind the Gospel redactions?

One of the most controversial questions is the relationship between the historical Jesus and that movement within Second Temple Judaism now known as Pharisaism. Though at times appearing reluctant, more Christian scholars are acknowledging that there is some direct connection between Jesus and the Pharisees, and perhaps even that Jesus was himself a Pharisee. In a cautious article, Robert Wild brings four New Testament texts to argue that the relationship between Jesus and the Pharisees is taken for granted in the early strata of the Synoptic Gospels.⁶ Each of Wild's four passages falls within the category of Controversy Pericope, seeming to pit Jesus against the Pharisees. Yet as Wild points out, Matt. 23:23/Luke 11:42 (the tithing of mint) and Matt. 23:25-26/Luke 11:39-41 (the cleansing of the cup) suggest that Jesus was familiar with Pharisaic sectarian regulations, a familiarity which may have come from participation or instruction in the life of that sect.⁷ Mark 2:15-17 (eating with sinners and tax-collectors) and Mark 7:1-2, 5, 15 (eating with unwashed hands) both portray the surprise of the Pharisees that Jesus and his disciples are violating the accepted disciplines of "table-fellowship," a reaction appropriate only if the Pharisees were expecting conformity from Jesus as one who had already espoused the Pharisaic approach to Halakhah.⁸ Wild asks, "Why would Pharisees have anything to do with the customs of a curious group of legal 'sinners' or, on the other hand, why would Christians worry over legal niceties observed by a particular Jewish sect unless there was some common cause between the two groups?"⁹

Yet there are others who would call this approach by Wild too conservative, and who would confidently identify Jesus as a Pharisee, accepting the Controversy Pericopes as no more than in-house conversations, one Pharisee to another.¹⁰

Whether Jesus was himself a Pharisee, or if he only identified with the Pharisaic movement while remaining outside of it formally, we are challenged to read his parables through Jewish eyes, rather than through Christian eyes, for he spoke these parables from within Judaism.¹¹ Charlesworth points out that in doing New Testament research, "one must distinguish between what is in the New Testament from what is behind it... The failure to perceive this distinction has invalidated much New Testament research over the past two hundred years."¹² What is in the New Testament is the much-redacted Christology of the early church; what is behind the New Testament is the profoundly Jewish message of the profoundly Jewish historical Jesus, surrounded by Jewish followers both before and immediately after his death. Jesus' teachings and expectations are spoken from within Judaism, from within Pharisaism if you will, just as the primitive church from 40 to 70 C.E. remained a sect within Judaism.¹³ The parables must only be read within the context, the values and culture, the environment, commitments and symbolism, of Second Temple Judaism.

Jesus read as a Christian by Christians is a very different person than Jesus read as a Jew. The danger in reading Jesus as a Christian is that we so readily confuse ideas that are familiar and comfortable to us with the Word of God. To understand the

original intent of the teachings of Jesus, rather than the meaning ascribed to them by the subsequent tradition of the Church (which would have been shockingly foreign to the historical Jesus) or our present comfortabilities, we must move as completely as possible into the context of First Century Judaism. This is extraordinarily difficult for most contemporary Christians, but as will be argued, even originally the parables were not intended to be easily grasped nor immediately familiar.

Linnemann correctly points out that "for the original listeners to the parables of Jesus we cannot presuppose the belief that he is the Christ...Jesus stood before those listeners as a carpenter from Nazareth, as a wandering Rabbi, like many at that time who wandered up and down the land with their disciples, as a preacher of repentance...No acknowledged proof of divine authority gave weight to what he said, so that people had to listen to it in advance as a word of revelation...The only thing that could give weight to the words of Jesus was the words themselves, and who Jesus is for his listeners depends entirely on what he becomes for them through his words."¹⁴ We can begin to hear the historical Jesus speaking to us only by sifting and sorting the recorded teachings so that they conform to our rapidly-growing knowledge of the literature of First Century Judaism, both in its written tradition (those compilations which ultimately became the Mishnah) and its oral tradition (those memories only later recorded in the Talmud, Tosefta, Midrash, and similar related writings). Scholars have argued over the

details of this sifting and sorting--the criterion of similarity, the criterion of dissimilarity--an argument which is further complicated by the continuing lack of text and form criticism on early Jewish documents (with the recent exception of Neusner and his school). Surely the most conservative standard for recovering the words of the historical Jesus, if that is as possible as Charlesworth indicates, is well expressed by Leo Baeck:

All of the following are indicative of later strata: first of all, whatever accords only with the experiences, hopes, wishes, ideas, and the faith and the images of a later generation; then, events which were clearly begotten in the image either of biblical verses or of the gradually developing dogma and its symbolism; also, whatever is related or spoken with an eye on the Greco-Roman world or the Roman authorities, any obvious attempt to curry favor with them as well as anything prompted by the desire not to be confounded by them with the Jewish people; moreover, whatever is in the Hellenistic style, modeled after Hellenistic prophets and miracle workers; and finally all that reflects the age of the catastrophe, the age after the conquest of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. All this belongs to the history of the faith of the Church, but is not part of the old Gospel. The following, on the other hand, must be part of the old and original tradition: whatever is completely different from the tendencies and purposes of the generations which came after the first generation of disciples; whatever contradicts the tenets which later became part of the faith; whatever is different from, or even opposed to, the intellectual, psychic, and political climate in which these later generations gradually found themselves; whatever, in other words, exemplifies the way of life and the social structure, the climate of thought and feeling, the way of speaking and the style of Jesus' own environment and time. In all this we are confronted with the words and deeds of Jesus.¹⁵

In the spirit of this hermeneutic of suspicion, we now turn to three parables attributed by Matthew to Jesus.

II. Parable: Form and Symbol

To reiterate the premises which we have set forth thus far:

1. The search for the historical Jesus has taken on new urgency and credibility.
2. There is reason to associate Jesus closely, or very closely, with the Pharisees.
3. The teaching of Jesus can only be understood correctly in the context of Second Temple Judaism.
4. The most conservative standards, according to the criteria of dissimilarity as set forth by Leo Baeck, come closest to helping us discover the parables in their original dominical form.

The parables of Jesus are not easy to understand, and Scripture indicates that they are intentionally obscure. "To you have been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand."¹⁶ Apparently, even the disciples did not understand all that Jesus was teaching them. It may be that the parables were taught in an obscure form; it may be that they are made obscure by the historical process of transmission; it is sure that they are made obscure when alien categories are applied to them. For decades scholars have tried to apply Greek forms of analysis and structure to the parables of Jesus, failing to recognize that Jesus' parables are conditioned by the Jewish religion and culture out of which they proceed, and thus cannot be forced into Greek manners of thinking.¹⁷

The parable in general is, of course, a universal form, and parables are known in many languages and in many religions, frequently in a parallel form (Example 1 E&H abc). But within the larger and universal framework of the parable, there are identifiable cultural differences, contexts and purposes behind the telling of parables. For instance, "fox" is a concept which may be understood even by those who have never actually seen a fox; but the relation of a fox to a vineyard--in that a fox raids a vineyard for food--is known only to those who are closely tied to viticulture, such as Israelite society. When Jesus used parables, he used them from within the Jewish tradition, rather than from within some universalized pan-cultural tradition. His facility with parables was such that he earned the reputation of an expert: "And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as a parabolist, rather than as a scribe."¹⁸

To understand the parables of Jesus, we must also appreciate the philosophy of parables within Judaism, as opposed simply to grasping the more universal function of the parable as a literary form. Perhaps the best articulation of Judaism's philosophy of parables comes from Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed:¹⁹

The Sage has said: 'A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings (maskiyyoth) of silver'...The term maskiyyoth denotes filagree traceries; I mean to say traceries in which there are apertures with very small eyelets, like the handiwork of silversmiths. They are so called because a glance penetrates through them... The Sage accordingly said that a saying uttered with a view to two meanings is like an apple of gold overlaid with silver filagree-work having very small holes. Now see how marvellously this dictum describes a well-constructed parable. For he says that in a saying that has two meanings--he means an external and an

internal one--the external meaning ought to be as beautiful as silver, while its internal meaning ought to be more beautiful than the external one, the former being in comparison to the latter as gold is to silver. Its external meaning also ought to contain in it something that indicates to someone considering it what is to be found in its internal meaning, as happens in the case of an apple of gold overlaid with silver filagree-work having very small holes. When looked at from a distance or with imperfect attention, it is deemed to be an apple of silver; but when a keen-sighted observer looks at it with full attention, its interior becomes clear to him and he knows that it is of gold. The parables of the prophets, peace be on them, are similar. Their external meaning contains wisdom that is useful in many respects, among which is the welfare of human societies, as is shown by the external meaning of Proverbs and of similar sayings. Their internal meaning, on the other hand, contains wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is.²⁰

Turning the parable into an allegory, says Maimonides, by seeking meanings for each word, tends frequently to obscure further the meaning of the parable, for parables are usually not meant to be allegories. Allegorization of the parable leads one further away from the "apple of gold," the truth which lies inside the parable.²¹ If Maimonides' philosophy of parables is a correct extension of Second Temple Jewish thought, we can assume that to seek an allegorical meaning to the parables of Jesus is generally a violation of the spirit of those parables. This premise in turn supports those form-critics of the dominical parables who would choose to remove the Nimshal, the moral, from the parables as they stand in the Gospel text.²²

Parables generally have a specific form--the body of the story, which is in Hebrew called the Mashal, and the application or point or moral, which is called the Nimshal. Even when the body of the parable, the Mashal, is the same between parables of two different cultures, the Nimshal may vary. For example, the

Mashal in Aesop's "The Swollen Fox" (Example 1 H&E a) and the Parable of the Fox from Kohelet Rabbah (Example 1 H&E b) are the same: the hungry fox eats too much in the vineyard (or oaktree) and cannot get out again without fasting. But each has a different Nimshal: for Aesop, the point of the parable is that "time solves difficult problems"; for the author of Kohelet Rabbah, the Nimshal is quite different--"As one enters (this world at birth) so one leaves (this world at death)." It is clear from early Jewish scripture commentaries that the "veneration" of any given Nimshal is forbidden; the point of a parable is the Mashal, the narrative story itself.²³ Of course, not every Mashal is followed by a Nimshal (see Example I H&E c, Winnie the Pooh). Some rabbinic parables have Nimshalim and some do not; some of the parables of Jesus have Nimshalim and some do not. In analyzing the parables of Jesus, then, we are forced to ask in relation to each parable: who attached the Nimshal in the Gospel to the Mashal? Did Jesus? the Gospeller? Christian tradition? or is it accidentally misplaced from a different Mashal?

also Parables ordinarily draw on a repertoire of stock figures.²⁴ They are short, and have no time for extensive character development. Rather, they rely on the cultural associations brought by the hearers to the mention of these stock figures. In this sense, the figures in a parable are "symbols," particularly in the Jungian sense, though as has been stated, the allegorization of parables is not generally an accepted part of the rabbinic tradition. With the passage of centuries, we have lost our grasp of the cultural definitions automatically associated with

the stock figures common to First Century Jewish parables. For example, the Parable of the Fox from Kohelet Rabbah (Example 1 H&E b) contains three stock figures or clues in the first sentence: fox, vineyard, and fence. Each of these words has strong associations in the literature of the Second Temple and early Rabbinism; their very mention, particularly in combination, would dredge up associations, other traditional tales, stereotypes, mind-pictures, and expectations for the outcome of the story.

The fox is a very common figure in rabbinic parables, yet even more fox stories were known than have survived: "Rabbi Meir had three hundred parables of foxes, and we have only three left."²⁵ The image of the fox suggests craftiness and danger. A fence is also a common figure in both rabbinic parables and sayings; for example, "Be deliberate in judging, and raise up many disciples, and make a fence for the Torah."²⁶ The fence suggests a safeguard, and particularly in relation to the Torah, suggests safeguards of behavior. Vineyard is a word with a long and unquestionable association in Hebrew Scripture, the best example of which is also one of the finest parables in Scripture, Isaiah 5:1-7. Vineyard suggests the House of Israel, the People Israel. Foxes and vineyards are connected with each other in the traditional literature, such as Song of Songs 2:15 (the little foxes that spoil the vineyards) and Numbers Rabbah XX.14 (Shall the vineyards be sold like foxes?). Thus in three short words--fox, vineyard, fence--a whole set of associations in the minds of the reader are set into motion. These associations would be quite

different from the associations brought by Aesop's contemporaries to his version of the Mashal. To illustrate: a combination of Bear, Honey-pot, and Stuck-in-a-Hole automatically conjures up associations with Winnie the Pooh, but only for those readers who have been raised in a culture in which Winnie the Pooh is a familiar figure; for readers from another culture, one may wind up with the same story line, but without the richness of our associations with Winnie the Pooh as a developed character. So for the rabbinic audience, the combination of fox, vineyard, and fence, while telling a story on the "silver filagree" level, at the same time (without allegorization and without needing interpretation) tells a story about Israel and the Torah being endangered by an intruder. The two stories are told simultaneously, rather than sequentially, though the hearer may at first be conscious only of the primary level. Unless we can re-capture the associations, taken for granted by the author of Kohellet Rabbah, we can only hear the "silver filagree" story; the "golden apple" story will be lost to us completely. So too with the parables of Jesus; if we cannot grasp the associations which were automatic to the original hearers, we cannot grasp the full richness of those parables. They remain for us one-dimensional.

The problem remains of identifying the associations with stock figures which would have been common to Jesus and his hearers. In a provocative article, C. H. Cave claims that "the 'original context' of the parables was always a sermon, and that we have lost the point which the parable was originally intended to enforce because we have lost the sermon."²⁷ On the basis of Cave's

hypothesis, if we cannot rediscover the original sermons of Jesus which were the contextual settings of the parables, then we cannot ever hope to understand what Jesus was teaching in his parables. The only other possible source for definition, it would seem, is Jewish literature of the period as close in time as possible to the life of Jesus: the parables contained in the Mishnah, Midrash, and Talmud.²⁸ There remain serious problems for the scholar, for without extensive form and text criticism of rabbinic materials, we are on shaky ground in deciding what associations belong to which period. But we do have evidence supporting the tenacity of oral tradition in Judaism, and it is quite possible that the rabbinic parables shed important light on the parables of Jesus simply because oral tradition kept stock figures and automatic associations alive for several generations. It therefore seems appropriate in a search to understand the parables of Jesus to seek out whatever illumination is possible from the rabbinic parables retained in traditional Jewish literature.

Attempts have been made by Christian exegetes to prove that Jesus did not draw on this common Jewish repertoire, but that he used stock figures to mean something very different than his contemporaries. The obvious problem with this reasoning, usually offered in an attempt to prove the uniqueness of Jesus, is that his listeners would never have understood his parables had he altered the meaning of the stock figures, for the listeners would have brought such contrary associations. Furthermore, the attempts by some Christian scholars to shift the symbolism of stock figures is not convincing because there is so little literary support.

For example, Jewish associations with the figure of the vineyard are so strong in Hebrew Scripture that it is virtually impossible to imagine that Jesus, as a Jew, could have used that figure in any way other than as a representation for the People Israel, the House of Israel. The specific association is stated most clearly in Isaiah 5:7--"For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel." The association between vineyard and the House of Israel is so established in both the Hebrew Scriptures and early rabbinic literature that it would be highly unusual that vineyard should fail to symbolize the nation.²⁹ This Scriptural meaning, supported by rabbinic continuation, is here the logical meaning to attach to Jesus' use of stock figures.³⁰ There is no convincing reason to shift the meaning of vineyard to "the world," or to "the Torah," or to neutralize it of any parabolic meaning at all. Nor is vineyard to be interpreted as "inheritance," as certain Christian exegetes attempt. The house of Israel, the covenanted people itself, is the vineyard. The house of Israel is the recipient, not the gift, of God. Inheritance implies something which can be given or withheld. Whatever Israel's troubled relationship with God at times might appear to be, there is no Scriptural witness that the relationship was dissolved--i.e., that Israel is disinherited, which at any rate still does not make the vineyard an inheritance--nor that the house of Israel is something which can be given or withheld. The point is here belabored, for the idea that the vineyard is an inheritance which can be taken away from a partner in covenant with God, is an idea which plays a major role in the Christian exegesis of Matthean vineyard parables.

III. Analyzing Three Matthean Vineyard Parables

To sum up our conclusions thus far, in addition to those made in Section I of this paper:

5. The parable is a universal form known in many cultures and religions.
6. In order to differentiate between parables from various cultures, we must address the cultural context which defines the stock figures, and
7. In order to differentiate between parables, we must distinguish between the purposes for which the parable is told. One key to such differentiation is the Nimshal attached to the parable, though text criticism suggests that the Nimshal attached to any given Mashal is not necessarily original to the parabolist.
8. The stock figures used in the parables of Jesus must be defined by the Hebrew Scriptures, and possibly may be defined by reference to early rabbinic parables.
9. Telling a parable in stock figures allows the parabolist to tell two stories simultaneously, without any need for allegorization.

In the 20th and 21st chapters of Matthew, we find three parables attributed to Jesus which have a vineyard for their setting: The Laborers in the Vineyard (Matt. 20:1-15 with a Nimshal in v. 16); The Two Sons (Matt. 21:28-31a with a Nimshal in v. 31b, and a second Nimshal in v. 32), and The Wicked Tenants in the Vineyard (Matt. 21:33-41, with a Nimshal in v. 42 and a second Nimshal in v. 43). The traditional interpretation of the three parables, by

generations of Christian exegetes is summarized by Goulder:

"The Laborers in the Vineyard describes God's merciful generosity to the unrighteous Last, and the resentment of the righteous First; the Two Sons the ultimate obedience of the sinners and the real disobedience of the Pharisees. The Wicked Husbandmen ...speak(s) of the rejection of Christ by Israel, and the substitution of the Gentiles..."³¹ But growing Christian sensitivity to the ^{Pharisee} Pharisaic identity of Jesus suggests that these traditional interpretations are highly improbable as being intended by Jesus. The warning-siren in the interpretation of any parable is anomaly. The parables, on both the "silver filagree-work" level and the "apple of gold" level, must be approached with the hermeneutic of suspicion: "In a detective story, the piece of evidence which does not fit is of the greatest interest to the detective. It is often by arranging the rest of the information around it and seeing the whole case in terms of it that he cracks the problem."³² Indeed, parable (פֶּנּוּ) and riddle (נִזְהָ) are at times used interchangeably in Scripture.³³ Approaching these three Matthean Vineyard Parables with suspicion, we discover that each has a typical Jewish form, yet each has at least one Nimshal attached which does not logically proceed from the Mashal itself. We are thereby alerted to ask how the Nimshal got attached to the Mashal. Did Jesus include these Nimshalim in his telling of the parables? Did Matthew, or the final redactor of Matthew, add these Nimshalim?³⁴ Did a Nimshal from Mashal "x" get attached to Mashal "y" by the vagaries of scribal transmission? Did later church tradition add them?

Upon removing the Nimshal from each Mashal, we discover immediately that the remaining Mashalim have no inherently anti-Jewish content, and thus make a great deal more sense as authentic statements of a teacher connected with the Pharisaic tradition. We also discover that the Nimshalim as we presently have them would have made no sense to Jewish listeners. This process suggests that the three parables as we presently find them in Matthew are each a combination of a Mashal taught by Jesus (unless one wishes to accept Goulder's hypothesis that no parable in Matthew is original to Jesus)³⁵ and a Nimshal attached from some other source. With the Nimshalim detached, the remaining Mashalim fall more correctly into the Maimonidean definition of a parable which is simultaneously illustrative and cryptic, "ears" by which to grasp a truth which cannot be articulated,³⁶ a "ladder" by which one can ascend to higher truths and descend again to a newly-comprehended reality.³⁷

To the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Example II E a) is appended a Nimshal which reads: "Thus will the last be first, and the first last." The Nimshal unquestionably has no relation to the Mashal, for the Mashal is not about the reversal of fortunes; it is rather a Mashal about the equality of all creatures, and about God's autonomy in rewarding obedience. The Mashal itself is an amplification of Isaiah 45:9-13 ("Will you question me about my children, or command me concerning the work of my hands? I made the earth, and created humankind upon it..."). Of several rabbinic parables parallel to that of Jesus,

the most frequently repeated theme (Example II E b, c, d, e, h, i, j) is that God will be generous to laborers by treating them all equally, no matter if their obedience has been less than perfect. Only f and g do not carry out this theme, and these two parables both emphasize Judaism's experience in living as an oppressed minority in a largely Gentile world, stressing that Israel will surely be rewarded in the future since the present reward is so obviously absent. In no instance, with any of these parables including the parable of Jesus, is there a suggestion that an appropriate Nimshal might be "the last will be first and the first last." With the Nimshal removed, the parable makes complete sense as spoken by a Jew to a Second Temple Jewish audience, about their responsibilities within the Vineyard, the House of Israel, and about God's generous providence. It is not possible to determine whether Jesus might have intended any more universal application of the message of God's generosity to his undeserving laborers, but certainly there is no hint here of any Gentile displacement of the Jewish people.

Few living commentators are more blatantly anti-Semitic than William Barclay, whose devotional words are so popular in America and England. In commenting on the Parable of the Two Sons (Example III E a) he writes: "The original meaning is clear...The second son stands for...the Pharisees. All their lives was one long profession that they would serve God and obey His commandments and yet when the Son of God came they refused to have anything to do with Him and in the end crucified Him."³⁸ Scores of New Testament exegetes identify the disobedient Son in the parable as representing the

Pharisees, though in the Matthean text there is no mention of the Pharisees either near the parable or even for nearly three chapters before it. The parable is itself somewhat curious, for it has two Nimshalim attached to it--v. 31b and v. 32. The second Nimshal, v. 32, exists independently in Luke, without being attached either to this parable (which does not appear in Luke) or to Luke's Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), to which the Two Sons bears a distinct resemblance. On the basis of a) the suggestion that the Nimshal exists independent of the parable; b) the unlikelihood that a Pharisaic Jesus would use such a parable against the Pharisees; and c) the historically doubtful claim that tax-gatherers and prostitutes flocked to John the Baptist, the second Nimshal can be rejected as original to Jesus. But what of the first Nimshal? Can it be original to the dominical parable? In the rabbinic parallels (and the interesting Greek parallel II E c) the themes appear to divide more or less equally between obedience and repentance. If indeed the Matthean parable echoes the same thought as Luke's Prodigal Son, then the theme of Jesus' teaching is the need for repentance, teshuvah. In this case, the first Nimshal is possibly dominical, though it is not at all necessary to the impact of the parable. Whether with or without the first Nimshal, we note that there is nothing anti-Jewish about the Mashal. Both sons remain sons of the father, just as in the first Nimshal everyone enters the Kingdom of God. Nothing about the parable suggests that the obedient son represents the followers of Jesus, and the disobedient son those who reject Jesus. Rather, the message of the parable is a call to repentance, highly typical

of the message of both John and Jesus, with the recognition that God does not force the response of repentance, and remains generous in his reward and autonomous in his decisions, as in the Laborers in the Vineyard.

The third parable, the Wicked Tenants in the Vineyard (IV E a), is certainly one of the most controversial parables in the New Testament. Most scholars reject its dominical authorship, but such a claim does not seem necessary. The key to the puzzle must be the definition of "vineyard." In the Laborers in the Vineyard and the Two Sons, a Jewish Jesus addresses a Jewish audience with parables about people within the House of Israel, within the Vineyard, the Vineyard being neither neutral, nor suggesting The World. The jealous early laborers and the disobedient son do not represent the Jews as contrasted to the Gentiles, represented by the latecoming laborers and the obedient son. So in the parable of the Wicked Tenants: the setting is the House of Israel. The wicked tenants do not represent the Jews, ultimately to be displaced by the Gentiles. Rather, paralleling Jesus' parable with the parable from Sifre Deuteronomy (IV E b), a case can be made that the wicked tenants should be identified with the Gentiles, or at least with those who have turned their backs on Judaism. But in fact, it is extremely dangerous to attempt to allegorize this parable in any manner, even more than the two cited previously. This is an excellent example of a type of parable described by Maimonides: "In such a parable very many words are to be found, not every one of which adds something to

the intended meaning. They serve rather to embellish the parable and to render it more coherent or to conceal further the intended meaning (emphasis added)...You should not inquire into all the details occurring in the parable...The assumption of such an obligation would result in extravagant fantasies..."³⁹

The first Nimshal attached to the parable, v. 42, must be rejected for the simple reason that it is illogical to attach a Nimshal about a building to a Mashal about a vineyard. The second Nimshal, v. 43, also has no connection to the Mashal, for the Kingdom of God is not synonymous with the Vineyard. Whatever the origin of these two Nimshalim, they have no relationship to each other, and no relationship to the Mashal. If we then focus on the Mashal itself, the message is clearly: God has a tenacious sense of ownership toward the Vineyard/House of Israel. Various people attempt to interfere with that relationship, particularly as it bears fruit. But God will not tolerate such interference, and will not abandon the Vineyard. No matter what happens, God will find a way to make sure that the House of Israel, God's own forever, is encouraged to bear fruit. Thus again, we have a message perfectly consistent with a Jewish teacher, and very comforting to a Jewish audience, particularly in the turbulence of First Century Palestine. There is no reason to assume an anti-Jewish intent to the Mashal as it stands, the Nimshalim having been removed; to have even suggested a transference of covenant to the Gentiles would have confounded and alienated a First Century Jewish audience.

Traditionally New Testament commentators have linked these

three parables together as bearing a message of the displacement of Jewish religious authority, and the transference of the covenant promises to the Gentiles. Having removed the highly-suspect Nimshalim, it seems more consistent with the Jewish identity of Jesus to link the three parables together as a message of comfort to the Jewish people in a time of crisis and upheaval: God will generously reward all those who labor within the House of Israel, for such autonomy is his (the Laborers in the Vineyard); God desires the repentance of Israel, though the failure to repent does not exclude anyone from covenanted relationship with God (the Two Sons); God will not abandon the House of Israel, no matter how it is misused, but will persevere in his relationship to the people whom he has planted and fenced round as being his own. Neither individually nor in conjunction do these three Matthean Vineyard Parables justify an anti-Jewish interpretation, and all three are adequately supported by rabbinic parallels as demanding a Jewish context, a Jewish purpose, and a Jewish interpretation.

IV. Epilogue: Preaching the Vineyard Parables

A consistent problem with both the radically Jewish interpretation of the New Testament and the new Christology proceeding out of the Christian-Jewish dialogue is translating new modes of thinking from an academic to a congregational level. One need only listen to the frequency with which the heinous myth that the Jews killed Jesus (see Barclay above) still crops up, particularly in Protestant preaching, in order to understand that even the most basic insights of the dialogue are not reaching local congregations.

Attempts by those clergy sensitive to the dialogue's Christology to translate these insights have met with mixed results. Some Christians are eager to know more of the historical Jesus, sensing that the church's teaching emphasis has leaned more heavily toward the divine as opposed to the human aspect of Christ's dual nature. Some people are able to accept the difficulties and human fallibility of historical transmission of the New Testament teachings, without having their faith deeply shaken. A few appear even to have a natural inclination to automatically hear themselves as the reference when the Scriptures speak of "the Jews." But resistance remains high, and the dialogue has a problem of convincing the Christian laity that its agenda is urgent or correct. The following reasons help explain this resistance:

1. American Christianity, and in particular Protestantism, has a long history of emphasis on personal salvation. This emphasis has been aggravated by charismatic renewal. To portray Jesus as speaking exclusively to Jews, or as concerned with reaffirming the Jewish covenant, makes Christians feel threatened that Jesus has no message for or interest in them personally.
2. New Testament criticism tends to be complicated, and demands some degree of intellectual training. The new exegesis proceeding out of the dialogue tends to be even more complicated. Rather than assume responsibility for working through a complicated exegesis, many Christians prefer to take the New Testament at face value.

3. The new exegesis appears to contradict the divinely-inspired character of Scripture. Many Christians, even in the liberal denominations, are still bound to Biblical literalism on a primitive personal level. If some parts of Scripture are challenged, it feels as though all Scripture may be challenged, and that the preacher or educator has fallen ^{prey}~~prey~~ to arbitrariness.
4. The new Christology sounds like heresy to many. This is due in part to the dialogue's tendency to skip from the New Testament to the 20th century, ignoring the intervening development of Christian dogma and doctrine. The dialogue needs to document the historical foundations for its approach.
5. The suggestion that the anti-Semitism of later New Testament redactors is a flawed expression of historical animosities appears to challenge the development of the Ecclesia under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and suggests that the Church might have become something which Christ did not intend. This too rattles the security of the faithful.
6. People come to church for encouragement and comfort, again usually on a personal level. An emphasis on the Jewishness of Jesus makes them feel that comfort is being withheld, generating anger, disappointment, and frustration.
7. There is not enough broad-based support for the insights of the dialogue, so that when they are preached or taught, they sound like isolated quirks. Unfortunately Nostra Aetate has not solved this problem, because too few people know of its *existence*.

existence, nor are they often willing to believe that it says what those involved in the dialogue explain it to mean.

8. The claim of Christianity to be the exclusive mode of salvation ("I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life") is so deeply ingrained in the Christian faithful, that even those who are able to let it go intellectually are not able to let it go emotionally. The majority of the Christian faithful still believe that those who do not accept Jesus do not go to heaven, no matter how childish that idea may be shown to be.
9. The insights of the dialogue tend to register as teachings about Judaism as opposed to Christianity. The connection is not always apparent to the laity, and one still hears the response: "I don't want to learn about Judaism; I want to learn about Jesus."

One arena for addressing these resistances is Christian education, either through instruction in the local church, or reaching more people through church publications with arguments which confront their most intransigent and simplistic assumptions. Further support could be supplied by official denominational statements and position papers of a more assertive nature, though American Christians seem to be quite selective about the authority they grant to denominational pronouncements. It would appear that the primary base for affecting lay attitudes is the pulpit. The dialogue must find more ways of convincing local clergy that its Christology is orthodox, or at least correct, and then assisting local clergy in finding ways to preach these insights to a well-meaning but resistant laity.

How then could one preach, for example, the three Matthean Vineyard Parables? The problem can be approached from two directions. On the one hand, the Jewishness of Jesus could be asserted, accompanied by proper intellectual and critical support. Texts could be analyzed and Nimshalim rejected; Second Temple contexts could be described, and the Jewish philosophy of parables explained. For a minority of the laity, this is challenging in a positive way, for it encourages them to struggle with the Gospel texts, and to work through an individual theology which is personal response to, or "owning", the Gospel in its highest form. In such an approach, insights from other disciplines are extremely helpful, and humor (such as Winnie the Pooh!) helps soften a re-orientation which is difficult even for the willing. But this approach has problems, in that it asks people to suspend years of education and conditioning by a church which has tolerated the teaching of contempt, and it generally fails to feed those faithful who have come to church for comfort and encouragement. It can as well generate anger, and even a reverse reaction in which anything smacking of appreciation of Judaism is rejected altogether.

On the other hand, a softer approach may be taken. One can emphasize how comforting the Matthean parables (as exegeted here) were to their audience, calling upon the laity to use their imaginations in entering into the psycho-history of the New Testament world. Once the affirming (and should we say theologically conservative?) nature of the message of Jesus to his hearers is established, the same sense of affirmation, particularly on a feeling level, can be extracted and applied in a more universal manner to our present predicament.

If Jesus speaks these words of comfort to his own people, then we can hope that he speaks the same words of comfort to us. But there are dangers in this approach as well. It universalizes a situation whose message and theology are essentially particular. It does not connect the Jews of the Second Temple period with contemporary Judaism, and thus fails to appreciate the ongoing relationship of covenant between God and the House of Israel. It easily side-steps issues of redactional anti-Semitism, and subconsciously supports the idea that Christ is the only true mediator between God and humanity, in that he alone speaks words of comfort to Jew and Christian alike.

It may be that the dialogue cannot hope to encourage the harder approach outlined first, until the softer approach outlined second has become much more wide-spread in American pulpits. The second approach is flawed, and carries a significant danger, yet perhaps we cannot hope to bring the laity into a deeper appreciation of the particularity of Jesus the Jew until we have given them enough comfort and encouragement to support such re-orientation. The responsibility for change continues to rest with those who inform Christian preachers and educators: seminary faculty and the theologians of the Christian-Jewish dialogue. Some degree of hope is offered in the rise in sensitivity to Judaism on the part of seminary faculty, as is documented by recent studies of Episcopal and Roman seminary curricula. Further growth would be encouraged if the theologians of the dialogue, such as van Buren, Thoma, Gaston and others, could provide more suggestions on the

translation of their Christology into language and piety accessible to the laity, or if the dialogue were to raise up a more effective generation of interpreters. Yet, in spite of resistances and short-comings, the problems enumerated here provide us with an agenda of creativity and encouragement.