

# *The Watchtower* and the Contexts of Jesus' Stories

THE WATCHTOWER  
ANNOUNCING JEHOVAH'S KINGDOM

What is the parable's basic message? Remember the context.

MARCH 15, 2015 13

STUDY ARTICLES

MAY 4  
"This  
You  
PAGE

MAY 11-17

**Doug Mason**

MAY 18-24  
Learn From  
Illustration

MAY 25-31  
Loyally Supporting  
Christ's Brothers  
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# ***The Watchtower* and the Contexts of Jesus' Stories**

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**Doug Mason**

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[doug\\_mason1940@yahoo.com.au](mailto:doug_mason1940@yahoo.com.au)

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## THE OBJECTIVE OF THIS STUDY

*The Watchtower* for March 15, 2015 presents the Watchtower Society's [WTS] latest eschatological setting for Jesus' stories at Matthew chapters 24 and 25 of Matthew's Gospel. When introducing each story, the WTS writes that the context needs to be understood. That is absolutely correct. The contexts need to be considered before extracting meaning, lest bias be permitted to intervene.

The WTS explains Jesus' stories through the filter of its organisation's needs. Forcing camels through a watchtower shaped keyhole, the WTS manipulates meaning to suit its ends—allegiance to the Governing Body with unquestioning support of the organisation.

This Study presents the contexts of the stories by Jesus that are discussed in the WTS's publication.

- the Scriptural context of Matthew chapters 23 to 25;
- the context of contemporary Messianic claimants;
- the context of contemporary sources;
- the contextual markers within each story.

These expose the WTS's shallow and self-seeking explanations. The truism states: "A text without a context is a pretext for a proof text".

Analysis of the WTS's two-tiered soteriology lies beyond the scope of this Study, and nothing is gained by helping the WTS through explaining its current eschatological structure. That task is left to the WTS leadership.

One article in this *Watchtower* magazine claims that it is making things simpler and easier. That is for the rank-and-file to decide, and to respond accordingly. The real question is not simplicity but of having the correct understanding.

Taking the contexts of a piece of writing into account is fundamental to understanding it, which the WTS acknowledges in the following:

A 'proverb' embodies a truth in expressive language, often metaphorically, and a 'parable' is a comparison or similitude, a short, usually fictitious, narrative by which a moral or spiritual truth is drawn. ...

Illustrations or parables as a powerful teaching device are effective in at least five ways: (1) They arrest and hold attention; few things command interest like an experience or a story ... (2) They stir up the thinking faculty. ... (3) They stir emotions. ... (4) They aid memory. ... (5) They preserve the truth. ...

There are two general misconceptions that can hinder the understanding of the illustrations of the Bible. One is the viewing of all the illustrations as being merely good stories. ... In this connection, it may also be remarked that the illustrations, although drawn from life and natural things, did not necessarily take place in actuality. ...

A second obstacle to understanding is the drawing of too fine an application of the illustration, trying to make every detail of the narrative of the literal events fit symbolically by arbitrary application or interpretation.

The proper approach is made, first by reading the context, ascertaining the setting in which the illustration was spoken, asking: What were the conditions and the circumstances?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Insight on the Scriptures*, Vol. 1, pages 1174, 1175, 1176, "Illustrations". (emphasis supplied)

## THE WATCHTOWER'S CONTEXTS

*The Watchtower* magazine for March 15, 2015 presents two parables and an eschatological narrative appearing at Matthew 25:

- (1) Ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13.) – *The Watchtower*, pages 12-16;
- (2) Talents (Matthew 25:14-30) – *The Watchtower*, pages 19-24;
- (3) Final Judgment (Sheep and Goats) (Matthew 25:31-46) – *The Watchtower*, pages 25 – 29.

The Watchtower Society's [WTS] obsession with itself and its self-importance suffocates and distorts the Biblical message of each story. The truths are swamped by the wet blanket of the WTS's soteriology and its eschatological framework.

- **Soteriology:** A two-tiered salvation (heaven-bound or earth-bound) that depends on whether a Jehovah's Witness [JW] is one of the *144,000 Spirit-anointed* or is one of the millions of *Other Sheep*. Of the Spirit-Anointed, a handful of men make up the ruling Governing Body – known as the *Faithful and Discreet Slave* – which decides the organisation's rules and the destiny of millions
- **Eschatological framework:** Details of the WTS's apocalyptic structure of latter-day events is subject to ongoing change, as is shown with *The Watchtower* under review. The framework is tethered to supernatural events in 1914 and in 1919 as key marked dates and these are kept to the fore along with the constant reminder that the momentous divine apocalyptic interventions of Armageddon and the Coming of Christ as Judge and Executioner are imminent.

This *Watchtower* magazine openly acknowledges that it is again changing details in its eschatology with this publication. How confident can a faithful JW be that in time this present "new light" will be switched off and replaced with another "new light" or with a previous "old light"? Will Jesus judge on the basis of allegiance to the WTS, regardless of whatever it is teaching? Does truth matter, or is "truth" simply anything that the WTS is saying at the moment?

Underlying the WTS's soteriology and eschatology is its teaching that the parable of the faithful slave (manager) at Matthew 24:45 is a prophecy about a group of people, and that the WTS's Governing Body is that group. JWs are told to accept the following circular reasoning:

"The WTS's Governing Body says that this prophecy is about the WTS's Governing Body, and it knows this is so because the prophecy is about the WTS's Governing Body"

### Four related stories by Jesus

Although this issue of *The Watchtower* addresses three stories by Jesus at Matthew's Gospel, another is intimately linked, that of the Good Slave at Matthew 24:45-46:

The parable of the talents is one of four related illustrations recorded at Matthew 24:45 to 25:46. The other three –about the faithful and discreet slave, the ten virgins, and the sheep and the goats—are also part of Jesus' answer

*The Watchtower*, March 15, 2015, page 19

### The Watchtower's contexts for Jesus' stories

With the presentation of each story, *The Watchtower* says that the context has to be understood<sup>2</sup>. However, it does not give contexts in terms of Matthew's Gospel but in terms of the WTS and its organisation.

The illustrations about the slave, the virgins, and the talents are directed to his anointed followers. ...

In the parable of the virgins, Jesus stresses that all his anointed followers would need to be *prepared* and to be *vigilant*, knowing that Jesus is coming but not knowing the day or the hour.

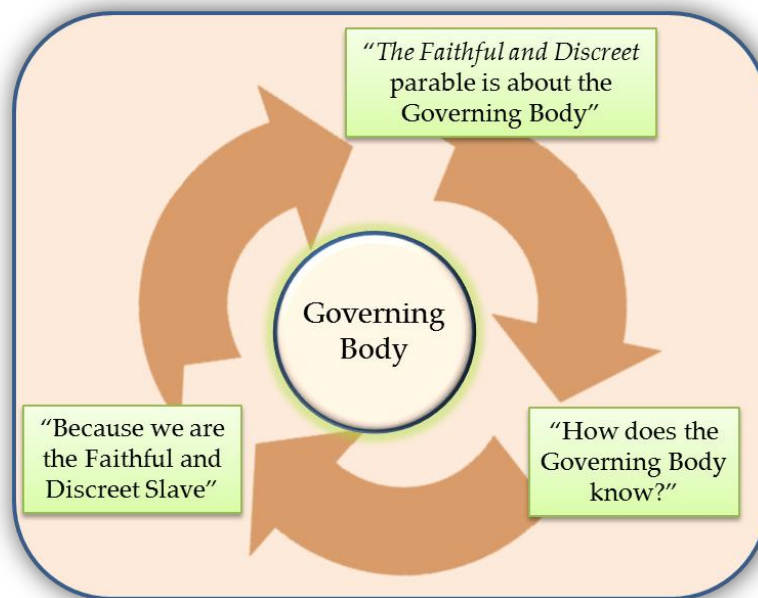
In the parable of the talents, Jesus shows that the anointed would need to be *diligent* in carrying out their Christian responsibilities.

Jesus directs the final illustration, the parable of the sheep and the goats, to those with an earthly hope. He emphasizes that they would have to be loyal and give full support to Jesus' anointed brothers on earth.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus' stories are thus filtered through the WTS's soteriology in which there are "anointed followers" and those with an "earthly hope". At one stage, the WTS's explanation is based on: "it seems reasonable to conclude"<sup>4</sup>.

### The Governing Body's self-centred explanation of the "Good Slave"

A primary example of the WTS's selective application lies with the story of the "Good Slave", or the "Good Manager". Instead of seeing this story as providing guidance for any believer, the Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses states that this is a prediction made by Jesus specifically about them, even though the organisation has felt free to keep changing its meaning of the term "Faithful and Discreet Slave".



How the Governing Body reasons that Jesus' story is about it

<sup>2</sup> With the "Ten Virgins" at page 13 of *The Watchtower*; with the "Talents" at pages 23 and 24; with the "Final Judgment" at page 27.

<sup>3</sup> *The Watchtower*, March 15, 2015, pages 19-20

<sup>4</sup> *The Watchtower*, March 15, 2015, page 24

## *Self-centred interpretation of the "Good Slave" story*

the faithful slave is the Govern-  
ing Body, (Page 9)

Jesus cast his prophetic gaze far, far into the future. He told them a great deal about the last days of this wicked world system, the time when he would be ruling in God's Kingdom. He told them that during that climactic time, his "faithful and discreet slave" would represent him on earth, (p. 12)

his "faithful and discreet slave." That slave would prove to be a small group of anointed men who would take the lead among Christ's followers during the last days. Jesus warned those men that they must remain faithful. (Page 13)

**Jesus' story of the "Good Slave" is said to be a prophecy of the WTS's Governing Body**

**The WTS's organisation context for "The Ten Virgins" (Matthew 25:1-13.)**

For the parable of the "Ten Virgins," the WTS writes:

What is the parable's basic message? Remember the context. (*The Watchtower*, March 15, 2015, page 13)

The WTS's soteriology arbitrarily assigns the meaning of parable of the Ten Virgins to its Spirit-anointed minority.

Jesus directed the parable of the ten virgins to his anointed followers. (*The Watchtower*, March 15, 2015, page 16)

*The Watchtower* tells the Anointed that they have to remain vigilant to the organisation's instructions, which come from Jehovah, lest they become asleep like the five foolish virgins.

Just as five virgins were foolish and five were discreet, each anointed one has the full capacity to choose either a course of preparedness and vigilance or a course of folly and unfaithfulness.<sup>5</sup>

The "wise virgins" were also asleep.

*The Watchtower* does say that this parable has a meaning for the "Other Sheep", which means that they too are required to work on behalf of the WTS's "ministry".

The message of the parable is simple: "Keep on the watch." Does that apply only to the anointed? Jesus once said: "What I say to you, I say to *all*: Keep on the watch." (Mark 13:37) Jesus requires all his followers to prepare their hearts for faithful service and to meet the same standard of watchfulness.

So all Christians follow the lead set by the anointed in this regard, imitating their good example and putting the ministry first in life. ...

We must be ready. And he is coming soon!<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *The Watchtower*, March 15, 2015, page 16. (emphases supplied.)

<sup>6</sup> *The Watchtower*, March 15, 2015, page 16. (emphases supplied.)



## Organisation-centred interpretation of the "Ten Virgins" story

Clearly, Jesus intended the parable recorded at Matthew 25:1-13 as counsel and a warning to his anointed followers. (Page 13)

Remember the context. Jesus had just discussed his "faithful and discreet slave." That slave would prove to be a small group of anointed men who would take the lead among Christ's followers during the last days. (p. 13)

Next, he broadened his focus and gave this parable to admonish *all* his anointed followers in the last days to "keep on the watch" lest they miss out on their precious reward. (Page 13)

during the great tribulation, faithful anointed ones cannot help any who had turned unfaithful. (p. 15)

"Keep on the watch." Does that apply only to the anointed? Jesus once said: "What I say to you, I say to *all*: Keep on the watch." (Mark 13:37) Jesus requires all his followers to prepare their hearts for faithful service (p. 16)

**The "Ten Virgins" story is said to be a prophecy about a group of Jehovah's Witnesses**

**The WTS's organisation context for "The Talents" (Matthew 25:14-30)**

For the parable of "The Talents", the WTS writes: Consider the context.<sup>7</sup>

**The WTS's soteriology relates this parable to the Spirit-anointed.**

*Organisation-centred interpretation  
of the "Talents" story*

IN THE parable of the talents, Jesus clearly reveals an obligation resting on his anointed followers. (Page 19)

Thus, the parable finds its fulfillment in our time and is part of the sign that Jesus is present and ruling as King. (p. 19)

In the time of the end, particularly from 1919 on, Christ's faithful anointed slaves on earth have been doing business with the Master's talents. Like the first two slaves, anointed brothers and sisters have done their best  
(Pages 21-22)

Jesus' faithful, hardworking servants have carried out the greatest preaching and disciple-making work in history. Their collective effort has resulted in hundreds of thousands of new disciples being added to the ranks of Kingdom proclaimers each year, making the preaching and teaching work an outstanding feature of the sign of Jesus' presence in Kingdom power.  
(Page 22)

**Jesus' story about the Talents is said to be fulfilled in the efforts by Jehovah's Witnesses**

<sup>7</sup> *The Watchtower*, March 15, 2015, page 23

**The WTS's organisation context for "Sheep and Goats" narrative (Matthew 25:31-46)**

For the narrative of "The Sheep and the Goats", the WTS writes:

Consider the context of Jesus' words.<sup>8</sup>

This time the WTS's soteriology assigns this eschatological narrative (it is not a parable) to the Other Sheep – that vast proportion of JWs. They are told that Jesus will condemn them if they do not help the Spirit-anointed ("Christ's Brothers"), which means that they have to be involved in the organisation's building works, providing it with money, distribute their publications, and so on. And they must haste, because the climax of divine intervention is imminent!

Therefore, one of the primary ways that those judged to be sheep show kindness to Christ's brothers [the Spirit-anointed] is by supporting them in the preaching work.<sup>9</sup>

Give financial contributions and help to build Kingdom Halls, Assembly Halls, and branch facilities, and ... loyally obey those appointed by "the faithful and discreet slave" to take the lead.

Soon the angels will unleash the destructive winds of the great tribulation. ... Now is the time for those who hope to be judged as sheep to support Christ's brothers loyally.<sup>10</sup>

And what of the *reason* why people will be judged as either sheep or goats? The outcome hinges on how they have treated the remaining ones of Christ's spirit-anointed brothers on earth.

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There are probably about 15,000 JWs who consider themselves as Spirit-Anointed. Not only are they thinly spread, they have no special role within a congregation.

**Worldwide Religious Order**

Despite being Spirit-anointed, the few JWs who have the "heavenly hope" have no responsibility and no authority, unless they are a member of the Governing Body [GB], a position that is only available to a man.

Rather than use the Spirit-anointed for its teaching, preaching and similar responsibilities, the GB set up a Religious Order, originally known as the "Order of Special Full-Time Servants" to perform these tasks. Virtually all members of this religious Order are not Spirit-anointed. To reflect the worldwide range of the Order's activities, from 2003 it became known as the "Worldwide Order of Special Full-Time Servants of Jehovah's Witnesses."

At the time of the name change, the GB wrote:

Worldwide, a total of 19,823 ordained ministers staff such branch facilities. All are members of the Worldwide Order of Special Full-Time Servants of Jehovah's Witnesses.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *The Watchtower*, March 15, 2015, page 27

<sup>9</sup> *The Watchtower*, March 15, 2015, page 27

<sup>10</sup> *The Watchtower*, March 15, 2015, page 29. (emphases supplied.)

<sup>11</sup> *2003 Yearbook*, page 30

As with other religious Orders, its members undertake a vow of poverty and obedience. This is recognized by the Courts. Based on evidence provided by counsel for the Jehovah's Witnesses, a Court concluded:

The purpose of the the *Worldwide Order of Special Full-Time Servants of Jehovah's Witnesses* ("the Order") is to "further the religious objectives of Jehovah's Witnesses."

Members of the Order are special, full-time servants who oversee the spiritual needs of the various Jehovah's Witnesses congregations they are assigned to serve. Members of the Order take a vow of poverty and are prohibited from secular employment. They perform their duties without salary. Instead, in return for their services, they receive "housing and a nominal monthly reimbursement for personal necessities provided by the Order." The Order is responsible for arranging housing for its servants.<sup>12</sup>

The following is also based on evidence provided to a Court by legal counsel for the Jehovah's Witnesses.

**I. STATEMENT OF FACTS.** Plaintiff (*Montavilla Unit of the Portland, or company of Jehovah's Witnesses inc.*) is a religious organization. ... The Circuit Overseer is an important figure in the hierarchy of the *Worldwide Order of Special Full-Time Servants of Jehovah's Witnesses* ("the Order"). Sworn to a lifetime of poverty and obedience, he is forbidden any secular employment and is required to devote himself to the administrative and spiritual oversight of the congregations in the circuit he oversees, and must reside within that boundary.

**II. ANALYSIS.** Providing housing for its Circuit Overseers is reasonably necessary for the religious objectives of the Order. ... It is not lost on the court that the Circuit Overseer is required to take a vow of poverty.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> West Beaverton congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (plaintiff) v. Washington County Assessor (defendant). (Oregon Tax Court, Magistrate Division, Property Tax, Decision TC-MD 031095E)

<sup>13</sup> Montavilla unit of the Portland, or company of Jehovah's Witnesses inc. (plaintiff) v. Multnomah County Assessor (defendant). (Oregon Tax Court, Magistrate Division, Property Tax, Decision TC-MD 021250A)

## Organisation-centred interpretation of the "Sheep and Goats" narrative

Jesus directs the final illustration, the parable of the sheep and the goats, to those with an earthly hope. He emphasizes that they would have to be loyal and give full support to Jesus' anointed brothers on earth. (Page 20)

An important one! Jesus' illustration of the sheep and the goats teaches us that those with the earthly hope have the honor of loyally supporting Jesus' anointed brothers in the preaching and teaching work. (Page 22)

He describes the sheep as "righteous" because they recognize that Christ has a group of anointed brothers still on earth, and the sheep loyally support the anointed during these critical last days. (Page 27)

they loyally obey those appointed by "the faithful and discreet slave" to take the lead. (Page 29)

Therefore, now is the time for those who hope to be judged as sheep to support Christ's brothers loyally. (Page 29)

**Jesus is said to judge the "other sheep" JW's on their obedience to the Watchtower Society**

## THE PARABLES IN THE GOSPELS

Two of Jesus' stories discussed in *The Watchtower* of March 15, 2015 are unique to Matthew's Gospel: Ten Virgins (25:1-13) and The Talents (25:14-30), although a similar story of the Minas appears at Luke 19:11-17. The story of the Faithful Servant (Matthew 24:45-46) also appears at Luke 12:42-48). The story of the Final Judgment ("sheep and the goats") does not fall within the meaning or understanding of a Parable; hence it is usually not included in lists of Gospel Parables. It is an apocalyptic narrative.

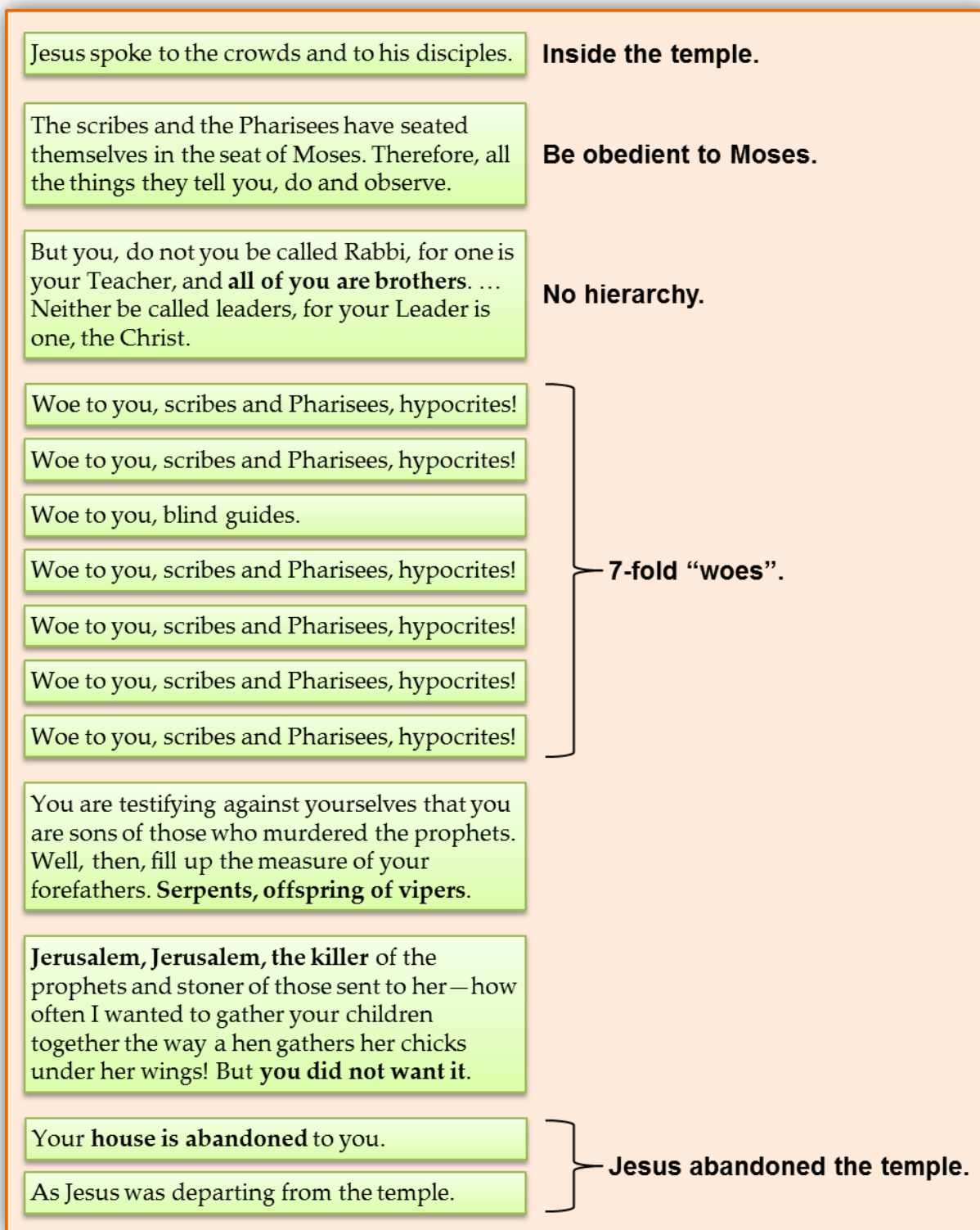
<b>Parables in the Gospels</b>			
Parable	Matthew	Mark	Luke
1 A Lamp on a Stand	Matt. 5:14-16	Mark 4:21-22	Luke 8:16-17; 11:33-36
2 The Wise and Foolish Builders	Matt. 7:24-27		Luke 6:47-49
3 New Cloth on an Old Garment	Matt. 9:16	Mark 2:21	Luke 5:36
4 New Wine in Old Wineskins	Matt. 9:17	Mark 2:22	Luke 5:37-38
5 The Sower	Matt. 13:3-9	Mark 4:2-9	Luke 8:4-8
6 The Weeds	Matt. 13:24-30		
7 The Mustard Seed	Matt. 13:31-32	Mark 4:30-32	Luke 13:18-19
8 The Yeast	Matt. 13:33		Luke 13:20-21
9 The Hidden Treasure	Matt. 13:44		
10 The Pearl	Matt. 13:45-46		
11 The Net	Matt. 13:47-50		
12 The Lost Sheep	Matt. 18:12-14		Luke 15:3-7
13 The Unmerciful Servant	Matt. 18:23-35		
14 The Workers in the Vineyard	Matt. 20:1-16		
15 The Two Sons	Matt. 21:28-32		
16 The Tenants	Matt. 21:33-45	Mark 12:1-12	Luke 20:9-19
17 The Wedding Banquet	Matt. 22:2-14		
18 The Ten Virgins	Matt. 25:1-13		
19 The Talents	Matt. 25:14-30		
20 The Growing Seed		Mark 4:26-29	
21 The Absent Householder		Mark 13:34-37	
22 The Creditor and the Two Debtors			Luke 7:41-43
23 The Good Samaritan			Luke 10:30-37
24 A Friend in Need			Luke 11:5-13
25 The Rich Fool			Luke 12:16-21
26 The Watchful Servants			Luke 12:35-40
27 The Faithful Servant	Matt. 24:45-51		Luke 12:42-48
28 The Barren Fig Tree			Luke 13:6-9
29 The Place of Honor			Luke 14:7-11
30 The Great Banquet			Luke 14:16-24
31 The Cost of Being a Disciple			Luke 14:25-35
32 The Lost Coin			Luke 15:8-10
33 The Prodigal Son			Luke 15:11-32
34 The Shrewd Steward			Luke 16:1-13
35 The Rich Man and Lazarus			Luke 16:19-31
36 The Obedient Servant			Luke 17:7-10
37 The Persistent Widow			Luke 18:1-8
38 The Pharisee and the Tax Collector			Luke 18:9-14
39 The Ten Minas			Luke 19:11-27
Total Parables in each Gospel	20	8	27
Unique Parables in each Gospel	10	2	17

This free eChart is taken from the pamphlet *Rose Book of Charts Vol. 3* ISBN 9781596368699.

## THE SCRIPTURAL CONTEXT OF THE STORIES

The Scriptural context of Jesus' stories under review runs through all of Chapters 23, 24 and 25 of Matthew's Gospel

### The Scriptural context (1): Matthew 23



Summary of the Scriptural context (1): Matthew 23:1 to 24:1

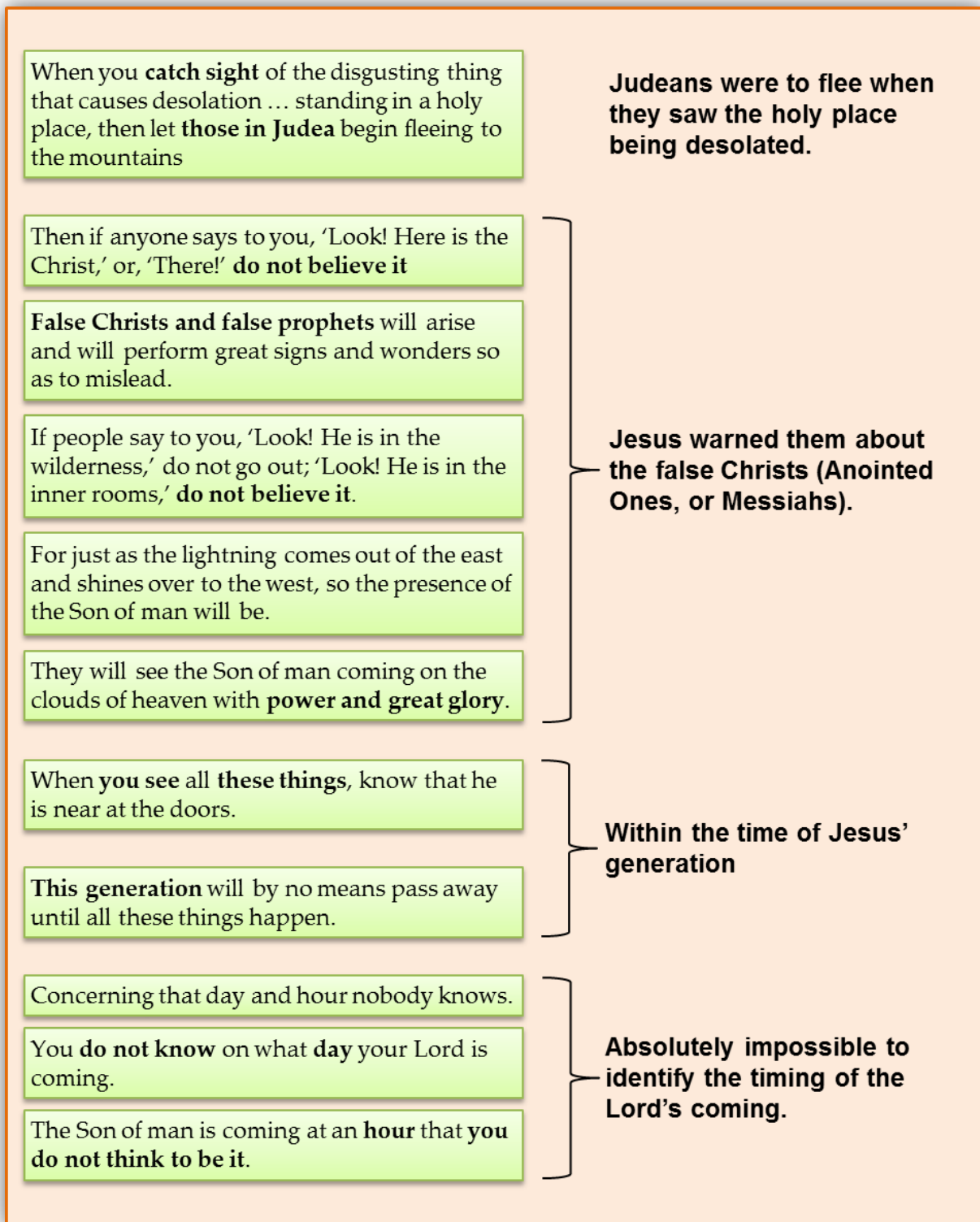
## The Scriptural context (2): Matthew 24:1-14

Your house is abandoned to you.	}	<b>Jesus abandoned the temple.</b>
As Jesus was departing from the temple.		
By no means will a stone be left here upon a stone and not be thrown down		<b>The temple will be destroyed.</b>
When will these things be, and what will be the sign of your presence and of the conclusion of the system of things?		<b>Matthew</b>
When will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are to come to a conclusion?		<b>Mark</b>
When will these things actually be, and what will be the sign when these things are to occur?		<b>Luke</b>
Look out that nobody <b>misleads</b> you.		
Many will come on the basis of my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will <b>mislead</b> many		
You are going to hear of wars and reports of wars. See that you are <b>not alarmed</b> , for these things must take place, but the <b>end is not yet</b> ..... All <b>these things are a beginning</b> of pangs of distress.		
Many false prophets will arise and <b>mislead</b> many.		
This good news of the Kingdom will be preached in all the inhabited earth for a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.		

## Summary of the Scriptural context (2): Matthew 23:38, 24:1-14

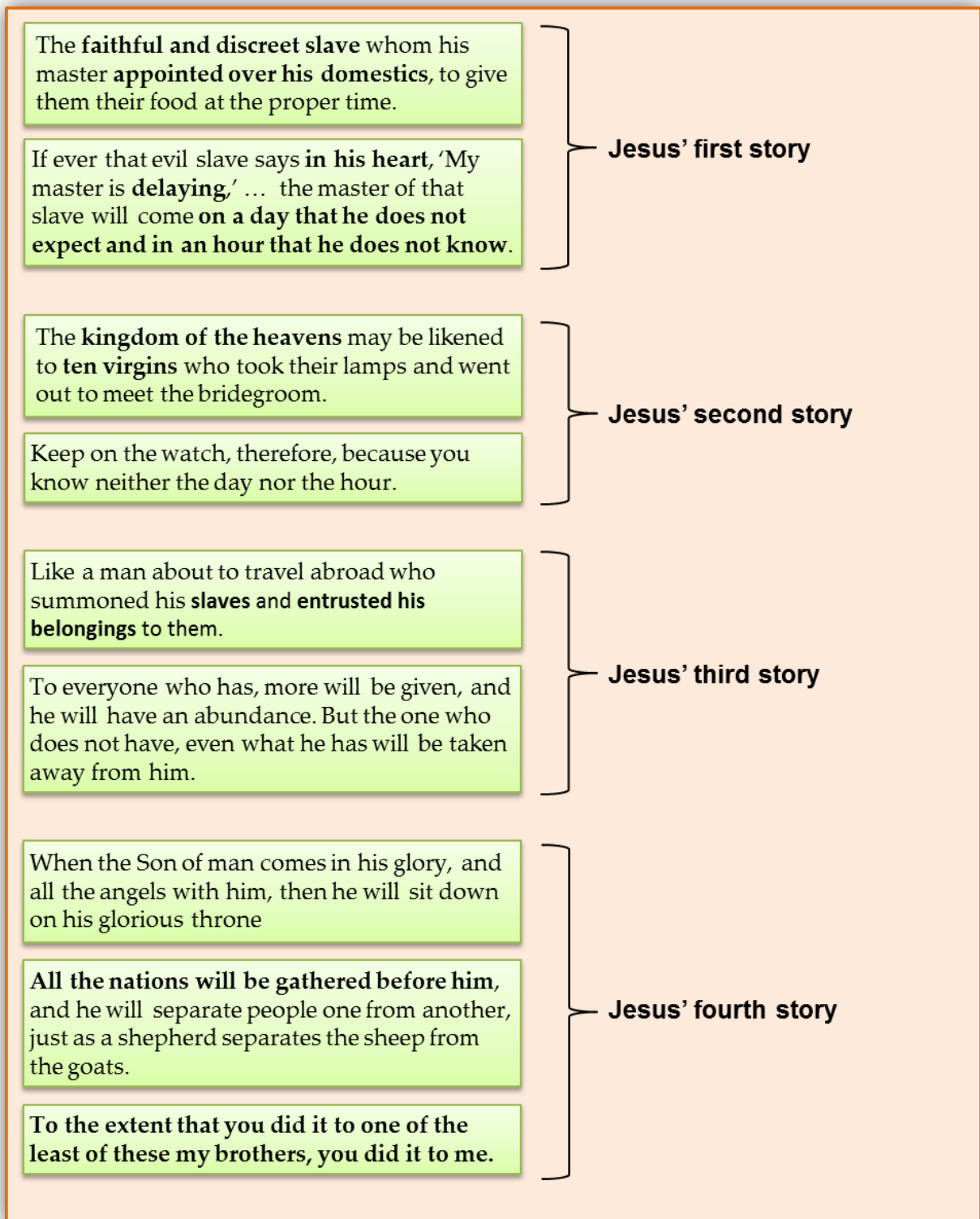


### The Scriptural context (3): Matthew 24:15-44



### Summary of the Scriptural context (3): Matthew 24:15 44

**The Scriptural context (4): Matthew 24:45-25:46**



**Summary of the Scriptural context (4): Matthew 24:45-25:46**

### **The Fig Tree Story: “This generation will by no means pass away”**

Now learn this illustration from the fig tree [Luke: *and all the other trees*]: Just as soon as its young branch grows tender and sprouts its leaves, you know that summer is near.

Likewise also you, when you see all these things, know that he is near at the doors. [Luke: *the Kingdom of God is near*].

Truly I say to you that this generation will by no means pass away until all these things happen.

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will by no means pass away.<sup>14</sup>

[On Matthew 11:16]. The expression “this generation” appears eighteen times in the Synoptic Gospels,<sup>15</sup> referring to Jesus’ contemporaries as the last generation before the end, just prior to the approaching final judgment, and it is always a negative (or pejorative) expression.

Similar expressions about the present generation are that it is “adulterous” (Mark 8:38), “evil” (Matt 12:45; Luke 11:29), and “faithless” (Matt 17:17//Mark 9:19). The concept of a whole generation as being corrupt appears already in the OT (Deut 32:5, 20; Judg 2:10; Pss 78:8; 95:10) and in Jewish tradition<sup>16,17</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Matthew 24:32-35; Mark 13:28-31; Luke 21:29-33, NWT, 2013

<sup>15</sup> Matt 11:16; 12:41, 42, 45; 23:36; 24:34; Mark 8:12, 38; 13:30; Luke 7:31; 11:29, 30, 31, 32, 50, 51; 17:25; 21:32. To this list can be added Acts 2:40; Heb 3:10.

<sup>16</sup> 1 Enoch 93:9; Jub. 23:16; 1QpHab 2:6.

<sup>17</sup> *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*, Arland J. Hultgren, pages 206-207.

## THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY MESSIANIC CLAIMANTS

When he addressed four of his followers, Jesus warned them about many people in the region who were claiming to be the Messiah, the Anointed.

Jesus said to them: “Look out that nobody misleads you, for many will come on the basis of my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ’ [The Anointed], and will mislead many. ... Many false prophets will arise and mislead many. ... False Christs and false prophets will arise and will perform great signs and wonders so as to mislead. ... Look! I have forewarned you.<sup>18</sup>

While the historical record of these is sparse, enough remains to support Jesus’ observation.

### Messianic Claimants of the First and Second Centuries<sup>19</sup>

In the first and second centuries of the Common Era several persons claimed some form of messianic status. Review of the claims and activities of these claimants helps clarify the “messianic context” of the time and place in which Jesus lived and the later interpretive backgrounds against which the NT authors wrote.

#### Biblical and Historical Precedents

Although “messiah” (i.e., “anointed one,” from Heb. *mesah*/*Gk. chriein*) is often understood in terms of the royal “son of David,” in reality messianic concepts in late antiquity were quite diverse. If we understand “messiah” to mean one who believes himself to be anointed by God in order to play a leading role in the restoration of Israel, a restoration which may or may not involve the Davidic monarchy, then it is correct to speak of anointed kings, anointed prophets, and anointed priests. ...

*Kings.* The concept of the “anointed” king derives from early biblical history. ...

*Prophets.* Prophets, as well as kings, were “anointed.” ...

*Priests.* In very old tradition priests appear as kings. ... As were kings, priests also were anointed.

#### Messianic Kings

[Josephus] says: “Judea was filled with brigandage. Anyone might make himself a king [*basileus*] . . . causing trouble to few Romans . . . but bringing the greatest slaughter upon their own people” (*Ant.* 17.10.8 §285). ...

The following figures sought to rule Israel and bring about political, if not religious, restoration.

*Judas (of Sepphoris, Galilee) son of Hezekiah the “brigand chief”. ...*

*Simon of Perea, a former royal servant. ...*

*Athronges the shepherd of Judea. ...*

*Judas (of Gamala) the Galilean.* Judas the Galilean is regarded as one of the anointed kings, and not simply a bandit, because of his “bid for independence” (*Ant.* 18.1.1 §4) and because of his mention in Acts 5:37, thus putting him in the company of Jesus and Theudas, both prophets and probably both messianic claimants.

*Menahem (grand)son of Judas the Galilean. ...*

*John of Gischala son of Levi. ...*

*Simon bar Giora of Gerasa. ...*

*Lukuas of Cyrene. ...*

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 24:4-5, 11, 24, 25, NWT, 2013

<sup>19</sup> From *Ancient Texts for New Testament Studies*, pages 431-442, Craig A. Evans, Baker Academic, 2005

*Simon ben Kosiba (Bar Kokhba)*. ... The messianic kingdom that Simon hoped to establish was crushed by the Romans.

### **Messianic Prophets**

Even those who claimed to be prophets had intentions not too different from the kingly aspirants. They too wished to liberate Israel and consequently provoked violent response from the Romans. ...

*The Anonymous Samaritan*. Josephus tells us that during the administration of Pontius Pilate (26-36 C.E.) a certain Samaritan (36 C.E.) ... convinced many of his people to follow him to Mount Gerizim where he would show them the place where their sacred temple vessels were buried. Pilate sent a detachment of troops, which routed the pilgrims before they could ascend the mountain (*Ant.* 18.4.1 §§85-87). This episode, although not a Jewish affair, parallels the type of thinking found in Jewish regions (i.e., Galilee and Judea). ...

*Theudas*. During the administration of Fadus (44-46 cE.), Josephus tells us that “a certain impostor named Theudas persuaded the majority of the populace to take up their possessions and follow him to the Jordan River. He stated that he was a prophet and that at his command the river would be parted and would provide easy passage. With this talk he deceived many” (*Ant.* 20.5.1 §§97-98). ...

*The Anonymous Egyptian (Jew)*. ... Josephus tells us that these “madmen” promised their followers “signs of freedom” (*J.W.* 2.13.4 §259). ... As to the Egyptian, Josephus reports: “At this time [ca. 56 C.E.] there came to Jerusalem from Egypt a man who said that he was a prophet [*prophetes*] and advised the masses of the common people to go out with him to the mountain called the Mount of Olives, which lies opposite the city. . . . For he asserted that he wished to demonstrate from there that at his command Jerusalem’s walls would fall down through which he promised to provide them an entrance into the city” (*Ant.* 20.8.6 §§169-170). ... This Egyptian is mentioned in other sources as well. According to Acts 21:38 a Roman tribune asked Paul: “Are you not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?” ...

*Anonymous “Impostor.”* In a context in which he described the troubles brought on by the *sicarii*, Josephus reports that “Festus [ca. 61 C.E.] also sent a force of cavalry and infantry against those deceived by a certain impostor who had promised them salvation and rest from troubles, if they chose to follow him into the wilderness. Those whom Festus sent destroyed that deceiver and those who had followed him” (*Ant.* 20.8.10 §188). It is likely that this “impostor” was another messianic prophet, probably in keeping with the prophet-like-Moses theme (as the wilderness summons would seem to indicate).

*Jonathan the refugee*. Following the Roman victory over Israel, one Jonathan fled to Cyrene. According to Josephus, this man, by trade a weaver, was one of the *sicarii*. He persuaded many of the poorer Jews to follow him out into the desert, “promising to show them signs and apparitions” (*J. W.* 7.11.1 §§437-438; *Life* 76 §§424-425).

### **Messianic Priests**

Although there were eschatological ideas that envisioned the appearance of messianic priests, some based on the Hasmonean model ( *T. Reu.* 6:10-12; *T. Jud.* 21:2-3), others based on Melchizedek (Heb 5, 7-8; perhaps 11QMelch), there are no clear examples of messianic priestly claimants in the period under consideration.

### **Later Messianic Claimants**

Following the defeat of Simon in 135 C.E. it would be three centuries before the reappearance of messianic fervor. Based on various calculations it was believed that Messiah would come either in 440 c.e. (cf. *b. Sanh.* 97b) or in 471 C.E. (cf. *b. cAbod.*

Zar. 9b). (Other dates were suggested.) Answering this expectation, one “Moses of Crete” (ca. 448 C.E.) promised to lead the Jewish people through the sea, dry-shod, from Crete to Palestine. At his command many of his followers threw themselves into the Mediterranean. Some drowned; others were rescued. Moses himself disappeared (cf. Socrates Scholasticus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 7.38; 12.33 ...

A variety of other pseudo-messiahs appeared in the Islamic period (especially in the eighth century), during the later crusades (especially in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries), and even as late as the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries (cf. *JE* 10:252-55).

### Further resources on the WWW

Search the World Wide Web using:

false messiahs in the first century

### False messiahs coupled with other warnings

Jesus warned his disciples about the false Messiahs. In the same breath, Jesus pointed to man-made events such as wars and to natural events such as earthquakes, telling his followers that they must not concern themselves about these. “Do not be terrified”. The false Messiahs were pointing to such events, but Jesus said that wars would continue to happen because nations would fight. He never spoke about changes in the frequency, number of casualties, and so on, simply that these would continue and they were not indicators. Jesus’ message went against the message of these false self-appointed Christs (Anointed Ones).

You are going to hear of wars and reports of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for these things must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be food shortages and earthquakes in one place after another. All these things are a beginning of pangs of distress.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, when you hear of wars and reports of wars, do not be alarmed; these things must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in one place after another; there will also be food shortages. These are a beginning of pangs of distress. As for you, look out for yourselves.<sup>21</sup>

He said: “Look out that you are not misled, for many will come on the basis of my name, saying, ‘I am he,’ and, ‘The due time is near.’ Do not go after them. Furthermore, when you hear of wars and disturbances, do not be terrified. For these things must take place first, but the end will not occur immediately.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Matthew 24:6-8, NWT, 2013

<sup>21</sup> Mark 13:7-9, NWT, 2013

<sup>22</sup> Luke 21:8-9, NWT, 2013

## THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY WRITINGS

From its earliest days, the Christians accepted a range of writings. They shared concepts and idioms of the wider Jewish community, adapting them to their new-found belief that Yeshua (“Jesus”) was the promised Messiah.

A fluid situation concerning formally recognised Scripture thus existed when Matthew’s Gospel was written. It is thus not surprising that Matthew’s Gospel, along with the remainder of the NT canon, makes full use of writings that are today considered apocryphal; that is, they are not formally recognised as Scripture.

The following is a partial list of contemporary writings that are relevant to Chapters 23 to 24 of Matthew’s Gospel. A practical example of the value of understanding the contemporary context of these other ancient texts is presented at page 35 of this Study, where the *Gospel According to the Nazarenes* sheds light on the *Parable of the Talents* (Matthew 25:14-30).

### Quotations, Allusions, and Parallels to the New Testament

This appendix contains a list of NT passages that quote, allude to, or contain ideas that closely parallel the OT and/or the writings surveyed in this book. This list is not comprehensive; it is illustrative only.

Matt 23:2	<i>Exod. Rab.</i> 43.4 (on Exod 32:22); <i>Pesiq. Rab. Kah.</i> 1.7
Matt 23:3	Deut 17:10; <i>Sipre Deut.</i> §154 (on Deut 17:10); <i>Pesiq. Rab.</i> 3.1; <i>Lev. Rab.</i> 35.7 (on Lev 26:3); Epictetus 3.7.17
Matt 23:4	<i>b. ‘Abod. Zar.</i> 36a; <i>b. Sanh.</i> 94b; <i>‘Abot R. Nat.</i> (A) 2.2
Matt 23:5	Num 15:38; <i>b. Ned.</i> 62a
Matt 23:9	Dio Chrysostom, <i>Disc.</i> 1.22
Matt 23:10	Josephus, <i>Ant.</i> 18.1.6 §23; Epictetus 1.19.9
Matt 23:11	<i>Sipre Deut.</i> §38 (on Deut 11:10)
Matt 23:15	<i>Gen. Rab.</i> 39.14 (on Gen 12:5); <i>b. Yebam.</i> 47a; Justin Martyr, <i>Dial.</i> 122
Matt 23:16	Philo, <i>Virtues</i> 7
Matt 23:16–22	<i>m. Ned.</i> 1:3; <i>m. Šebu.</i> 4:13
Matt 23:20	Exod 29:37; <i>m. Zebaḥ.</i> 9:1
Matt 23:22	Isa 66:1; <i>Mek.</i> on Exod 17:16 ( <i>Amalek</i> §2)
Matt 23:23	Hos 6:6; <i>Tg. Isa.</i> 28:25; <i>m. Demai</i> 2:1; <i>b. Yebam.</i> 47a
Matt 23:26	<i>b. Ber.</i> 28a; <i>b. Yoma</i> 72b; <i>Gos. Thom.</i> §22
Matt 23:29	1 Macc 13:27–30; Josephus, <i>Ant.</i> 7.15.3 §§392–394; 13.8.4 §249; 18.4.6 §108; 20.4.3 §95; <i>J.W.</i> 5.12.2 §506
Matt 23:34	<i>Tg. Jer.</i> 18:18; <i>T. Ezek.</i> 7:26
Matt 23:34–35	Gen 4:10; 2 Chr 24:20–22; 2 Esdr 1:32
Matt 23:35	Gen 4:8; 2 Chr 24:20–21; <i>Liv. Pro.</i> 23:1; Zech 1:1
Matt 23:37	Deut 32:11; Isa 31:5

*Ancient Texts for New Testament Studies*, Craig Evans, pages 342, 350

Matt 23:37–38	2 Esdr 1:30, 33; <i>Tg. Isa.</i> 28:11–12; 32:14
Matt 23:38	Jer 12:7; 22:5; Tob 14:4
Matt 23:39	Ps 118:26
Matt 24:1	4 Ezra 5:2
Matt 24:4	<i>Apoc. Elijah</i> 1:14
Matt 24:5	<i>Apoc. Elijah</i> 3:1
Matt 24:6	2 <i>Bar.</i> 48:34, 37
Matt 24:6–7	<i>Sib. Or.</i> 3:636–637
Matt 24:7	4 Ezra 13:31; 15:15; 2 <i>En.</i> 70:23; 2 <i>Bar.</i> 27:9
Matt 24:8	2 <i>Bar.</i> 27:3
Matt 24:11	2 <i>Bar.</i> 48:34; Tacitus, <i>Ann.</i> 15.44
Matt 24:12	<i>m. Sotah</i> 9:15
Matt 24:15	1 Macc 1:54; 6:7; 2 Macc 8:17; 2 <i>Bar.</i> 28:1
Matt 24:16	1 Macc 2:28
Matt 24:17	2 <i>Bar.</i> 53:9
Matt 24:19	2 <i>Bar.</i> 10:14
Matt 24:20	<i>m. Erub.</i> 4:3; 5:7
Matt 24:21	<i>T. Mos.</i> 8:1
Matt 24:24	2 <i>Bar.</i> 48:34
Matt 24:26	LXX Deut 32:25
Matt 24:27	Zech 9:14; 4Q246 2:1–2; <i>Apoc. Elijah</i> 3:4; Suetonius, <i>Dom.</i> 16.1
Matt 24:28	Job 39:30; Hab 1:8; 1QpHab 3:8–12; Cornutus, <i>De natura deorum</i> 21; Seneca, <i>Ep.</i> 95.43
Matt 24:29	<i>Apoc. Elijah</i> 3:6
Matt 24:30	Zech 12:10; 2 <i>Bar.</i> 25:3
Matt 24:31	Isa 27:13; 1 <i>En.</i> 22:3; <i>Apoc. Mos.</i> 22:3; <i>Apoc. Ab.</i> 31:1
Matt 24:37–39	Gen 7:6–10; <i>Sib. Or.</i> 3:815–818, 823–827; Ovid, <i>Metam.</i> 8.618–724
Matt 24:38	Gen 7:6–10
Matt 24:40–41	<i>Apoc. Zeph.</i> 2:2
Matt 24:51	Jdt 16:17
Matt 25:14–30	<i>Ahiqar</i> 192
Matt 25:23	3 <i>Bar.</i> 15:4
Matt 25:24	Sir 13:4; 26:29
Matt 25:30	1QS 4:12–13
Matt 25:31	1 <i>En.</i> 61:8; 62:2–3; 69:27
Matt 25:31–46	<i>T. Jos.</i> 1:5
Matt 25:33–34	<i>T. Benj.</i> 10:6
Matt 25:34	2 <i>En.</i> 9:1; 23:5; 42:3
Matt 25:35	Tob 4:17; <i>T. Isaac</i> 6:21; 2 <i>En.</i> 9:1
Matt 25:35–36	<i>T. Jos.</i> 1:5–6; <i>Der. Er. Rab.</i> 2.21
Matt 25:36	Sir 7:32–35
Matt 25:41	1 <i>En.</i> 10:13; 2 <i>En.</i> 10:4; Virgil, <i>Aen.</i> 6.741; Plutarch, <i>Mor.</i> 167A: <i>Superst.</i> 4
Matt 25:46	Dan 12:2; Plato, <i>Phaedo</i> 113D



## Overview of these writings

The following list<sup>23</sup> indicates the extent of material available to and made use of by the early Christian Church. These form a significant context for the New Testament environment.

1. Old Testament Apocrypha;
2. Old Testament Pseudepigrapha;
3. The Dead Sea Scrolls;
4. Versions of the Old Testament.
5. Philo and Josephus;
6. The Targumim;
7. Rabbinic literature;
8. The New Testament Pseudepigrapha
9. Early Church Fathers;
10. Gnostic writings;

## The value of studying the ancients sources

The following is from *Ancient Texts for New Testament Studies*, by Craig A. Evans<sup>24</sup>

These writings clarify the following areas of exegetical concern.

1. The meaning of words. ... Appeal to the LXX, which contains the Apocrypha, is quite appropriate. Although written mostly in Hebrew, Qumran documents often can be helpful in determining the meaning of certain words in the NT. Some of the pseudepigrapha circulating in Palestine and the eastern Mediterranean can therefore be helpful in determining the meaning of words used in the NT. ...

2. Syntax. The grammar of the NT is Koine, not classical. It is also heavily influenced by the Semitic style of the LXX. This is seen by the NT's frequent use of *egeneto de* or *kai egeneto* ("and it came to pass"). This expression comes right out of the LXX. To "set one's face" and to go "before one's face" (cf. Luke 9:51-53) are idioms that derive from the LXX and whose meanings are clarified by the Greek OT. Other grammatical expressions reflect the Aramaic language of Palestine ("in truth" [Luke 4:25; 1QapGen<sup>ar</sup> 2:5]; "he was seen," meaning "he appeared" [Luke 24:34; 1QapGen<sup>ar</sup> 22:27]). Some of the NT's syntax seems to reflect Hebrew (preposition *en* with the articular infinitive meaning "while doing" [Luke 1:21; 2:6; 5:1]).

3. The meaning of concepts. When Jesus tells his disciples that they have been given authority to "tread upon serpents [*ophis*] and scorpions" and that "the spirits are subject" to them (Luke 10:19-20), he may have alluded to Ps 91:13 ("You will tread upon lion and the adder, young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot"). Psalm 91 has nothing to do with Satan; but Jesus' words do (cf. Luke 10:17-18). Would a reference to treading upon serpents have been understood in first-century Palestine as a reference to Satan and demons? Very much so. Consider this eschatological hope expressed in one of the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*: "And Beliar [i.e., Satan] shall be bound by him [i.e., an agent of salvation on whom the Spirit of God shall rest; Isa 11:2]. And he shall grant to his children the authority to trample on wicked spirits" ( *T. Levi* 18:12; cf. *T. Sim.* 6:6; *T. Zeb.* 9:8). ... The targumic tradition also links serpents and scorpions with Satan and evil spirits (and Gen 3:15, which speaks of the woman's seed crushing the serpent's head, is understood in a messianic sense in the Targumim).

4. History. Some of the writings ... contribute to what we know about the intertestamental and NT periods. First and second Maccabees are invaluable sources for our knowledge of the Jewish revolt against Antiochus IV in 167 B.C.E. Josephus's

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<sup>23</sup> From *Ancient Texts for New Testament Studies*, pages 1-3, by Craig A. Evans

<sup>24</sup> Pages 3-6.

*Jewish War* and *Jewish Antiquities* reveal helpful information about Jewish politics and history at the turn of the era. ...

5. Historical, social, and religious context (i.e., Sitz im Leben). Following the death of Herod the Great Palestine went through a period of political instability and upheaval. Josephus cynically remarks, "Anyone might make himself a king" (*Ant.* 17.10.8 §285). Josephus has no sympathy for Jewish nationalists and would-be-liberators, calling them "brigands" (*lestes*). This is the very word that is used when Jesus is arrested and crucified (Mark 14:48; 15:27). In view of Josephus's description of these kingly claimants as *lestai*, some of whom may very well have thought of themselves as messiahs, it is possible that when *lestes* is used of Jesus, it meant "insurrectionist." Josephus also tells of false prophets who deluded the people by promising signs of deliverance, sometimes urging them to withdraw to the desert. The language that he uses (*Ant.* 17.10.7 §§278-284; 20.8.6 §168; 20.8.10 §188; *J.W.* 2.13.5 §§261-263; 6.5.4 §315) parallels, at places quite closely, the warnings that we read in the Gospels (cf. Matt 24:26; Mark 13:21-22).

6. Exegetical context. Of major importance is the fact that the noncanonical writings quite often shed light on the interpretation of the OT passages quoted or alluded to in the NT. For example, parts of 2 Sam 7:12-16, the "Davidic covenant", are quoted (Heb 1:5) or alluded to (Luke 1:32-33) in the NT as fulfilled in Jesus. Since Nathan's oracle originally spoke of Solomon the son of David, one wonders if early Christian interpretation would have been understood or accepted. Qumran has made it clear, however, that this oracle was interpreted in an eschatological sense, at least in some circles. The eschatological deliverer will be God's Son (4QFlor 1:11-12; 4Q246 1:6-9; 2:1-4) and he will be seated on the throne of David (4Q252 5), thus fulfilling the promise of 2 Samuel 7 in a way that Solomon and his descendants did not. As another example, the presentation of Jesus in the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel as the Logos ("word") is illumined by Philo and possibly by the Targumim. Philo describes the Logos as "God's firstborn, the Word" (*Confusion* 28 §146), through whom God created the world (*Cherubim* 35 §127). The Targumim say that God created humanity through the Memra ("word"): "The Memra of the Lord created man in his own image" (*Tg. Neof Gen* 1:27; cf. *Tg. Isa.* 45:12). The presence of "Word" as agent of creation in Genesis 1 is highly suggestive, since John 1 ("In the beginning . . .") echoes the language of the creation account.

7. Hermeneutical context (i.e., how Scripture could be interpreted, how it could be applied, adapted). The literatures ... help us understand how biblical literature was interpreted and what role it played in the life of the Jewish and Christian communities of faith. Qumran affords us with examples of peshet interpretation whereby various prophetic details of Scripture were applied to contemporary events and events felt to be imminent. Rabbinic writings provide us with numerous examples in midrashic interpretation whereby Scripture was searched in an effort to find answers to the questions relating to how God's people should live and how they should understand their sacred tradition. Philo's writings illustrate allegorical interpretation. Do the details of Scripture point to meanings beyond the obvious and literal? The Targumim and some of the pseudepigraphal writings show how the biblical story can be paraphrased, expanded, and enriched. But perhaps more importantly, these various literatures aid us in understanding what role Scripture played in the life of the believing community. All of this sheds light on how early Christians understood their own sacred tradition.

8. Canonical context (i.e., what was regarded as Scripture and why).

## CONTEXTUAL MARKERS WITHIN THE *FAITHFUL SLAVE* STORY

### Mark 13:32-37

Concerning that day or the hour nobody knows, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, but the Father. Keep looking, keep awake, for you do not know when the appointed time is.

It is like a man traveling abroad who left his house and gave the authority to his slaves, to each one his work, and commanded the doorkeeper to keep on the watch.

Keep on the watch, therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether late in the day or at midnight or at dawn or early in the morning, in order that when he comes suddenly, he does not find you sleeping. But what I say to you, I say to all: Keep on the watch.”

### Matthew 24:45-49

**Who** really is the faithful and discreet slave whom his master appointed over his domestics, to give them their food at the proper time? Happy is that slave if his master on coming finds him doing so!

Truly I say to you, he will appoint him over all his belongings.

But if ever that evil slave says in his heart, ‘My master is delaying’, and he starts to beat his fellow slaves and to eat and drink with the confirmed drunkards, the master of that slave will come on a day that he does not expect and in an hour that he does not know, and he will punish him with the greatest severity and will assign him his place with the hypocrites. There is where his weeping and the gnashing of his teeth will be.

### Luke 12:40-48

[Jesus said] “You also, keep ready, because at an hour that you do not think likely, the Son of man is *coming*.”

Then Peter said: “Lord, are you telling this illustration just to us or also to everyone?”

And the Lord said: “Who really is the faithful steward, the discreet one, whom his master will appoint over his body of attendants to keep giving them their measure of food supplies at the proper time?

Happy is that slave if his master on coming finds him doing so! I tell you truthfully, he will appoint him over all his belongings.

But if ever that slave should say in his heart, ‘My master delays coming,’ and starts to beat the male and female servants and to eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that slave will come on a day that he is not expecting him and at an hour that he does not know, and he will punish him with the greatest severity and assign him a part with the unfaithful ones.

Then that slave who understood the will of his master but did not get ready or do what he asked will be beaten with many strokes. But the one who did not understand and yet did things deserving of strokes will be beaten with few.

Indeed, everyone to whom much was given, much will be demanded of him, and the one who was put in charge of much will have more than usual demanded of him.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Luke 12:40-48, NWT, 2013 (emphases supplied).

## The immediate contexts

**In Matthew's Gospel**, Jesus had just viciously attacked the temple leadership in a series of condemnations. Speaking at the temple to the crowds and to his disciples<sup>26</sup>, Jesus told them:

They like the most prominent place at evening meals and the front seats in the synagogues and the greetings in the marketplaces and to be called Rabbi by men. But you, do not you be called Rabbi, for one is your Teacher, and all of you are brothers. Moreover, do not call anyone your father on earth, for one is your Father, the heavenly One. Neither be called leaders, for your Leader is one, the Christ.

But the greatest one among you must be your minister. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.<sup>27</sup>

In contrast to these, the Disciples were taught of what constitutes the Good Servant. In Matthew's Gospel, the story immediately follows the lesson:

*The Son of man is coming [ἔρχεται: erchetai] at an hour that you do not think to be it.*<sup>28</sup>

**In Luke's Gospel**, the story is set in a completely different context. This is important, since the WTS makes such play on the eschatological context of the story at Matthew's Gospel.

In Luke's Gospel (contra Matthew's) the parable is not located within the context of Jesus' ministry *in* Jerusalem. Instead it is within the Travel Narrative (9:51-19:27) devoted to Jesus' journey *to* Jerusalem. More specifically, it is located within a section of warnings to the disciples (12:1-13:9), although multitudes are present (12:1, 13, 54). In 12:35-40 (just prior to the parable) Jesus exhorts his disciples to be alert and ready for the coming of the Son of man. But since the parable is not located within the eschatological discourse of Luke's Gospel (21:5-36), there is less sense of an impending crisis at hand than in the Gospel of Matthew.

The parable is preceded by a question of Peter (12:41). ... The question makes the reader aware that the multitudes are on the scene, and that Jesus may be speaking to them or to other hearers or readers (of the Gospel of Luke) as well as to the disciples. Peter asks concerning what was said in 12:35-40, which he calls a "parable". His question is not answered explicitly. Yet by virtue of having located that parable within the Travel Narrative (9:51-19:27), in which Jesus is instructing the Twelve for the time beyond his earthly ministry, it applies to others beyond the circle of the Twelve, including leaders of the church in Luke's own day.

The actual response of Jesus is to relate an additional parable, which is told to Peter and the others among the Twelve. The cumulative effect of the first parable (12:35-40), the question of Peter (12:41), the second parable (12:42-46), and the sayings that follow (12:47-48) is to say that those who have known the will of the master, but have not carried it out, will be treated with utmost severity.<sup>29</sup>

## **Parousia and Coming**

Matthew's Gospel includes the word *παρουσίας* [parousias] in this eschatological discourse whereas Luke never uses that word. Instead, Luke's Gospel uses *ἔρχεται* [erchetai] to describe the same event. The WTS errs in attempting to distance the *parousia* from the *erchetai*. This separation is reminiscent of the two-stage event introduced by the Rapturists at the same time that the Russell and Conley families were forming the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society. William Conley was its first President.

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<sup>26</sup> Matthew 23:1

<sup>27</sup> Matthew 23:6-12, NWT, 2013

<sup>28</sup> Matthew 24:44, NWT, 2013

<sup>29</sup> *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*, Arland J. Hultgren, pages 164-165.

## The context of slavery

The differences from the early American institution of slavery are several: it was not based on race; slaves could become citizens after emancipation, and citizens could sell themselves into slavery; they could own property; they were regarded as persons (not simply as property or subhuman); they could be educated — and some were better educated than their owners; and they could be, and were, involved in many tasks and professions as business managers and agents, craftsmen, bankers, physicians, farm tenants, government bureaucrats, teachers and tutors, artists, accountants, actors, domestic and farm laborers, gladiators, and even sea captains. What distinguished the slave from a free person was that he or she was owned by another.

In spite of the risks of using the term “slave” as a translation for the Greek term in a North American context, it is, in the end, preferable to the term “servant” in the case of the parables. It is clear that the persons referred to are the possession of a master in each case, and it can be assumed that they, like their masters, are Jews.

The slaves portrayed in the parables are stock figures who carry on a number of activities. They work the fields and tend sheep for their masters (Matt 13:27-28; Luke 17:7), serve them meals (Luke 17:8), collect produce from tenants on behalf of their masters (Mark 12:2//Matt 21:34//Luke 20:10-11), make loans to fellow servants (Matt 18:28), carry messages for their masters (Matt 22:3-10; Luke 14:17-23), and care for their masters’ wardrobe (Luke 15:22). Moreover, they are authorized by their masters to take charge of households during their masters’ absence (Mark 13:34//Luke 12:37; Matt 24:45-51//Luke 12:42-48), and they are entrusted by their masters with property to make investments (Matt 25:14-30; Luke 19:12-25). Given such relatively free rein, slaves in the parables have opportunities to misbehave. They are capable of mistreating fellow servants (Matt 18:28-30; 24:48-51//Luke 12:45-46) and even of defrauding their masters (Luke 16:1-8).

But if caught, they can suffer severe beatings (Matt 24:51//Luke 12:47-48) and even be handed over to torture (Matt 18:34). It is possible also for a slave who is heavily indebted to his master to be thrown into prison along with his wife and children (Matt 18:25). The degree to which the latter was legally possible is beside the point. The telling of a parable of a wealthy king and his servant knows no bounds of hyperbole, whether that be in regard to release from debts (10,000 talents!) or punishment.<sup>30</sup>

## Exposition of Matthew’s account

The picture before us is that of Jesus teaching his disciples in Jerusalem near the close of his earthly ministry. It anticipates the time in which those disciples, and those who come after them, will be entrusted with caring for their fellow disciples, members of the church. That responsibility is not given to all, but it is granted to certain persons. And so it continues. ... Various persons, whether ordained or lay, are entrusted on a continuing basis with care for fellow members of the church. ...

The expectation of the person entrusted with the ministry of proclamation and teaching is that he or she will continue in fidelity, ministering to fellow members of the church continually and in a regularized manner, just like a slave who feeds his fellow slaves at the appropriate time. One cannot calculate the time of the Lord’s coming and the judgment that will follow upon one’s work. Therefore it is simply necessary to be faithful now, and every day, so that when the Lord does appear, he will find that the person who has been entrusted with ministry in his name and during his absence will be carrying out that ministry wisely and faithfully.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*, pages 474-475, Arland Hultgren

<sup>31</sup> *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*, Arland J. Hultgren, page 164

### **Exposition of Luke's account**

The picture before us in Luke's Gospel is that of Jesus teaching his disciples, plus others, on his way to Jerusalem. The subject of the parable is a "manager," and he is entrusted with distributing rations for the crew of slaves under the control and ownership of his master, who is absent. Metaphorically, even allegorically, the parable refers to the responsibility that any leader of the church has in carrying out ministry in the name of Jesus to and with those under his or her care. ...

The one who is entrusted is to be faithful and wise. That means that one's ministry in the name of Jesus is to be directed outward to the care of those for whom one is responsible, proclaiming and teaching what has been received by, and entrusted to, the minister of the Word. That is ministry without illusions. Furthermore, as the verses after the parable indicate, the greater the responsibility one has, the higher the expectations are.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*, Arland J. Hultgren, pages 167-168

## CONTEXTUAL MARKERS WITHIN THE *TEN VIRGINS* STORY

The “Ten Virgins” story is unique to the Matthew Gospel.

### Matthew 25:1-13

Then the Kingdom of the heavens may be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.

Five of them were foolish, and five were discreet. For the foolish took their lamps but took no oil with them, whereas the discreet took oil in their flasks along with their lamps.

While the bridegroom was delaying, they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

Right in the middle of the night there was a shout: ‘Here is the bridegroom! Go out to meet him.’

Then all those virgins got up and put their lamps in order. The foolish said to the discreet, ‘Give us some of your oil, because our lamps are about to go out.’

The discreet answered, saying: ‘Perhaps there may not be enough for both us and you. Go instead to those who sell it, and buy some for yourselves.’

While they were going off to buy it, the bridegroom came [ἦλθεν: *elthen*] The virgins who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut.

Afterward, the rest of the virgins also came, saying, ‘Sir, Sir, open to us!’ In answer he said, ‘I tell you the truth, I do not know you.’

Keep on the watch, therefore, because you know neither the day nor the hour.

### Luke 12:35-36

Be dressed and ready and have your lamps burning, and you should be like men waiting for their master to return from the marriage, so when he comes [ἐλθόντος: *elthontos*] and knocks, they may at once open to him.

### The Virgins

All ten had lamps; all were preparing for the marriage feast.

All of them fell asleep. None was awake to the timing of the Groom’s coming.

Even though the “foolish virgins” had obtained the required lamps and oil, the Bridegroom still refused them entry, saying that he had *never known them* even though they were virgins who were waiting for his arrival.

Were they already at the location of the ceremony? They “went out” to greet the arriving bridegroom. The ten virgins were not the bride.

### The Bride

There is no mention of the Bride, only of the celebration, whether at the home of the bride, of the groom, or somewhere else.

According to contemporary Jewish custom, the couple was legally married at the time of their engagement, which would precede the wedding ceremony by a period of 12 months.

### The Bridegroom

The day began at nightfall, following which the bridegroom would come with his male friends at an unknown, unpredictable time to the place of the celebration.

### **The Coming: ἤλθεν: elthen**

The common Greek word ἤλθεν: *elthen*, which describes the “coming” of the Bridegroom<sup>33</sup>, also appears at Matthew 24:39 where it describes the *coming* of the flood upon Noah and his generation.

### **The time of day**

For the Jewish community, the day end and starts with the setting of the sun. Although many refer to the “Midnight Hour” in terms of Western culture’s change of the day at midnight, this is drawing an unwarranted inference. All that is intended by “midnight” in this story is that they virgins had to wait for a long time, causing them to sleep, and that the Groom arrived at a time when he was not expected, well into the night.

### **The point of the story**

As is typical with parables, the details are only there to entice and carry the interest of the listener and to bring out the unexpected punchline. The single point of this parable is provided within it:

Keep on the watch, therefore, because you know neither the day nor the hour.

Any other conclusions, such as made by the WTS, go beyond the purpose of the parable.

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<sup>33</sup> Matthew 24:39



## CONTEXTUAL MARKERS WITHIN THE *TALENTS* STORY

### Matthew 25:14-30

For it is just like a man about to travel abroad who summoned his slaves and entrusted his belongings to them. He gave five talents to one, two to another, and one to still another, to each according to his own ability, and he went abroad.

Immediately the one who received the five talents went and did business with them and gained five more. Likewise, the one who received the two gained two more. But the slave who received just one went off and dug in the ground and hid his master's money.

After a long time, the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. So the one who had received the five talents came forward and brought five additional talents, saying, 'Master, you entrusted five talents to me; see, I gained five talents more.' His master said to him: 'Well done, good and faithful slave! You were faithful over a few things. I will appoint you over many things. Enter into the joy of your master.'

Next the one who had received the two talents came forward and said, 'Master, you entrusted two talents to me; see, I gained two talents more.' His master said to him: 'Well done, good and faithful slave! You were faithful over a few things. I will appoint you over many things. Enter into the joy of your master.'

Finally the slave who had received the one talent came forward and said: 'Master, I knew you to be a demanding man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not winnow. So I grew afraid and went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.' In reply his master said to him: 'Wicked and sluggish slave, you knew, did you, that I reaped where I did not sow and gathered where I did not winnow?

Well, then, you should have deposited my money with the bankers, and on my coming I would have received it back with interest.

Therefore, take the talent away from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents.

For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance. But the one who does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. And throw the good-for-nothing slave out into the darkness outside. There is where his weeping and the gnashing of his teeth will be.'

### Luke 19:11-27 (*The Minas*)

Because [Jesus] was near Jerusalem and they thought that the Kingdom of God was going to appear instantly.

So he said: "A man of noble birth traveled to a distant land to secure kingly power for himself and to return. Calling ten of his slaves, he gave them ten minas and told them, 'Do business with these until I come.'

But his citizens hated him and sent out a body of ambassadors after him to say, 'We do not want this man to become king over us.'

"When he eventually got back after having secured the kingly power, he summoned the slaves to whom he had given the money, in order to ascertain what they had gained by their business activity. So the first one came forward and said, 'Lord, your mina gained ten minas.' He said to him, 'Well done, good slave! Because in a very small matter you have proved yourself faithful, hold authority over ten cities.' Now the second came, saying, 'Your mina, Lord, made five minas.' He said to this one as well, 'You too be in charge of five cities.'

But another one came, saying, ‘Lord, here is your mina that I kept hidden away in a cloth. You see, I was in fear of you, because you are a harsh man; you take what you did not deposit, and you reap what you did not sow.’

He said to him, ‘By your own words I judge you, wicked slave. You knew, did you, that I am a harsh man, taking what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow? So why did you not put my money in a bank? Then on my coming, I would have collected it with interest.’

“With that he said to those standing by, ‘Take the mina from him and give it to the one who has the ten minas.’

But they said to him, ‘Lord, he has ten minas!’—

‘I say to you, to everyone who has, more will be given, but from the one who does not have, even what he has will be taken away.

Moreover, bring these enemies of mine here who did not want me to become king over them and execute them in front of me.”

### **The term” *Talent*”**

The term “talent” originally specified a weight that varied in differing parts of the Middle East (ca. 42.5 kilograms in Greco-Roman times [ca. 93.7 pounds]). By means of its weight, a talent could designate value; a talent of gold or silver, for example, could be weighed out. By the first century A.D., however, the term commonly referred to a monetary unit equivalent to 6,000 denarii. Since a denarius was a day’s wages for a common laborer, and he might work some 300 days per year, a talent would be worth nearly twenty years’ wages.<sup>34</sup>

In Jesus’ day, a talent was equivalent to about 6,000 denarii. Earning a denarius a day, the average worker had to labor some 20 years to earn just one talent.<sup>35</sup>

This means that when the man in the Parable of the Talents gave a total of 8 talents to these slaves, he was handing over the equivalent of almost 160 years’ salary for one person.

When the slave with five talents (about 100 years’ salary) doubled his investment, what would the peasant listeners of this story have thought of this investor?

Given their experience with bankers, what would peasant farmers think of the recommendation that the talent should have been invested with those bankers?

### **The man handing out the talents**

The enormously wealthy man who handed out the eight talents is described as:

- demanding;
- reaping where he did not sow; and
- gathering where he did not winnow.<sup>36</sup>

He harvested crops that he had not sown, he collected produce that he had not laboured for.

Further, he informed the man who protected his single talent that he should have deposited it with bankers who would have provided interest, a practice scorned at in Scripture.

The man took from the poor and he gave what little they had to the rich. He said that the poor were to be thrown out into darkness and punished. The man in Luke’s story of the minas wanted the poor to be executed in front of him; the word at Luke indicates being cut into two.

The WTS says this is their picture of Jesus and it reflects what will happen to those who do not make disciples for the Watchtower Society.

<sup>34</sup> *The Parables of Jesus*, Arland Hultgren, page 23


<sup>35</sup> *The Watchtower*, March 15, 2015, page 20.

<sup>36</sup> Matthew 24:24, 26

### The Watchtower on the Talents and on the Minas

The parables of the talents and the minas have a number of features in common. Both describe a man in authority who before embarking on a journey summons his slaves and commits to them his money, instructing them to increase his belongings. Then, when the man returns, he holds his slaves accountable for the way they used the money. (Matt. 25:14-30; Luke 19:12-27) In both illustrations, the master pictures Jesus, and the slaves picture his anointed disciples. In each account, the master entrusts his slaves with money, which pictures the precious privilege of making disciples. Both accounts also contain a warning about what would happen if Christ's disciples developed the characteristics of a wicked slave.<sup>37</sup>

### Currency and Weight



**Gerah** ( $\frac{1}{20}$  shekel)  
0.57 g / 0.01835 oz t  
10 gerahs = 1 bekah


**Bekah**  
5.7 g / 0.1835 oz t  
2 bekahs = 1 shekel

**Pim**  
7.8 g / 0.2508 oz t  
1 pim =  $\frac{2}{3}$  shekel

**Shekel**  
11.4 g / 0.367 oz t  
50 shekels = 1 mina

**Mina**  
570 g / 18.35 oz t  
60 minas = 1 talent

**Talent**  
34.2 kg / 1,101 oz t



**Mina**  
100 drachmas  
340 g / 10.9 oz t  
Luke 19:13  
= about 100 days' wage

**Talent**  
60 minas  
20.4 kg / 654 oz t  
Matthew 18:24  
Revelation 16:21  
= about 19 years' wage

NWT (2013), pages 1794, 1795

<sup>37</sup> *The Watchtower*, March 15, 2015, page 21.

## Apocryphal Gospels and “The Parable of the Talents”<sup>38</sup>

Can the apocryphal gospels shed light on the NT Gospels? Sometimes. Consider the parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14-30; roughly paralleled by Luke 19:11-27). Commentators have usually assumed that Jesus intended his hearers to understand that the heroes of the parable are the servants who doubled their master’s money. These servants are models for Jesus’ followers: “All of this constitutes an appeal to good works as demonstrating the reality of professed discipleship” (Gundry, 505). The servant who hid his master’s money, and did not even lend to bankers for interest, is understood to be a poor model: “Thus the parable closes on a threatening note concerning the punishment Jesus will mete out to disciples who falsify their profession by failing to do good works” (Gundry, 510).

The traditional interpretation runs into problems when we are mindful of the biblical principles and economical realities by which the majority of Palestinians in Jesus’ day lived. The first problem has to do with the master. He expects exorbitant profits, he is a “hard” man, he reaps the fields of others, gathers the grain that others have threshed, and has no difficulty with usury (Matt 25:24-27). Moreover, he is merciless (Matt 25:30). At the very least this is a hard-nosed businessman who does not observe the law’s express prohibition against the practice of usury (cf. Exod 22:25; Ps 15:5). But it is more probable that the picture is worse. This man may be an oppressive gouger and a thief. In any case, it is hard to imagine how an agrarian audience, for the most part peasants, could have heard this parable and understood the master in a favorable sense.

The second problem has to do with the actions of the servants. The first two double their master’s money. In the minds of first-century peasants such margins of profit were not fair, but could take place only through high interest rates, excessive returns from tenant farmers, taxation, or outright theft. However these profits were obtained, the peasants knew that it would be at their expense. The third servant neither cheated anyone, nor made a profit at anyone’s expense. He kept his master’s money safe and returned it to him. Although guiltless in the eyes of the peasants, this servant is “worthless” in the eyes of his master and is punished.

For these reasons one may well wonder if the parable as we now have it in the canonical Gospels has been misunderstood. Eusebius wondered this also. Commenting on the Matthean version of the parable he discusses the different perspective of the *Gospel of the Nazarenes* (*Gos. Naz.* §18; cf. Eusebius, *Theoph.* 22 [on Matt 25:14-15] ):

But since the Gospel in Hebrew characters which has come into our hands enters the threat not against the man who had hid [the talent], but against him who had lived dissolutely—for he [the master] had three servants: one who squandered his master’s substance with harlots and flute-girls, one who multiplied the gain, and one who hid the talent; and accordingly one was accepted (with joy), another merely rebuked, and another cast into prison—I wonder whether in Matthew the threat which is uttered after the word against the man who did nothing may refer not to him, but by epanalepsis to the first who had feasted and drunk with the drunken.

The parable of the *Gospel of the Nazarenes* seems to be a combination of the parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14-30) and the parable of the Wicked Servant (Matt 24:45-51; Luke 12:45-48). But what is interesting is Eusebius’s thought that perhaps the word of rebuke was originally uttered against the man who made huge profits.

Additional problems arise when we consider the Lukan form of the parable (Luke 19:11-27), the so-called parable of the Pounds (or Minas). Not only is the man (called a “nobleman”) harsh and demanding, but he is hated by his subjects who do not want him to reign as king over them (Luke 19:14). After his return, he settles with his servants, much as in the Matthean version. But he appears even more harsh, for he demands that those who did not want him to be king be brought before him and be slain in his very presence (Luke 19:27). The traditional interpretation of this form of the parable is not unlike the interpretation of the Matthean version (e.g., Fitzmyer, 2:1232-33; C. A. Evans, 284-87). The evangelist Luke, as the evangelist Matthew, probably understood the parable along the lines that modern commentators interpret it.

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<sup>38</sup> *Ancient Texts for New Testament Studies*, pages 330-333, Craig A. Evans, Baker Academic, 2005

There is a second problem with the Lukan version. It appears that the unique parts of the parable, that of the nobleman's quest to receive a kingdom and the citizens' sending a delegation in the hope of frustrating this goal, are based upon the experience of the hated Archelaus not too many years before. (He ruled Judea from 4 B.C.E. to 6 C.E.) This is suggested by the numerous parallels between the parable's nobleman and Archelaus (whose experience is recounted in Josephus): The nobleman went to a far country (v. 12), just as Archelaus went to Rome (*Ant.* 17.9.3 §219); the nobleman hoped to receive a kingdom (*basileia*) and to return (v. 12), just as Archelaus hoped (*Ant.* 17.9.3 §220: *basileia*); the nobleman left household instructions to his servants (v. 13), just as Archelaus did (*Ant.* 17.9.3 §219, 223); the nobleman's citizens hated (*misein*) him (v. 14), just as Archelaus's subjects hated him (*Ant.* 17.9.4 §227: *misos*); an embassy (*presbeia*) is sent after the nobleman (v. 14), as one was sent after Archelaus (*Ant.* 17.11.1 §300: *presbeia*); the citizens petitioned the foreign country against the nobleman's rule (v. 14), just as the envoys petitioned against Archelaus (*Ant.* 17.11.1 §302); the nobleman slaughtered (*katasphazein*) his citizens who opposed him (v. 27), just as Archelaus had done before his journey (*Ant.* 17.9.5 §237, 239: *sphazein*); when the nobleman returned as ruler, he collected his revenues (vv. 15-19), just as Josephus notes that Archelaus was to receive 600 talents as his yearly tribute (*Ant.* 17.11.4 §320); and finally, when the nobleman returned, he settled accounts with those who had opposed him (v. 27), which parallels Archelaus's settling with Joazar the high priest for having supported the rebels (*Ant.* 17.13.1 §339). Since Herod Antipas also traveled to Rome to press his claim to the throne, and was also opposed, his experience loosely fits the experience of the parable's nobleman. But it is Archelaus who offers the closest match.

Why would Jesus tell a parable whose hero is supposed to be law-breaking, despised tyrant? In what sense does such a man model Jesus? In what sense are the servants who work for this man and assist him in his oppressive activities models for Jesus' followers? But perhaps this is not what Jesus originally intended. Following the lead of Eusebius's discussion of the form of the parable in the *Gospel of the Nazarenes*, it is possible, if not probable, that Jesus originally told his parable(s) to illustrate how *not* to be a master and how *not* to be servants. This idea coheres with his teaching elsewhere (Mark 10:42-44):

You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.

In its original context, the parable may have presented a contrast between Jesus' style of kingship and that of the Herodian dynasty. The latter was known for its oppression and ruthlessness. But Jesus wished to present a new way and expected his followers to practice it as well.

It is easy to see how the original point of the parable(s) came to be confused with teaching concerned with stewardship and responsibility (cf. Matt 24:45-47; Luke 12:35-38; 17:7-10). The servant that is wise and faithful, doing what he is expected to do, such as treating the members of the master's household properly (not profiteering at his neighbors' expense) will be rewarded. It is possible, then, that the theme of reward drew these parables together, so that the servants of the oppressive master and nobleman came to be interpreted much as the servants of the other parables. But whereas the latter were held up as worthy models, the former were not.

**Bibliography:** C. A. EVANS, *Luke* (NIBC 3; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1990); J. A. FITZMYER, *The Gospel according to Luke X—XXIV* (2 vols.; AB 18, 28A; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981-1985); R. H. GUNDRY, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982); D. E. OAKMAN, *Jesus and the Economic Questions of His Day* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen, 1986); R. ROHRBAUGH, "A Peasant Reading of the Parable of the Talents/Pounds: A Text of Terror?" *BTB* 23 (1993): 32-39.

***Insight on the Scriptures: Archelaus***

*The minas* (Lu 19:11-27). Spoken as Jesus was on his way up to Jerusalem for the last time, 33 CE. (Lu 19:1, 28) The reason for the illustration, as stated in verse 11, was that “they were imagining that the kingdom of God was going to display itself instantly.”

It was a common thing in the Roman Empire for a person of noble birth to travel to Rome in quest of kingly power. Archelaus the son of Herod the Great, had done this, but the Jews sent 50 ambassadors to the court of Augustus to bring charges against him and, if possible, thwart his quest for power. The silver mina that was initially given to each save would to worth \$65.40 in today’s values but was equal to 88 days wages then.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *Insight on the Scriptures*, Vol. 1, page 1182

## CONTEXTUAL MARKERS WITHIN THE *FINAL JUDGMENT* NARRATIVE

### Matthew 25:31-46

When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit down on his glorious throne.

All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will put the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on his left.

Then the King will say to those on his right: ‘Come, you who have been blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the founding of the world. For I became hungry and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you received me hospitably; naked and you clothed me. I fell sick and you looked after me. I was in prison and you visited me.’

Then the righteous ones will answer him with the words: ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and receive you hospitably, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’

In reply the King will say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’

Then he will say to those on his left: ‘Go away from me, you who have been cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the Devil and his angels. For I became hungry, but you gave me nothing to eat; and I was thirsty, but you gave me nothing to drink. I was a stranger, but you did not receive me hospitably; naked, but you did not clothe me; sick and in prison, but you did not look after me.’

Then they too will answer with the words: ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not minister to you?’

Then he will answer them, saying: ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of these least ones, you did not do it to me.’ These will depart into everlasting cutting-off, but the righteous ones into everlasting life.

### Contextual markers

The remaining selections are extracts from pages 310-323 of *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*, by Arland J. Hultgren. Subheadings have been added.

#### Not truly a parable

This story is unique to Matthew’s Gospel. It is generally not considered to be a parable but an eschatological narrative.

The unit is not truly a parable. It is actually an apocalyptic discourse with a parabolic element in 25:32b-33 — the simile of a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats. Yet it is often called (even if miscalled) “The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats” or “The Parable of the Last Judgment,” and exegesis of it is commonly included in studies of the parables of Jesus.

The passage appears only here within the Gospels.<sup>40</sup>

#### Universal judgment

For Matthew, the judgment is universal (24:30-31), and the picture painted here is one of broad sweep: all of humanity stands before the Son of man awaiting judgment.

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<sup>40</sup> *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*, page 310, Arland J. Hultgren

### **To those on the right**

The things accredited to those on the right are actions performed to alleviate typical problems of the unfortunate — hunger, thirst, being an alien, lacking clothes, illness, and imprisonment. The actions spoken of are not mandated by law, religious or secular, nor do they ensue from a person's conforming to typical virtues, such as the classical virtues (wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice). They arise rather out of love and compassion. They correspond most closely to what are called in rabbinic tradition the *gemiluth hasadim*, the “deeds of lovingkindness,” which the good person does to the unfortunates encountered. The list of six actions done to alleviate conditions of need is not exhaustive; that would have had to include actions to care for persons who are victims of assault, of robbery, of grief from a loved one's death, and so on. The actions listed must be considered representative, even “symbolic stageprops ... used to convey the primary meaning of the parable.” Moreover, the list has been cast into symmetrical parallelism, with two items in each of three groupings:

- (1) giving food and drink to the hungry and thirsty,
- (2) providing shelter for the stranger and clothing for the naked, and
- (3) visiting the sick and the imprisoned. ...

#### **Complete stranger**

The third act of kindness has some ambiguity about it. The term ξένος (*xenos*) can mean either “stranger” (as in the NRSV) or “alien”. ... The modern distinction between an alien (a noncitizen) and a stranger would not have been so clear-cut. The stranger would be from another locality, virtually an alien, certainly “foreign” in the estimation of the person giving the welcome, and perhaps having a different manner and accent. To express the sense of the clause, one could translate it as: “I was a complete stranger to you, and you took me into your home”. ...

#### **Visiting the sick**

Visiting the sick is the fifth act of kindness listed. ... Visiting (or caring for) the sick is listed as a religious duty in various texts, both Jewish and Christian. Among pre-Christian Jewish sources is Sirach 7:35 (2d century B.C.): “Do not hesitate to visit the sick, because for such deeds you will be loved.” In the *Letter of Polycarp* (2d century A.D.) the presbyters of the church are called upon to visit (care for) the sick, and various other early Christian texts use the same verb to commend the visitation of the sick as well. Many rabbinic texts can be cited. ...

#### **Visiting the imprisoned**

Visiting the imprisoned is the last of the six activities mentioned. Such an act was not only possible, but often necessary for the very survival of prisoners. Prisons in the Greco-Roman world were for detention, not for long-term incarceration as a means of punishment, and prisoners were often dependent upon relatives and friends to supply them with food, water, and other necessities. Visiting a person in prison as a benevolent act is mentioned in Jewish sources, as well as in other Christian texts. Within the Babylonian Talmud there is a story in which Rabbi Akiba is in prison, and he is attended by a friend who has to supply his basic need of water. Many texts in the NT presuppose that those in prison can be, and were, visited and cared for by friends (Matt 11:2; Phil 3:25; 4:18, 21; 2 Tim 1:16-17; 4:11, 21; Heb 13:3), which is amply illustrated also in classical sources.

### **One of the least**

Who would qualify as “one of the least of these my brothers and sisters” (25:40)? Within current scholarship there are three major proposals, and each has a direct bearing on the interpretation of the pericope.



The three are:

- (1) any persons in need, the unfortunates of the world;
- (2) the disciples of Jesus; or
- (3) early Christian missionaries. ...

The term ἐλαχίστος (elachistos, “least”) — actually the superlative of ἐλαχυσ (elachus, “small,” “little”) — functions as the superlative form for μικρος (mikros, “small,” “little”), meaning “smallest” or “least”. ...

The terms: ἀδελφῶς (adelphos, “brother”; plural at 25:40, 45, “brothers and sisters”) is used frequently in the Gospel of Matthew (as elsewhere in the NT) to mean “brother” in a spiritual sense, that is, those devoted to one another on the basis of their devotion to Jesus (5:22-24; 7:3-5; 12:49-50; 18:15, 21, 35; 23:8; 28:10). The Twelve (minus Judas) are specified as the “brothers” of Jesus at 28:10.

### **Bases for interpretations**

The interpretation of the passage in recent years goes primarily in three directions, as indicated above. For purposes of analysis, we shall state them briefly, leaving aside various nuances (as well as still other interpretations). According to the various views, the pericope portrays the last judgment, but the basis on which the judgment is to be made differs:

11. The judgment will be based on how people have dealt with the unfortunates of the world — those who are hungry, ill-clothed, imprisoned, etc. Here the term “least” has special significance; it applies particularly to the unfortunates of the world, who are also Jesus’ brothers (and sisters). Usually, in this interpretation, all who are being judged include both Christians and non-Christians alike. This interpretation prevails in various studies of NT ethics.
12. The judgment will be based on how the people of the world have treated Jesus’ disciples, that is, Christians. Here the term “brothers” has special significance; it applies particularly (as elsewhere in Matthew) to the disciples of Jesus. Because of persecution, they suffer the various misfortunes listed. In this interpretation those being judged are necessarily the non-Christians of the world; how they have treated Christians is decisive. A variation on this is that, while the original version of the parable (from Jesus) had to do with the treatment of the needy, the evangelist Matthew revised it so that it has to do with the treatment of Jesus’ disciples.
13. The judgment will be based on how the people of the world have responded to a particular subgroup of Jesus’ disciples, namely, his missionaries. Here the term “brothers” has special significance too, but the six types of misfortunes listed (four times over: 25:35, 37-39, 42-43, 44) are brought in for emphasis as misfortunes typically experienced by traveling missionaries. In this interpretation those being judged are, again, usually regarded as the non-Christians of the world.

### **The way that people have dealt with the unfortunates of the world**

While these proposals are extremely attractive — based as they are on linguistic and comparative study — there are good reasons to maintain that the first interpretation cited is the most satisfactory for the following reasons:

- (1) The passage is located at the conclusion of the lengthy eschatological discourse of 24:1-25:46 and follows upon material that is thoroughly hortatory in function (24:32-25:30). ...

- (2) There is nothing within the passage itself that requires the narrower meaning (that the six categories refer to Jesus' disciples). One comes to that only by way of making connections between terms that appear in the passage ("least of these" and "brothers and sisters") and similar ones that occur elsewhere in the Gospel of Matthew. While cross-referencing is essential in the study of terms, it should be subservient to the study of the overall structure and content of the text at hand. "No one, reading Matt. 25:31-46 in isolation, would suppose that its subject is the treatment of Christian evangelists."
- (3) The phrase "one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters" (25:40) and its briefer form (25:45) have an antecedent. They refer back to any and all of the six examples of the unfortunates listed in 25:35-36. To link the phrase up with designations for the disciples in earlier portions of the Gospel is a difficult stretch. The last time that Jesus has called any of his disciples "my brothers" (οἱ ἀδελφοί μου) was in an enigmatic statement about his disciples (and it is not clear whether that means the Twelve or his followers in general) thirteen chapters earlier (12:49). The next instance is in the post-resurrection scene (28:10).
- (4) To make the link on linguistic grounds, that is, the use of ἐλαχίστος (elachistos, "least"), is extremely difficult. When related terminology is used regarding the disciples, they are called by terms that sound to the ear and appear to the eye as quite different. They are called the μικροί ("little ones," 10:42; 18:6, 10, 14) or (in the singular) the μικροτερός ("the lesser one," 11:11). Why would Matthew use the relatively rare superlative here? The word μικροί would have worked perfectly well in the phrase (so: "to one of these little ones, my brothers and sisters"). The only other time that ἐλαχίστος is used for a disciple is at 5:19, and there the term has a very negative meaning. One must entertain the strong possibility that, by use of the superlative in this pericope, Matthew actually intended to *distinguish* the unfortunates from the disciples of Jesus; it is not simply the latter who are to be recipients of acts of mercy.
- (5) The contexts for Matthew's use of the terms μικροί and μικροτερός are decidedly ecclesiastical. The context for his use of ἐλαχίστος in this passage is not. The scene here has a "sweeping universalism" that the others do not. ...
- (6) While "the least" could refer to a disciple (one in whom God is at work), its more fitting referent is any and all of those listed as persons in need, those who make up the collective of unfortunates. In this way of thinking, it is precisely because they are *not* his disciples in any obvious way that Jesus can call them "the least" of his "brothers". They are "the least" purely because of God's special favor for them, which Jesus here declares. It is certainly much simpler — looking for the plainest meaning of the text — to consider "the least" as referring to persons who are actually and continuously despised and neglected in the course of common life, and then declared to be Jesus' brothers by grace alone, than to think of them as disciples of Jesus, who may or may not be despised at any time or place.
- (7) The persons on the right and left are astonished to hear that they have, or have not, served the king who speaks to them (25:37-39, 44). If the persons on the right had served the representatives of the king — feeding them, clothing them, welcoming them (regardless of their being strangers), and visiting them while sick or in prison — and if the representatives had been missionary disciples of Jesus, why would those on the right find that out only at the last judgment? If we are to adopt the view that "the least" are disciples, it follows that the last judgment passage portrays a scene in which the Son of man rewards those who knowingly served him in the world, that is, those who had received and served disciples who came in his name. But that is precisely what we do not have. Those on the right are completely surprised; they *did not know* the one whom they served. They do

not ask simply, “When *were* you hungry?” but “When did *we see* you hungry?” They served those in need close at hand. The same applies to those on the left. They *did not know* that the persons they neglected to serve came to them in the name of Jesus. And if the unfortunates never identified themselves, how are they to be distinguished from any other unfortunates of the world?

- (8) Neglecting to serve those in need is the only offense mentioned of those on the left. If they had rejected the missionary disciples of Jesus, it would seem that their offenses would have been more overt than simple neglect. The six misfortunes do not begin to coincide with the activities of the persecutors known in this Gospel, namely, the slandering, killing, and flogging of the disciples (5:11; 23:34). The offense is more likely simple neglect of the unfortunates by those who have the means to relieve their suffering.
- (9) In keeping with Matt 10:14-15, it would be fitting that the last judgment be based on how persons respond to the *message* of the missionary disciples of Jesus. That it should be based on how persons respond to their *condition* has no other basis in this Gospel (or any other early Christian literature).
- (10) If “the least” are Christians, and if the peoples of the world are to be judged on the basis of their receiving them, one of the six items listed seems out of place. That is visiting the imprisoned. Visiting the imprisoned is not a matter of “receiving” people or responding to their apparent needs. It is an overt act that involves seeking a person out. Furthermore, if a person were placed in prison on the basis of missionary work, and if it were known why that person was imprisoned, it is difficult to imagine any non-Christian risking a visit. In this particular instance, visiting a person in prison appears rather to be simply an act of kindness and support, regardless of the reason why that person had been placed there.
- (11) According to the perspective of the Gospel of Matthew, “righteousness” is characterized in part by mercy. That is spelled out in texts characteristic of this Gospel (5:7; 18:33; 23:23; cf. 12:7). It is therefore to be expected in the present context that the one who will be accounted righteous in the final judgment is the one who has shown mercy to persons in need.
- (12) The conditions of those called “the least” are typical, though not exhaustive, of those suffered by human beings the world over and in every age. It is not unusual for ancient writers to list a number of them in what can be called form-critically a “catalog of misfortunes”. Such lists are found, for example, in the OT (e.g., Isa 58:6-7: the oppressed, the hungry, the homeless, and the naked; Zech 7:9-10: “the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor”). They are found in both Greco-Roman literature” and Jewish pseudepigraphical works. There is nothing about the list in our pericope, given four times over (25:35-36, 37-39, 42-43, 44), that characterizes the suffering of missionary disciples alone. Such an interpretation is certainly narrower than required by the text.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*, (selections from) pages 310-323, Arland J. Hultgren.