CLASS ANTAGONISM AND EXPLOITATION IN JESUS' PARABLES: MK 12

In this essay, I will approach the parable of the so-called Wicked Tenants from a literary and sociological perspectives. Recent anthropological studies of pre-capitalist societies within a social conflict perspective have empower biblical studies to re-read Jesus' parables from a new perspective. Social anthropology has allowed us to hear Jesus' traditions within their context of class struggle and exploitation.

According to Gerhard Lenski, in agrarian societies the lower class was composed of the peasant, artisan, the unclean and degraded, and expendables sectors. The peasant sector, in agrarian societies, comprised the bulk of the population. Peasants paid tribute from their production in rates of between 10 and 70 percent of their total output. These tributes included taxes levied on other sectors of the agrarian society which were usually shifted to the peasants and to the urban artisans. Another burden levied on the peasant sector was forced labor on their landlords' lands. Lenski states that "when land taxes, rents, and labor services failed to secure the whole of the economic surplus, or left the peasants time or energy to spare, still other taxes and obligations were devised" (1966:269).
According to Alföldy, the lower strata of the countryside "constituted the overwhelming majority of the population of the empire" (1988:142). It was comprised of nominally free peasants and rural slaves. The nominally free peasants were tenants and landless people. Alföldy evaluates the social conditions of the rural population under the Roman empire and states that it included "the most oppressed social strata in the Roman empire" (1988:145).

JESUS AND THE PEASANTRY

The parable of the Wicked Tenants is placed in Mark 12.1-12, with parallels in Luke and Matthew, and in the Gospel of Thomas 65,66. It is my contention that this parable is a story about class antagonism and exploitation.

Class Confrontation and Violence: Mark 12.1-12

The parable's introduction is secondary. In Mark it is introduced with the Markan formula of transition "and he began to speak..." 1

Mark situates this parable following the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem and his attack on the temple. Mark's setting places Jesus in strong conflict with the authorities. This parable is a preface to the passion narrative. Indeed, the parable --as it is now situated-- is an explanation of the assassination of Jesus by the Jewish and Roman authorities; it is

1See the same construction in Mark 1.45; 2.23; 4.1; 5.17,20; 6.2,7,34,55; 8.11,31,32; 10.28,32,41,42,47; 11.15; 12.1; 13.5; 14.19,33,65,69,71; 15.8,18.
a parabolic passion prediction, as is 8.32, 9.31 and 10.31. However, in terms of the parable itself, this context is secondary, part of the evangelist's redaction of Mark's material. Originally, parables were set to the oral context of Jesus and early Christianity. The community passed them on without frames, as in the Gospel of Thomas. Only later were they set into narrative contexts, as they appear in the Synoptic Gospels.

The introductions of Luke and Matthew are also secondary to the parable. Luke's introduction follows Mark's order, but now the parable is spoken to the people, even though it is understood as an attack on the scribes and the high priest (Luke 20.9,19). One wonders if Luke has set this parable with the people at large as part of his understanding of the Jewish community as responsible for the death of Jesus. In the case of Matthew, the introduction is to a second parable. It comes after the story of the two sons. The parable is introduced by the Matthean formula, "hear another parable." This Matthean formula occurs whenever he narrates a series of parables (13.24, 31,33; 21.33). In the Gospel of Thomas, the parable is introduced by, "he said," which is the introductory word for the sayings of Jesus in this Gospel.

Mark 12.12, and its parallels in Luke and Matthew, are a frame to the parable. Mark's frame in 12.12 serves as a narrative hermeneutical key to the parable. The subject of the clause is implicit in the verb ἐπιτεύχω and refers back to the indirect object (οὐκέτα) in verse 1, which also refers back to 11.28, "the chief priest and the scribes and the elders." Mark
understood the parable as a teaching against these authorities who are now the "wicked tenants". This framing is secondary, as the Gospel of Thomas shows. Luke follows Mark closely and possibly adds the motif of the "hour" (Luke 22.14,53). A major change in Matthew is that the adversaries are named as "chief priests and the Pharisees." These are the typical adversaries of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. The other major redaction of Matthew is the purpose clause explaining the reason of the attachment of the crowds to Jesus; ἐπεὶ εἰς προφητείαν ἀνάκτον ἔρχεται. In Matthew one of the titles of Jesus is prophet (13.57; 21.11).

In Mark and its Lucan and Matthean parallels, the parable concludes with a question of judgment about the plot (v.9). This conclusion is missing in the gospel of Thomas. With this redaction, Mark is able to condemn the Jewish authorities who, according to his narrative, finally killed the Son of God. The concluding section of the narrative also helps us to date the Markan Gospel because it seems to presuppose events after 70 CE. In this sense it is a vaticinus ex eventu.

This Markan conclusion redacts an end to the parable in order to interpret it. Indeed, the idea of destroying the tenants and giving the vineyard to others is an early Christian concern foreign to the historical Jesus. Another interesting motif that this conclusion has added to the parable is the coming of God to judge the wicked tenant. The landowner has been assimilated into the figure of God, an early Christian interpretation.
Luke added to the Markan text the answer in v.16b, "when they heard this, they said, God forbid!" In v. 19, the scribes and the chief priests are the ones who understand the parable as a charge against themselves.

In Matthew, the parable is changed into a dialogue between Jesus and his adversaries in which the adversaries judge and convict themselves, as in Nathan's parable in the Hebrew Bible. "They said to him, He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their season." This is all Matthean terminology. For example, the theme of the fruits appears nineteen times in Matthew, while only five in Mark and thirteen in Luke. Another interesting redaction by Matthew is that, by means of the fruit motif, he relates this narrative to the fig tree story. The point is that Judaism has not produced the fruits of justice required, and thus God has given the vineyard to the Matthean (Christian?) community. Thus, the introductory and concluding frames of the parable were part of its setting in a narrative context, a context which itself was secondary.

In the Markan narrative, Ps. 118.22 is included as part of the narrative. This psalm is quoted from the LXX, a use which points to a secondary redaction. The quotation is the next logion of Jesus after the parable of the tenants in the Gospel of Thomas. This gospel is useful for giving us an insight into the history of traditions. It seems to me that in the prehistory of these sayings, the parable and the quotation of Psalm 118.22 were
in the first stage independent one of the other. At a second stage, they were set next to each other, as is now the case in the Gospel of Thomas. Still later, both independent traditions were fused into one unit, as it stands in Mark. Our parable in its earliest stage was independent from the Psalm quotation.

Matthew and Luke follow Mark word by word in this quotation of the Psalm. One wonders if for Matthew and Luke the quotation of Scripture was more authoritative than the quotation of Mark himself, and hence they did not redact the quotation as they redacted Mark. Luke also uses a quotation of Psalm 118.22 in Acts 4.11. There, it is stated clearly that Jesus is the stone which the Jews rejected and who has become the head of the corner (of the new temple of God?). Another redaction that Luke adds to the quotation of the Psalm are the words, "Every one who falls on that stone will be broken in pieces; but when it falls on any one it will crush him." The position that these adversaries had taken against Jesus will determine their future. Another redaction of Luke is his omission of Mark 12.11.

Matthew adds v.43, where Jesus says to his adversaries, "therefore, I tell you, the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing its fruits." This is a Matthean life setting concern and thus a redaction, as discussed above.

Mark 12.1b and parallels are a reference to Is 5.2 in the LXX. The verbs ἑφτευσεν, περιόθηκεν, ἔρυξεν, ὅκωδόμησεν, ἔβιβάζετο are obviously taken from the LXX. On the other hand, this allusion
(paraphrase) is not in the text of the Gospel of Thomas. Thus, it seems to me that this material is secondary. By mixing the parable with Is 5.2, the parable takes on a new meaning. Isaiah 5 is an allegory of God as the owner of the vineyard and Israel as the vineyard who is bringing forth bad fruits. With the inclusion of Isaiah 5, the parable has become an allegory of God's dealing with Jewish authorities. The servants could be the prophets and even John the Baptist. The "beloved" Son is obviously an allusion to Jesus who in the allegory was executed by wicked tenants, i.e., the Jewish authorities.

Matthew transformed the landowner into a householder (δομέων·). This is a common Matthean title (eight times in Matthew, one in Mark, four in Luke). Luke omits most of Isaiah 5.2 but adds to the parable that the landowner takes a trip to another country who was ἡγομένους ἱκανοὺς. This refers to the delay of the parousia, a delay which was part of Luke's theological theme.2

In the Gospel of Thomas, the landowner is a "good man". In the Greco-Roman world, the upper classes received honor due to their power. One of the signs of this honor and prestige was the kind of status title, good (ἀριστοτέλειον). According to Liddell and Scott, ἀριστοτέλειον as ἀριστοτέλειον referred among other things to "well-born, gentle... in a political sense, aristocrats" (1989ed: 4). Therefore, a possible alternative translation to this "good

---

"landowner" is "wealthy landowner". Mark, who is independent from the Gospel of Thomas, does not have the landowner as a "good man" (in a direct statement). Thus, I must conclude that the parable might not have been of a "good landowner" but only of a landowner.

We have noticed already that the verbs for the action of the landowner in Mark follow Isa 5.2 in the LXX. In the Gospel of Thomas, the actions of the landowner were only to possess a vineyard that he gave to some farmers. Once we assume that Mark's verbs are secondary, it seems that the Gospel of Thomas is nearest to the earliest parable in this respect. Another detail in the Gospel of Thomas is the landowner's purpose in renting the land to the tenants, "so that they would work it and he would receive its profits from them." In Mark this clause is part of the first servant commission. The Gospel of Thomas changes the agrarian language, ἵνα παρῇ τῶν γεωργῶν λάβῃ ὑπὸ τῶν καρπῶν..., to profits. It seems to me that the Markan language reflects better Palestinian rural context, whereas the Gospel of Thomas probably reflects an urban language. Thus, Mark's language seems earlier and more authentic since the earliest context was agrarian.

The first sending of the servant(s) in Mark 12.2 is in all the parallels and the Gospel of Thomas. Matthew changed the clause and converted it into a temporal clause, "when the season of fruit drew near." Another redaction of Matthew is the transformation of the slave to the plural. This is Matthean style. In other parables where the characters are slaves, they
are always in the plural (13.27; 18.23; 22.3; 25.14). Further, Matthew uses the \textit{αὐτῶν} as a possessive of the gains, emphasizing that the vine is from the landowner.

The section in Mark 12.3-5 and parallels is different in every tradition. For Mark there is a progression of events from the beating and sending away empty-handed of the first slave, to the wounding in the head and shameful treatment of the second slave, to the death of the last slave, followed by a summary of the whole scene. Since for Matthew, the commissioned were a group of slaves, he carries out similar embellishments of the whole scene. Now the first group of slaves received three different punishments: one was beaten, one was murdered and another was stoned. Then the "householder" sent more slaves who received the same treatment as the first group. Matthew omits parts of the second commission of a slave and the third slave and summary completely.

In the Lucan parallel, the first slave’s actions follow Mark, but the scene has a small change. Instead of wounding the slave in the head (Mark), they again beat the second slave. In the third slave section, instead of killing the slave (Mark), they wound this one. Luke omits Mark’s summary. In the Gospel of Thomas, there are only two slaves and then the son. The first slave, as in Mark, was beaten, but unlike Mark, "they almost killed him." Thomas adds to the story that the second slave went back and told this to the vineyard owner. Another difference is that, in the Gospel of Thomas, the thoughts of the landowner are
told, "perhaps he did not know them." Thus, he sent another servant. This other servant was only beaten, without mention of murder.

Clearly this section of the parable has been embellished. Matthew changes the original slave to a group, Mark has three slaves in a growing tension plus a summary, and Luke has three slaves also in a growing tension, but not as much so as Mark. In the Gospel of Thomas, the violence is explained as lack of knowledge (wisdom or gnostic?). Crossan points out that the two groups of Matthew are a reference in his allegory to the former and latter prophets in the Hebrew Bible. He also points out that Luke is more realistic compared to Mark, whose last slave murdered is a reference to John the Baptist (1973:88).

When we take out all this secondary material, the parable’s hypothetical core stands probably as follows:

He sent his slave so that the farmers would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard, and they sent him away with empty hands. He sent another slave and they beat him.

Mark 12.6-8 and parallels is the climax of the parable. For Mark, the landowner still had one son, his ἐμνήμος. This adjective is commonly attached to the title son in Mark (Mark 1.11; 9.7). In this way, Mark converted this parable into another passion prediction (Mark 8.31; 9.32; 10.32). Matthew follows Mark closely. On the other hand, Luke calls the

---

1 According to Brad H. Young (1989:285), the Greek term ἁγαπητός can refer to the Hebrew term יָהִיד which means "only son".
Obviously, Luke is associating God with the landowner. Luke also alludes to Isa 5.5 (LXX), "ποιήσω." In Isaiah this was a direct statement, "I will announce to you what I shall do", but in Luke it is a question. The Gospel of Thomas is sober. "The master sent his Son. He said, perhaps they will respect my Son. Those farmers seized him, they killed him, since they knew he was the heir of the vineyard." Apart from the title "Master", the Gospel of Thomas seems to be nearer to the earliest stages of the parable in this section.

I think that the oldest hypothetical parable that we can reconstruct is as follows;

A (wealthy?) man had a vineyard. He let it out to farmers and went into another country. He sent his slave so that they could get from the farmers some of the fruit of the vineyard. And they sent him away empty-handed. He sent another slave and the farmers beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Then the master sent his son. He said, perhaps they will respect my son. But the farmers seized him, and killed him, since they knew he was the heir of the vineyard.

Crossan (1973:93) has presented the following structure for the parable:

(1) Setting: The landowner and the farmer tenants
(2) the first servant
(3) the second servant
(4) the son of the landowner

Once we rebuild the hypothetical, earliest parable, we notice that the genre is a parable, not an allegory as in Mark and the other synoptics. The multiple attestation of independent traditions, such as Mark and the Gospel of Thomas, show that a
very early tradition about Jesus and the conflict between peasantry and wealthy landowners was shared among early Christians.

If we read this parable from the peasant's point of view, we notice that in the class structure of an agrarian society this is a narrative that tells a story of resistance and confrontation between landowner and the peasantry, arising from the tributary relationship. The antagonism is such that the parable evolves in a "spiral of violence" and ends with the assassination of the landowner's only son. This parable was so scandalous for early Christians that they smoothed it and converted it into a christological allegory. As early Christian communities became more city bound as well as upper class dominated, the parable became more embarrassing. The social stratification of an agrarian society expressed in the parable was projected onto the deity (the good landowner) and violence between the peasantry and the heir of the landowner was transformed into a christological passion prediction.

The parable was recast so well into early Christian faith and self understanding that even modern scholars have interpreted it as a passion prediction (Young 1989), or as a datum of Jesus' self conception (Charlesworth 1988). On the other hand, this allegorical story about Jesus' self-consciousness and/or Jesus' passion prediction has been understood by some modern scholars as
the basis for the rejection of the authenticity of this parable. But I would suggest that this is a parable not about Jesus' self-consciousness or passion prediction, but about the antagonism between Palestinian peasantry and the upper class landowners.

J. E. Stambaugh and D.L. Balch have given us a view of the situation of peasants in Palestine in the world of Jesus. After Israel became a colony of Rome, a considerable number of Jewish peasants were made landless. In Herod's kingdom there was a trend toward large holdings of land by the rich, and cultivation of those lands by tenant farmers.

This trend excited the savage hostility between landlords and renters.... Small landowners and tenants often were forced to ask for loans. The pressures for these loans was... intense.... Economic strains... produced deep antagonism between the owners of large rural properties and their tenants or debtors. These owners often lived in the cities, sometimes foreign ones.... This struggle for scarce land was one factor that stimulated the revolutionary cause of Hezekiah and John Gischala in Upper Galilee. (1986:91-92)

If we take the peasant sector's point of view, our parable describes the antagonism between the peasantry and the upper classes. The continual sending of surplus collectors (including the heir) by the landowner witnesses to the exploitation of tenants by the landowner. That the tenants resolved to oppose the exaction of surplus witnesses to the tenants' response to the exploitation to which they were subjected. Indeed, in this case

---

both opponents are struggling for the land output. The plot of this binary opposition is the escalation of violence. A reading from an upper class point of view has converted our peasants into the wicked tenants. A reading from the peasants' point of view shows the response of the exploited to a tributary relationship with the absentee landowner.

The parable's tension (class antagonism) is solved with the assassination of the heir. Gerd Theissen points to the situation that is addressed here:

The aggressiveness of the country population toward the masters who profited from their work was often reinforced by absenteeism. This absenteeism in fact helped on the transition from slavery to colonization, but it had disadvantages for the smaller tenants in Palestine: the absentee landlords -- who were often foreigners -- were interested only in profit, and not in the prosperity of their possessions (1978:56).

In this parable we are able to hear the voice of the oppressed peasantry in the earliest traditions about Jesus. The parable was a scandal to the ears of the landowner class (and all those who sided with the landowner, in the parable context and in our context). The exploitation to which the landowner submitted the peasantry backfired in a terrible manner.

What the parable does not allow us to know (in the earliest tradition) is the result of this violence. Early Christianity, in a different context, knew the outcome. The peasants would be repressed and exploited even further. "What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others" (Mark 12.9). Nevertheless, the parable brings forth a message, that the course of class antagonism
between landowners and peasantry was confrontation. Confrontation meant exploitation, violence and resistance to exploitation and structural violence. Hence, the parable confronted Jesus' contemporaries with a serious dilemma: no justice, no peace.

Conclusion

In this essay, we have examined several traditions about Jesus and the lower class. We can make the following observations in regard to Jesus' response to the lower class situation:

(1) Jesus responded to the social stratification and social class conflict of his context;

(2) Jesus acknowledged the class confrontation and violence between the propertied class and the peasantry;

(3) Jesus acknowledged the exploitation and the plight of the peasantry in their economic relationship with the propertied class;

(4) Jesus used his teaching as tools to facilitate the generation of class consciousness among the lower classes.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


Boers, Hendrikus

Boismard, M.E.

Borg, Marcus J.

Bottomore, Tom

Breech, James

Brown, John P.

Charlesworth, James H.

Clark Kee, Howard

Cohen, S.J.D.  
1987 From the Maccabees to the Mishnah.  

Conzelmann, Hans  
1961 The Theology of St. Luke. San Francisco:  

Croce, Benedetto  
1913 "Concerning the Limitation of the  
Materialistic Theory of History." Pp. 103-110  
in Interpretations of Marx. Ed. T. Bottomore.  
Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.

Crossan, John Dominic  


Davies, S. L.  

de Ste. Croix, G.E.M.  

Derrett, J.D.  

Desai, Meghnad  

Divitcioglu, Sencer  

Dodd, C. H.  
Edwards, D.R.  
1988  
"First Century Urban/rural Relations is Lower Galilee: Exploring the Archeological and Literary Evidence."  
California: Scholar Press.

Fanon, Frantz  
1967  
The Wretched of the Earth. Penguin.

Figes, Orlando  
1987  
"V.P. Danilov on the Analytical Distinction between Peasants and Farmers."  
Pp. 121-124 in Peasants & Peasant Societies.  
Ed. T. Shanin.  

Finley, Moses I.  
1973  

1991  

Fioravanti, Eduardo  
1972  

Flusser, David  
1986  
"Aesop's Miser and the Parable of the Talents."  

Freire, Paulo  
1970  
Pedagogía del Oprimido. Mexico: Siglo XXI.

Funk, Robert W. et al.  
1988  
The Parables of Jesus. California: Polebridge Press.

Gafni, I.  
1984  
"The Historical Background."  

Gager, John G.  
1979  
"Social Description and Sociological Explanation in the Study of Early Christianity: A Review Essay."  
Pp. 428-440 in The Bible and Liberation: Political and

Gardner, Jane F. & Wiedemann, Thomas

Garnsey, Peter

Garnsey, Peter and Saller Richard

Garnsey, Peter and Woolf, G.

Gnilka, Joachim

Godelier, Maurice


Gottwald, Norman K.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Source/Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985b</td>
<td>&quot;Contemporary Studies on Social Class and Social Stratification and a Hypothesis about Social Class in Monarchic Israel.&quot;</td>
<td>ASOR-SBL Seminar Paper</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Hengel, Martin**


1989  | The Zealots. Edinburgh: T & T Clark Ltd. |

**Hilferding, R.**


**Himmelweit, Susan**


**Hobsbawn, Eric J.**


**Hollenbach, Paul W.**


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>&quot;The Conversion of Jesus: From Jesus the Baptizer to Jesus the Healer.&quot; Pp. 196-219 in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>California: Scholar Press.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Holmberg, B.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hopwood, Keith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Horbury, W.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Horsley, Richard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>&quot;Bandits, Messiahs, and Longshormen: Popular Unrest in Galilee Around the Time of Jesus.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Horsley, Richard &amp; Hanson, J.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jeremias, Joachim</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Josephus, Flavius  

Kerblay, Basile  

Kyrtatas, Demitris J.  

Kolakowski, Leszek  

Lagerquist, Laura  

Lenski, Gerhard E.  

Lichtheim, George  

Linnemann, Eta  
1966 Parables of Jesus Introduction and Exposition. London: SPCK.  

Lipset, Seymour M.  

MacMullen, Ramsay  
Maduro, Otto

Malina, Bruce

Marx, Karl

Marx, Karl and Hobsbawm, Eric

McGovern, A.F.

Meier, J.P

Memmi, Albert

Meyer, Alfred G.

Milavec, Aaron A.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>


Schmidt, Thomas E. 1987 Hostility to Wealth in the Synoptic Gospels. Sheffield: Sheffield Academy Press.


Seddon, David

Segundo, Juan Luis

Shanin, Teodor

Snodgrass, K.

Stambaugh, J.E. and Balch, David L.

Stegemann, Wolgang

Stern, D.

Stern, M.
Theissen, Gerd

Thoma, Clemens & Wyschogrod, Michael

Thorner, Daniel

Tilly, Charles

Varga, Eugenio
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Young, Brad H.</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td><em>Jesus and His Jewish Parables: Rediscovering the Roots of Jesus' Teaching.</em> New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>