
A Parable of Jesus as a Clue to Biblical Interpretation

by John C. Brunt

Why do we need a Matthew, a Mark, a Luke, and a John, a Paul, and all the writers who have borne testimony in regard to the life and ministry of the Saviour? Why could not one of the disciples have given us a connected account of Christ's earthly life? Why does one writer bring in points that another does not mention? Why, if these points are essential, did not all the writers mention them?—It is because the minds of men differ. Not all comprehend things in exactly the same way. Certain Scripture truths appeal much more strongly to the minds of some than others.¹

—Ellen G. White

One important way to appreciate the distinctiveness of each book in Scripture is to study the way the Bible was formed. Can this approach to the Bible—often called the “historical-critical method”—be used by Bible students who hold a conservative view of scriptural inspiration? One way to decide is to look at a test case, the parable of the wicked tenants, and see how that parable was treated differently in Mark, Matthew,

and Luke. Analysis of the distinctive editing by gospel writers (technically called redaction criticism) is one example of the historical-critical method.

Before studying how the editing of that parable differs from gospel to gospel, it is helpful to remember that analysis of editing builds upon the work of other analysts of Scripture who focused on the sources of the gospels (source criticism) and others who focused on the forms in which passages in Scripture were fashioned (form criticism).

Analysts of the sources of the gospels recognized that the synoptic gospels are interrelated in a way that suggests direct literary dependence of some kind.² Although various hypotheses to explain the data were advanced as long as 200 years ago, the fundamental work that led to the present near-consensus among New Testament scholars was carried out in the nineteenth century by Lachmann, Wilke, Weisse, and Holtzmann and was refined by Streeter in the early 1920's. The basic conclusions of source analysts is that Mark was the first gospel to be written. They think Matthew and Luke each made independent use of Mark and that Matthew and Luke also used another non-extant source made up primarily of sayings material (represented by the symbol “Q”), in addition to their own unique material. Thus Matthew and Luke

John C. Brunt, is professor of New Testament studies at Walla Walla College and author of *A Day for Healing: The Meaning of Jesus' Sabbath Miracles*.

are both made up of material from Mark and Q, in addition to their own unique material.

The early source analysts who reached these conclusions were liberal scholars who attached certain theological baggage to their source-critical views that is no longer accepted by anyone today. They believed that in Mark they had found the simple historical Jesus who taught the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God and that it was unadulterated with the theological aberrations found in the later, less trustworthy gospels. This liberal theological baggage, however, neither grew out of the basic data from which their conclusions about source were drawn, nor negated the value of those conclusions.

“The application of form-critical methodology is further evidence that the early Christians did not cease the observance of Sabbath, but observed it in a way that differed from that of their Jewish neighbors.”

Most of today’s analysts of editing in the Bible accept that the writers of later gospels depended on gospels written earlier and that Mark was written first.³ Indeed, these conclusions about sources are crucial to the work of those going on to studying editing. However, editorial analysts do not see the evangelists using courses in the wooden manner that was often described by earlier analysts of sources.

While source analysis spoke to the problem of synoptic relationships, it did nothing to address questions about the gospel material before the existence of the written sources. After World War I, form analysts—such as Schmidt, Dibelius, Bultmann, and Taylor, borrowing methods developed in the study of oral folk materials and already applied to the Old Testament—turned their attention to the period of oral transmission previous to the written gospels.

The basic assumptions and conclusions of form analysis as applied to the gospels were:⁴

1. The stories about and sayings of Jesus were transmitted orally before they were written down.

2. These stories and sayings were circulated separately in independent units.

3. During the stage of oral transmission the material assumed certain fixed forms.

4. These forms can be linked to and arose from particular life-situations within the church.

5. The material served the needs of the church, and the church played a very creative role in its formation and transmission—thus the material often tells us much about the church and little, if anything, about Jesus.

6. The relative age and historical value of traditional material can be determined by the application of certain criteria.

7. The gospel writers were primarily collectors who pieced together various oral traditions and already written materials. Again, as was the case in the analysis of sources, the “liberal” conclusions in the last part of this list are by no means necessitated by the insights of the first part. It is altogether possible to agree that the gospel material served the needs of the early church, and was transmitted orally in certain fixed forms that are now identifiable within the gospels, without concluding that the church either was careless with the tradition or simply created it.

For example, in a separate study⁵ I have found form analysis useful in showing that Jesus’ Sabbath healing miracles were preserved by the church and recounted by the gospel writers to meet a certain need—that of justifying the church’s different manner of observing Sabbath. Indeed, these stories contain common ingredients that almost qualify them as a distinctive sub-form. The issue behind the stories appears to be the manner of Sabbath observance. These

stories justify an approach to Sabbath observance among Christians that differs from that of Jews by appealing to the example of Jesus. Thus the result of the application of form-critical methodology is further evidence that the early Christians did not cease the observance of Sabbath, but observed it in a way that differed from that of their Jewish neighbors.

Editorial analysis (or redaction criticism) grew up in the 1950's and 1960's and is associated with the names Perrin,⁶ Bornkamm,⁷ Conzelmann,⁸ and Marxsen.⁹ It assumes the basic conclusions of form analysis, but reacts sharply against number seven above. It considers the gospel writers to have become creative theologians who arranged and modified their material from particular theological perspectives to address a new life-situation in their own community. Therefore, editorial analysts concentrate not on the sources or traditions that stand behind the gospels, but on the way that the gospel writer uses both traditional material and his own contributions to form a new literary creation.

The methodology of editorial analysis involves careful observation of the text to determine how the author has collected, arranged, and modified his material in order to understand what he was trying to communicate. This includes careful comparison of the author's work with his sources whenever they are extant (as is the case with Matthew and Luke who used Mark). But even when sources are not extant, the analyst of editing in the gospels, by careful observation of the author's style, emphases, and use of language, attempts to distinguish the already existing tradition from the editing contributed by the author of the gospel.

Once again, the major analysts of editing work within a liberal tradition, which sees a very creative role for both the church in its transmission of the oral tradition and for the evangelists. Thus Norman Perrin approves of R. H. Lightfoot's conclusion that the gospels yield "only a whisper of Jesus'

voice."¹⁰ Perrin goes on to say that "a Gospel does not portray the history of the ministry of Jesus from A.D. 27–30, or whatever the dates may actually have been, but the history of Christian experience in any and every age."¹¹

“Source analysts say that Mark was the first gospel to be written.”

But these liberal conclusions are not inherent in the approach itself. The essential element in this way of studying the Bible is merely the careful attention to the distinctiveness of each writer. This appreciation of each author's unique contribution is entirely in keeping with God's purpose in communicating His message to us through various individuals. Ellen White, in the opening quotation of this essay, applauded the inclusion of many gospels in the canon "because the minds of men differ."

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants
 Mark 12:1–12; Matthew 21:33–46;
 Luke 20:9–19

All three of the synoptic evangelists include this parable at the same point in Jesus' ministry.¹² It is near the beginning of the Passion Week, and Jesus' opponents are asking him a series of controversial questions designed to trick him. Not only is this basic ordering of events the same in the three gospels, but the wording is so much the same at many points that dependence of one gospel author on another seems to be the only satisfactory explanation. It is even easier to recognize dependence when we realize that Jesus probably told the parable in Aramaic and the gospels are written in Greek. It is not possible within the scope of this paper to present the evidence for writers of later gospels depending on gospels written earlier and the gospel of Mark

being written first. But on the basis of both order and language, it is best to assume that all three gospels are narrating the same event—that Mark’s account is first, and that Matthew and Luke both had Mark’s account in front of them when they wrote.

But even though it appears certain that all three evangelists are narrating the same event (it is hard to imagine Jesus telling it three different times in the same context), there are unmistakable differences in detail in the three accounts. In all three an absentee owner first sends servants and, finally, a son to the tenants to receive fruit. But the details, for example, of the sending of the servants differ, as the following outline shows.

country. The details of the vineyard (hedge, winepress, tower, etc.) clearly connect it with Isaiah 5:2, the song of the vineyard, and show that the vineyard is intended to represent Israel (see Isaiah 5:7).

If the vineyard is Israel, the owner must represent God and the servants could hardly be other than the prophets sent to Israel, as Mark 12:5b makes explicit. Thus the parable has undeniable allegorical elements. This becomes even more clear with the reference to the son in verse 6. The designation “beloved” clearly shows that the son is Jesus. After unsuccessful attempts through the prophets to call the tenants of the vineyard to accept their responsibility, God finally sends his own son, who is killed.¹³

<i>Matthew</i>	<i>Mark</i>	<i>Luke</i>
A group of servants sent. Some beaten, some killed, some stoned.	One servant sent who is beaten.	One servant sent who is beaten.
A larger group sent with the same results.	Another servant sent who is wounded in the head.	Another servant sent who is beaten.
Son sent who is killed.	Another servant sent who is killed.	Another servant sent who is wounded and cast out.
	Many others sent who are beaten and killed.	Son sent who is killed.
	Son sent who is killed.	

Do these differences have meaning? What follows is a brief and oversimplified analysis of editorial shaping of the parable that looks first at the Markan version, then examines, in turn, the Matthean and Lukan accounts.

The Markan Version

This parable appears to be addressed to the chief priests, scribes, and elders, since Jesus tells it immediately following His answer to a question about authority put to him by these three groups. The parable concerns a man who planted a vineyard, let it out to tenants, and went to another

Following the basic story, Jesus asks a rhetorical question (What will the owner of the vineyard do?), which he answers himself by declaring that the tenants will be destroyed and the vineyard given to others. Presumably, this suggests that the Christian church assumes the role once filled by Israel, but Mark does not make this explicit. Since the parable is addressed to the chief priests, scribes, and elders, Mark may only be thinking of the rejection of the Jewish leaders.

Jesus concludes with a reference to Psalm 118 and compares his ministry with the stone that the builders rejected, a motif that became very important in early Christianity (see Acts 4:11; I Peter 2:4–7). Mark con-

cludes by showing that the Jewish leaders got the point of the parable (they perceived that he told it against them) and would have arrested Jesus except for their fear of the crowd. The focus of attention in this Markan version is the conflict between Jesus and his opponents and the significance of this conflict for the history of salvation. The central elements are the Son, his rejection by the Jewish leaders, and their resulting loss of the vineyard. Also of special significance in the story is the surprising element of the owner's patience. Although the tenants eventually lose the vineyard, the owner's patience goes to lengths that would hardly have been expected from any first-century absentee landlord. Although these central elements remain clear in the other two accounts, different facets of the picture are emphasized.

The Matthean Account

A number of minor variations of arrangement and detail are apparent in Matthew.

1. Jesus' previous encounter is with the chief priests and elders, not the scribes. Carlston suggests that this is because scribes are more positive for Matthew,¹⁴ but there are too many exceptions for this to be convincing.

2. Matthew includes two additional parables along with this one. The parable of the two sons precedes it, and the parable of the wedding garment follows it. The former helps emphasize Israel's recalcitrance and ties it with Israel's rejection of John the Baptist, whose authority has been the subject of the previous encounter. Thus Israel is seen to have rejected first John the Baptist, then Jesus.

3. It is not simply a man, but a "householder" who plants the vineyard. This is a favorite term for Matthew (he uses it seven times while Mark uses it but once).

4. In verse 34 Matthew mentions that the

servants were sent when the "season of fruit" drew near. In Mark there is only one incidental reference to fruit in the story. It is parallel to this verse where it is said that the owner sent the servant to get some fruit. But for the Matthew the concept of "fruit" is crucial to the story. Here the servants go at the season of fruit to get some fruit. In verse 41 the vineyard is given to other tenants who will *give the owner fruits*, and in verse 43 the kingdom is taken away and given to a nation that will *bear fruit*. Thus the concept of bearing fruit, only incidental in Mark, is strongly emphasized in Matthew in a way that is characteristic for him (cf. 3:8–10; 7:15–19; 13:8, 23, 26). The term fruit appears 19 times in Matthew and only five times in Mark.

5. The grouping of the servants is different (see parallels and differences outlined above). Virtually all commentators point out that Matthew is probably thinking of the former and latter prophets with his two groups of servants. This makes the reference to Israel more explicit.

6. In verse 39 the order of events has been reversed. Instead of the son being killed and cast out, he is first cast out and then killed. This heightens the allegorical reference to Jesus, by pointing to His crucifixion outside the city (cf. Heb. 13:12).

7. In verses 40 and 41, the rhetorical question has become an actual question that is answered by Jesus' opponents, rather than by Jesus himself. This heightens the sense of controversy and has the opponents condemn themselves.

8. The saying of Jesus in verse 43 is added. This saying makes much more explicit the fact that the Christian church assumes the role once played by Israel and makes the role dependent on bearing fruit.

When all these variations are taken together, the parable does have a somewhat different thrust than it does in Mark. The specific conflict between Jesus and his opponents is made more direct and dramatic. There is also a more explicit corporate or ecclesiological emphasis. The Christian

church is the new Israel that now accepts responsibility for bearing fruit, and as Carlston¹⁵ has shown, this latter concept adds an emphasis not present in Mark. Now the church can only possess the kingdom if it bears fruit. The parable of the wedding garment that follows connects with this emphasis and shows that even the new recipients of the kingdom cannot presume on God's grace. Matthew is showing that the kingdom is only for fruit-bearers. As Carlston says of Matthew's account of our parable:

The parable could be understood to reflect a regular principle in the divine economy: just as God has turned from the Jews to the Gentiles, so he will always turn from those who do not produce "fruit" to those who do. This seems to be Matthew's meaning, unknown to Mark and probably unthinkable for most Christians ever since.¹⁶

The Lukan Account

Several of the specific changes in Luke's account reflect stylistic changes that are typical of Luke, but there is a somewhat different theological focus as well. Among the variations are the following:

1. Luke specifically mentions that the parable is addressed to the "people." In both Luke and Mark, the Jewish leaders are contrasted with the people. The leaders oppose Jesus while the people are receptive. But only Luke addresses the story to the people, perhaps beginning already to set the tone for a more individualistic emphasis where not only the Jewish leaders, but the hearers or the people are to see the significance of the story for them ("people" is a favorite term for Luke; he uses it 37 times).

2. Luke omits the extended mention of the details of Isaiah 5. For him the connec-

tion between the vineyard and Israel is far less important than for Matthew or Mark.

3. Luke adds the detail that the owner went to another country "for a long time." Many interpreters have seen this as a subtle reference to the delay of Christ's Second Coming, but Luke's two other uses of the identical expression (8:27 and 23:8) are not allegorical, and even if this one is, it is far too subtle to be proven.

4. The ordering of the servants is different. Luke demonstrates a greater sense of style. There is an ascending crescendo of ill treatment of the three servants, and the dramatic climax is reached with the son, who is the first to be killed.

5. In verse 13, the owner, instead of making the statement "they will respect my son" before sending him, adds "*it may be they will respect him.*" Carlston¹⁷ suggests that Luke's sensibility is offended by the owner's apparently mistaken conviction, since the owner represents God, who cannot be mistaken.

6. Again, as in Matthew, the son is cast out before being put to death. Luke's purpose is undoubtedly the same as Matthew's at this point (note that this is the only point where Matthew and Luke agree against Mark. They probably make the change independently for the same reason).

7. In verse 16 the people respond to the parable by saying, "God forbid." Thus the focus is on the people's relationship to the story.

8. Luke omits the last part of the quote from Psalm 118 and adds the saying of Jesus in verse 18: "Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces." This focuses the attention on the individual hearer's response to Jesus, the rejected stone.

When taken together these changes again reflect a somewhat different thrust for the parable. There is hardly any emphasis on Israel's fate, or on the corporate church. Instead Luke wants to show his readers, the "people," that they are each individually judged on the basis of their response to Jesus. Each individual is confronted with the

decision that determines his or her destiny, the decision to accept or reject Jesus.

Although the story has the same overall message in all three of the synoptics, there is clearly a difference in emphasis. Mark emphasizes the role of Jesus in the history of salvation *vis-a-vis* his opponents; Matthew, the necessity for the church to bear fruit if it is to possess the kingdom; and Luke, the response to Jesus as the basis for individual judgment.

The Pre-Markan Parable

Even though this aspect of the parable does not fall within the scope of this study, some brief observations should be made. If both Matthew and Luke, under the inspiration of the Spirit, make certain modifications in Mark's account, which serves as their basic source, it could be assumed that Mark may also have made some changes as well. Although this is probably the case, the separation of Mark's editorial material from his source (probably oral tradition) is tenuous indeed and should be attempted only with great caution. In some cases Markan editing is obvious (see Mark 7:19, for example), but ordinarily any conclusion must remain very tentative.

The history of New Testament scholarship is filled with continuous attempts to move far beyond the evidence into the realm of speculation. Thus, although some conclude that any story with such allegorical details as are found in this parable could not have come from Jesus,¹⁸ a near-consensus has emerged that Jesus did tell the parable, but that he originally told a simple, non-allegorical version of it.¹⁹ But even those who agree in holding to the latter view suggest a variety of original meanings. The original parable is seen as a vindication of Jesus' gospel to the poor,²⁰ an aesthetic demonstration of the tragic results of inauthentic existence,²¹ a deliberately shocking story of

a successful murder, showing that Jesus' followers must act resolutely,²² or an attack on the methods of first-century zealots, showing that their violent methods will reap violent results.²³

It seems much more in keeping with the evidence to assume that any Markan variations would be of the same minor variety as those found in Matthew and Luke and that the original meaning was consistent with what we find in the synoptics.

Editorial analyses of this parable suggest certain conclusions are justifiable. When the synoptic gospels are carefully compared, it is evident that the evangelists have modified material they received. Both the arrangement and the narration of the details differ from one account to another. This could only be denied by arguing that Jesus told the story three times on the same occasion, that each of the gospel writers selected a different telling, and that they each recounted it at the same point in their gospel. Such a conclusion seems not only ludicrous, but unnecessary to anyone who does not equate inspiration with verbal dictation or inerrancy.

But although modification has occurred, there is no evidence that the evangelists have engaged in *creatio ex nihilo*. Modifications are of a minor nature and do not do violence to the story.

“When the synoptic gospels are carefully compared, it is evident that the evangelist have modified material they received. Both the arrangement and the narration of the details differ.”

Second, this modification is purposeful. While in no way contradictory, the gospels do use the parable with different theological

emphases, and the modifications contribute to these emphases. Matthew's additional references to fruit are not accidental, for instance, but contribute to the message that Matthew, under the guidance of the Spirit, seeks to communicate. In other words, differences in detail are not merely a matter of faulty memory, but rather of conscious modification in order to communicate a message. (Perhaps this could be compared with the preacher who tells the same personal experience in two different sermons with slightly different emphasis and detail.)

“By analyzing the editing of this parable by each gospel writer, Bible students have three texts from which to learn, instead of one. The unique facets of each can be appreciated without finding it necessary to harmonize the three accounts.”

Third, analysis of Scripture that notes the editing (or redacting) done contributes to understanding the gospels and should be utilized by Adventist exegetes. Editorial analysis is useful both to learn the theo-

logical and homiletical points of the book and to communicate that to others, because this kind of approach to the Gospel helps make the distinctive contribution of each evangelist clear.

By analyzing the editing of this parable by each gospel writer, Bible students have three texts from which to learn, instead of one. The unique facets of each can be appreciated without finding it necessary to harmonize the three accounts into a *de facto* Diatessaron,²⁴ where the unique colors of each are run together into a blob of grey. Recognizing the unique contribution of each writer helps us appreciate God's purpose as described by Ellen White.

Finally, the fact that the methods and terminology just described and demonstrated—source criticism, form criticism and redaction criticism (collectively described as the historical-critical method)—are used by conservative scholars such as R. P. Martin²⁵ and George Ladd²⁶ shows that liberal conclusions are not necessary when one uses these methods of studying the Bible. Indeed, virtually all Adventist exegetes of Scripture do use historical-critical methodology, even if they are not willing to use the term. The historical-critical method deserves a place in the armamentarium of Adventists who are serious about understanding their Bibles.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Counsels to Teachers*, p. 432.

2. For a history of source criticism of the gospels, see W.G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 17th ed., trans. Howard C. Kee (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975), pp. 44–52, and *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of its Problems*, trans. S. MacLean and Howard C. Kee (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), pp. 148–155, 325–327.

3. Although there has been recognition on the part of most scholars that the source history of the gospels is more complex than the two-document theory indicates, and although there has been vociferous objection to the theory on the part of a few, the strong consensus still favors Markan priority.

For an outline of the reasons for Markan priority, see Kümmel, *Introduction*, pp. 52–80.

4. This list is drawn from several different sources including: Edgar V. McKnight, *What is Form Criticism?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), pp. 17–20; Norman Perrin, *What is Redaction Criticism?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), p. 14; and Ralph P. Martin, *New Testament Foundations: A Guide for Christian Students: Volume 1; The Four Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 132, 133.

5. The results of this study, but not the process itself, can be seen in my book *A Day for Healing: The Meaning of Jesus' Sabbath Miracles* (Washington D. C.: Review and Herald, 1981), pp. 50–51.

6. For a concise introduction to redaction criticism, see Perrin, *passim*.

7. C. Bornkamm, G. Barth, and H. J. Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, trans. Perry Scott (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963).

8. H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, trans. G. Buswell (New York: Harper and Row, 1960).

9. W. Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist*, trans. James Boyce et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969).

10. Perrin, p. 69.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

12. A fourth account is found in the Gospel of Thomas where there is no historical context.

13. Although interpreters have offered various suggestions to explain why the tenants could possibly have thought that killing the son would result in their receiving the inheritance, it is probably best to refrain from pressing this detail too far.

14. Charles E. Carlston, *The Parables of the Triple Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), p. 40.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 44–45, 189–190.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 189–190.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 188.

19. See, for example, Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Charles

Scribner's Sons, 1972), pp. 70–77; Daniel O. Via, Jr., *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), p. 134; and John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), pp. 76–96. For a contrary view which argues that the Gospel of Thomas (which presents a simple version of the parable that the above consider to be closer to the original) is dependent on the synoptics see K. R. Snodgrass, "The Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen: Is the Gospel of Thomas Version the Original?" *New Testament Studies* 21 (Oct. 1974): 142–144; and Robert M. Grant, *The Secret Saying of Jesus* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1960), p. 172.

20. Jeremias, p. 76.

21. Via, p. 137.

22. Crossan, pp. 96–97.

23. Jane E. and Raymond R. Newell, "The Parable of the Wicked Tenants" *Novum Testamentum* 14: 226–237.

24. The *Diatessaron* was a second century document in which the church father Tatian wove all four gospels together into an account of Jesus' ministry.

25. See Martin, pp. 119–176.

26. George E. Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), *passim*.