

## **The Power of the Parable: Thomas 65: 1-7**

*A person owned a vineyard and rented it to farmers, so they would work it, and he could collect its crop from them. He sent his slave so the farmers would give him the vineyard's crop. They grabbed him, beat him, and almost killed him, and the slave returned and told his master. His master said, "Perhaps he didn't know them." He sent another slave, and the farmers beat that one as well. Then the master sent his son and said, "Perhaps they will show my son some respect," because the farmers knew he was the heir to the vineyard, and grabbed him and killed him.*

**We quote the story from Thomas,**

**not on the list of the many possible books from which the official committee selected to make up our Bible today,**

**because the Thomas text was not available till 1946 when they found it among the Dead Sea scroll collection.**

**Thomas was mostly a book of Jesus' sayings, but its great value is in its having been written long before our gospels.**

**Therefore we believe it to be closer to the word of mouth tradition than Matthew, Mark and Luke, gospels worked over for the evangelical purpose of drawing in Jews and Gentiles to faith in Christ. John, the 4th gospel, came much later with its well developed version. For John other matters were far more important than the chronology of events.**

**Sequences mattered hardly at all to the oral tradition. They, like Paul, looked for the Lord's return in their own life-time, as Jesus himself had said. When it didn't happen, as one coming down from above to take power over the whole world, like the Son of Man in Daniel's vision, something like a life-story became necessary. Two thousand years later we agree, only to find that sorting out the Jesus history, has become a huge, and often a thankless task,**

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What I've quoted from Thomas you recognize as the parable of the leased vineyard, which has been elaborated in our first three gospels, giving an account, for us, more plausible and easier to understand.

But it has removed us farther from Jesus' words to his first audiences, leading some readers to miss the punch of the parables with which Jesus confronted his hearers.

The parable is a particular kind of story, designed to take the hearers by surprise, when they discover they're on the wrong side. They thought they were the good guys, but here they were the bad guys after all.

The church treated parables as if they were allegories like Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* or Dante's *Inferno*. Allegories are easy to remember, for every item mentioned in the ancient source finds its moral parallel in our personal experience today. Nothing wrong with that, except it spares us our sharing the mounting tension as Jesus approaches Jerusalem for the Passover---and his crucifixion. We're far more comfortable with allegories than believers ought to be

What Jesus actually said to the crowds was surely more detailed than what we have here, but the earliest evidence shows he used parables with a single point rather than create allegories where everything in the story has its own obvious meaning---when seen through the eyes of faith.

*We illustrate from Matthew 21: 45, 46: When the chief priests and scribes heard his parables, they realized he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.*

Here's how parables work: Jesus tells an interesting story, which we call the SOURCE story. He did not need to invent all the source stories he used, for the point was not who may have said

it first. Hearers recall something like it from elsewhere, but so simple and straightforward a story sounds like just plain common sense. Before Jesus got very far into the story, most hearers guessed how the story may end.

Like the audience of a play, or a sport's crowd, they were already identifying with the main character, and expecting the gratification of their prediction coming true. Wasn't the 'hero' one of us? Am I not like him?

Suddenly hearers realized they were in the process of living through a parallel story. Let's call it the TARGET STORY, for belatedly hearers realized the story teller aimed squarely at them, heralding the precipitous plunge from the peak to the pit.

In utter dismay they turn to one another. "We're on the wrong side?" Is he right? Now what do we do about it? Plead guilty, and throw ourselves on the mercy of the court? For the fate of the source story cast shall surely be our destiny too.

"It's not fair!" Do we blame God's messenger for shouting God is against us, and set out to punish the messenger for, as they say on the streets, "'disrespecting' us?"

Years later gospel writers read the death and resurrection of Jesus back into the parables of his ministry. Of course, as shrewd as the human Jesus was, he could see which way the wind was blowing. If he kept going on the same road had he not deliberately chosen the deadly outcome?

A mounting public success makes matters worse for Jesus. He didn't see himself the commander-in-chief of a violent rebellion against Roman oppressors, as messiah's were supposed to do. See Matthew 4 and Luke 4. Remember the mountain top temptation to grasp "all the kingdoms of this world in a moment of time," His fantastic works and fabulous charisma set him forth as the favorite contender, while he alone saw commitment to the

kingdom of God convince him that his heavenly Father had something better for him, his people, and the whole wide world.

In hindsight we embrace the bottom line, but resisting the temptation was no "slam dunk" for Jesus. As the moment drew ever nearer, he struggled with the question "Who am I?" He turned to his disciples at Caesura Phillipi, "Whom do men say that I am?" and "Whom do you say that I am?" Peter's response, "You are the anointed one of God." The final confirmation. All doubt gone. Like Jacob, Jesus "crossed the Jabbock," or as Hannibal crossed the Rubicon," The point of no return.

Our actions confirm who we are. Eyes wide open Jesus confirmed his identity as God's anointed in following through with his choice. This cost Father and Son excruciating pain, but stalwart faith makes divine love and mercy a reality. Jesus did not benefit with the certainty of hindsight. Human that he was, faith was all he had to go on. Beware of the kind of thinking that depreciates the sacrifice of Jesus, as if, while on earth, he could like his heavenly Father count on the foreknowledge of God.

If Jesus, as Paul wrote, was adopted of God "as the first born among many brethren, it was his enduring relationship with God as Father and his life-story of faith that makes it entirely credible that Jesus was "anointed of God," in Hebrew, messiah, and in Greek, Christ. He calls us to be one with him, follow all the way.

The parable of the leased vineyard presents a source story in foreshadowing the destiny of the chief priests and scribes as target audience back them, for it places them under the judgment of God. But what of us? As we read the familiar parables, the stories come alive for us. We are the target audience discovering who we are in where we're headed today.

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