

Research Paper

Parable of the Tenants

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In this research paper for Synoptic Gospels class I am going to study the Parable of the Tenants. While this parable is present in synoptic gospels as well as in the Gospel of Thomas, I will limit my research only to the Gospel of Mark (Mark 12:1-12). As a research method I chose narrative criticism with focus on the symbols and people in this parable.

First I am going to introduce narrative criticism as a method that I will use in my research. In the main body of the paper I will apply four steps of this method to the pericope and compare my findings with findings of the authors of academic papers and books that I found, which deal with this parable. I will apply the exegesis to my pastoral situation and I highlight a few points that I took for my spiritual life. The paper concludes with recapitulation of what I have done and what I have learned in the process.

Narrative Criticism is a type of literary criticism, which focuses on the literary shape of the text. As such, it studies the final text of a given biblical book, as opposed to the origins of its parts.¹ Studied text is considered to be a message from an implied author to an implied reader, leaving a real author and a real reader extrinsic to the communication act.² The implied reader is an “imaginary person in whom the intention of the text is to be thought of as always reaching its fulfillment.”³ Reading the text from the perspective of the implied reader is perceived as somewhat unattainable, but a worthy goal nevertheless.⁴

¹ Catherine M. Murphy, “Narrative Criticism,” *PMIN 206 The Synoptic Gospels, Santa Clara University*(2020), online, <https://webpages.scu.edu/ftp/cmurphy/courses/all/bible/exegesis/narrative.htm>, accessed 4 June, 2020.

² Compare with Mark Allan Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* (Guides to Biblical Scholarship New Testament Series; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 19-20.

³ Powell cites Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew As Story* (2d ed.; Philadelphia: FortressPress, 1988) 38.

⁴ Compare with Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?*, 21.

The question I would like to find the answer to is: “What are the symbols and who are the people in the parable of the Tenants (Mark 12:1-12)?” As a method appropriate to studying storytelling features, I think narrative criticism is the most suitable, since the way how the story is told is the core focus of this method. Powell says about narrative criticism: “The goal of this method is to read the text as the implied reader.”⁵

This method analyzes four aspects of the narrative: literary form, literary structure, characters and setting of the story and perspective of the account. The first step of the method is to analyze the form of the text. Literary aspect characterizes the text as:

- fiction or non-fiction based on whether the events did occur in time and
- as poetry or prose based on whether the language pattern shows signs of recurrent units of meter.

Genres include biography, epic, debate, folklore, history, legend, myth and saga.

The second step of the method analyzes the literary structure of the text. It starts by looking at the setting of the story. Importance is given to the plot, where it identifies beginning, end and climax, and looks for features as: flashback, foreshadowing, irony, suggestive antithesis, suggestive gaps. Analyzing symbols, motifs, and themes wraps up this step.

In the third step the method identifies the characters in the story as protagonists and antagonists and looks into their motives and evolution.

The final step looks at the narrative perspective of the account. Whether the story is told from the first or third person, whether the narrator is omniscient and possible

⁵ Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?*, 20.

location and occasion for the recitation of the story.⁶

Scholars agree that this parable is one of the most difficult parables of the synoptic tradition.⁷ In my research I am using NABRE Second Edition and reading the Parable of the Tenants only from the Gospel of Mark, not taking into account other sources.⁸ It is worth noting that “material referring to Jesus' words and deeds is treated by tradition as authoritative and normative, but this does not mean that the transmission has to be literal, associated with specific wording.”⁹

The literary aspect of this parable is a fiction prose with obviously educational purpose. The text does not have any indication that the story of the parable took place at a particular time, rather we assume it conveys religious advice and shares a common life wisdom. Parables picture real events, even though they may not have happened.¹⁰ The text of the parable is not patterned into recurrent units of meter except for two verses cited from Psalm 118, therefore it certainly does not constitute poetry. We can contrast this with Isaiah 5:1-7 which is often referenced by scholars discussing this parable, where a song has a function of parable.¹¹ Regarding genre we can consider two options; myth or debate. The parable itself is an imaginative story which uses symbols to speak about reality. The pericopy that contains the parable is however closer to an

⁶ Compare with Murphy, “Narrative Criticism.”

⁷ Kelly R. Iverson, “Jews, Gentiles, and the Kingdom of God: The Parable of the Wicked Tenants in Narrative Perspective (Mark 12:1-12),” *Biblical Interpretation* 20:3 (2012) 305-335; Klyne R. Snodgrass, “Recent Research on the Parable of the Wicked Tenants: An Assessment,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 8 (1998) 187.

⁸ Jean M. Hiesberger, *The Catholic Bible. Personal Study Edition. (NABRE)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁹ Armand Puig i Tàrrach, “Metaphorics, First Context and Jesus Tradition in the Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard,” *Biblische Notizen* 159 (2013) 75.

¹⁰ Compare with Armand Puig i Tàrrach, “The Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard: The Narrative Outline and Its Socio-Historical Plausibility,” *Biblische Notizen* 158 (2013) 102.

¹¹ Wim J. C. Weren, “The Use of Isaiah 5,1-7 in the Parable of the Tenants (Mark 12,1-12; Matthew 21,33-46),” *Biblica* 79:1 (1998) 5.

argumentative dialogue between Jesus and his audience.

Jesus began to tell this parable in Jerusalem and it takes place mostly in or around a vineyard. There is no specific time mentioned, but we know around what time Mark did write this gospel, as well as the socio and political situation that it unwound in. The parable is placed in Mark's gospel after Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, cursing of a fig tree, and right after questioning of his authority by chief priests, the scribes and the elders, but before paying taxes to the Emperor, the greatest commandment, and a whole chapter before his passions. Snodgrass thinks that: "in some ways the parable serves as an introduction to the passion narrative"¹² The story takes place during seemingly a longer period of time, since the storyteller talks about planting a vineyard, putting a hedge around it, digging a vine press, and building a tower, leasing the vineyard to tenant farmers and his departure on a journey (Mk 12:1), which evidently did not happen immediately. The same applies for waiting for the first harvest. It is well known that it takes the new vine a couple of years to bring the first fruits. "At the proper time he sent a servant to the tenants to obtain from them some of the produce of the vineyard" (Mk 12:2). Commentary mentions that around 5 years is a reasonably expected time from planting to first harvest.¹³ Jesus said this parable in a public place, where many (possibly Jerusalem crowd) gathered.

The plot begins when Jesus says: "A man planted a vineyard, put a hedge around it, dug a wine press, and built a tower. Then he leased it to tenant farmers and left on a journey" (Mk 12:1, second and third sentence). From a point of view of how this parable

¹² Snodgrass, "Recent Research," 190.

¹³ Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., "The Gospel According to Mark," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy; Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1990) 621.

was told, Mark introduced Jesus as a storyteller of "another" parable: "He began to speak to them in parables" (Mk 12:1, first sentence). From the pericope it is not clear what were the other parables. This one was immediately preceded by the chief priests, the scribes and the elders questioning Jesus' authority.¹⁴ Planting a vineyard parallels the creation of the world, and leasing the vineyard to tenant farmers to the establishing the chief priests, the scribes and the elders as shepherds of the God's chosen people, Israel.

The climax of this parable is seemingly the killing of the beloved son of the vineyard owner: "So they seized him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard" (Mk 12:8) This is foreshadowing of how the chief priests, the scribes and the elders treated Jesus, his crucifixion. I think this is also one of the main reasons why he told this parable. Jesus wanted to emphasize what will happen to him as well as point out their wickedness.

The parable concludes with the verdict over the wicked tenants: "He will come, put the tenants to death, and give the vineyard to others" (Mk 12:9). This parallels the Second Coming of Jesus and the Last Judgment. This is the answer that the chief priest, the scribes and the elders responded to Jesus' question: "What [then] will the owner of the vineyard do?" Interestingly Puig i Tàrrach claims that it is the owner who asks a rhetorical question and answers it as well.¹⁵ The chief priests, the scribes and the elders leave after realizing that the parable was addressed to them¹⁶, which marks the end of the pericope.¹⁶ (Mk 12:12) Snodgrass concurs: "this parable is a juridical parable, modeled after Isaiah's juridical parable, or song, of the vineyard (Isa 5:1-7), which

¹⁴ Iverson, "Jews, Gentiles, and the Kingdom of God," 316-317.

¹⁵ Puig i Tàrrach, "The Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard," 108.

¹⁶ Compare with Snodgrass, "Recent Research," 191.

passes judgement against the ruling priests of Jerusalem.”¹⁷

Academic sources divide narrative outline of the pericope into three narrative stages of the plot and add two rhetorical questions:

- a) planting of the vineyard by the owner,
- b) sending servants multiple times,
- c) sending the beloved son.
- d) What should the owner of the vineyard do?
- e) What will happen to a son who has been rejected but will become a keystone?¹⁸

Jesus foreshadowed his own death by talking about wicked tenants killing the owner's only beloved son, who was sent to obtain some produce from the vineyard's tenants. There the owner was risking that his son will be treated the same way as other servants, even though he was assuming that they would spare him due to his status.¹⁹

Reading this parable we can clearly notice a repetition and we can look at it from two opposing points of view, the owner of the vineyard and the tenants. The owner kept sending servants to the tenants multiple times and finally he sent his beloved son, whereas tenants kept seizing, beating, sending away empty (first one), beating over the head and treating shamefully (another), killing (yet another), and finally the son was killed as well.²⁰

Critical moment which must be resolved in the story is the explicit question:

¹⁷ Snodgrass, “Recent Research,” 187.

¹⁸ Puig i Tàrrach, “The Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard,” 97. Iverson summarized the structure as: parable 1-8, question 9, stone 10-11, narrative conclusion 12 (Iverson, “Jews, Gentiles, and the Kingdom of God,” 305). The last question is missing in the work of Lanier, who mentions only Jesus' question in the conclusion of the pericope (Gregory R. Lanier, “Mapping the Vineyard: Main Lines of Investigation Regarding the Parable of the Tenants in the Synoptics and Thomas,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 15:1 [2016] 76).

¹⁹ Puig i Tàrrach, “The Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard,” 111.

²⁰ Johannes C. De Moor draws a comparison between treating the servants and prophets in the Old Testament (“The Targumic Background of Mark 12:1-12: The Parable of the Wicked Tenants,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 29:1 [1998] 72); Puig i Tàrrach, “The Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard,” 91.

“What then will the owner of the vineyard do?” (Mk 12:9). Paradoxically those whom this parable was addressed to (the chief priests, the scribes and the elders) answered Jesus and stated the punishment they themselves deserved: “He will come, put the tenants to death, and give the vineyard to others” (Mk 12:9).

There are suggestive gaps in the story, for example the owner went away on a journey and did not send any servants to check on the tenants before the time of the harvest. We could also ask: Why did he send servants multiple times and finally risked sending his beloved son? Why did he not send his beloved son right after the first servant was unsuccessful? Why didn't he come in person to punish the tenants immediately? Tarrech explains by the great patience of the landowner.²¹

Another unclarity is why did Jesus reference two verses from Psalm 118? “The stone that the builders rejected, has become the cornerstone; by the Lord has this been done, and it is wonderful in our eyes?” (Mk 12:10). He seemingly wanted to point out a mistake the chief priests, the scribes and the elders are making by wanting to get rid of him. They thought that if they would kill Jesus, the problem would be solved. On the contrary, he revealed their intention and condemned them. This verse also brings up the second rhetorical question of the pericope, “what will happen to a son who has been rejected but will become the keystone?”²² De Moor explains that verses of this Passover psalm are messianic; even though they may look misplaced at the first reading, they clearly foreshadow Jesus' suffering.²³

The storyteller puts into contrast the owner of the vineyard and his son on one

²¹ Puig i Tàrrach, “The Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard,” 91.

²² Puig i Tàrrach, “The Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard,” 93.

²³ De Moor, “The Targumic Background of Mark 12:1-12,” 77-79.

hand and the tenants without their own significant property on the other in their legal contract. Tenants killed everyone in order to assume ownership of what they never were supposed to receive or own by the law. Tarrech goes to lengths discussing legal aspects of how the tenants may have been calculating to become the owners of the vineyard (Mk 12:6-8).²⁴ Iverson stresses that the judgement is against the tenants, not the vineyard. Vineyard itself is never questioned, which is again in contrast with Isaiah's vineyard.²⁵

There seems to be no thematic inconsistency in the parable, however it is rich in symbols. Man represents God who planted the vineyard, which could be his people or his kingdom.²⁶ Perkins mentions that also Isaiah and Jeremiah use the same symbol for Israel.²⁷ Tenant farmers are clearly meant to portray scribes, priests, but also other leaders both religious as well as secular.²⁸ Setting on the journey may be interpreted as going back to heaven. Moses and the prophets are represented by servants sent by the owner of the vineyard.²⁹ Perkins uses the term “prophet’s call from God.”³⁰ These were often not recognized or rejected, in the same way as the servants - they were often seized, beaten or killed.³¹ The beloved son is Jesus.³² The killing of the heir seems to be

²⁴ Puig i Tàrrach, “The Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard,” 107-108.

²⁵ Iverson, “Jews, Gentiles, and the Kingdom of God,” 310.

²⁶ Iverson, “Jews, Gentiles, and the Kingdom of God,” 312.

²⁷ Larry Perkins, “The Markan Narrative’s Use of the Old Greek Text of Jeremiah to Explain Israel’s Obduracy,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 60:2 (2009) 230.

²⁸ De Moor, “The Targumic Background of Mark 12:1-12,” 74; Iverson, “Jews, Gentiles, and the Kingdom of God,” 316, 318. Iverson seemingly expands the judgment against the whole nation (p. 325).

²⁹ De Moor, “The Targumic Background of Mark 12:1-12,” 71.

³⁰ Perkins, “The Markan Narrative’s Use of the Old Greek Text of Jeremiah,” 231.

³¹ “The reason for their behaviour is apparently based on greed” (Puig i Tàrrach, “The Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard,” 92).

³² The expression “beloved son” means generally any Israelite, but in this context there is a little doubt that it is specifically “an only son” of God; De Moor, “The Targumic Background of Mark 12:1-12,” 75); “a term with evident Christological significance” (Puig i Tàrrach, “The Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard,” 91); even though he leaves room for possible parallel also with John the Baptist (De Moor, “The Targumic Background of Mark 12:1-12,” 78).

based on the desire of the possession of the vineyard, not for other possible reasons.³³

Surprisingly, the tenants were seemingly not interested in becoming the new heirs, only in the possession and use.³⁴

Evans exclaims that: "interpreters should not assume that these farmers would necessarily have been understood as poor sharecroppers who out of desperation for land resorted to theft and murder."³⁵ Casting the son outside and killing him alludes to Jesus' crucifixion outside of Jerusalem.³⁶ Commentary says that the hedge, the press and the tower do not have any allegorical meaning.³⁷ De Moor on the other hand says that hedge alludes to Isa 5:5 meaning the care the owner put into erecting the vineyard.³⁸ The wine sink he likens to an altar and tower he sees as a metaphor of the temple.³⁹ "Others" to whom the vineyard will be entrusted are according to Iverson Gentiles specifically disciples and/or early Church.⁴⁰ Evans exclaims that: "interpreters should not assume that these farmers would necessarily have been understood as poor sharecroppers who out of desperation for land resorted to theft and murder."⁴¹ Casting the son outside and killing him alludes to Jesus' crucifixion outside of Jerusalem.⁴² Commentary says that the hedge, the press and the tower do not have any allegorical meaning.⁴³ De Moor on the other hand says that hedge alludes to Isa 5:5 meaning the care the owner put into erecting the vineyard.⁴⁴ The

³³ Puig i Tàrrach, "The Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard," 92.

³⁴ Compare with Snodgrass, "Recent Research," 196; Puig i Tàrrach, "The Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard," 108.

³⁵ Craig A. Evans, "Jesus' Parable of the Tenant Farmers in Light of Lease Agreements in Antiquity," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 14 (1996) 82.

³⁶ Compare with Puig i Tàrrach, "The Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard," 92.

³⁷ Harrington, "The Gospel According to Mark," 621.

³⁸ De Moor, "The Targumic Background of Mark 12:1-12," 69.

³⁹ De Moor, "The Targumic Background of Mark 12:1-12," 70.

⁴⁰ Iverson, "Jews, Gentiles, and the Kingdom of God," 306-307, 326.

⁴¹ Craig A. Evans, "Jesus' Parable of the Tenant Farmers 82.

⁴² Compare with Puig i Tàrrach, "The Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard," 92.

⁴³ Harrington, "The Gospel According to Mark," 621.

⁴⁴ De Moor, "The Targumic Background of Mark 12:1-12," 69.

wine sink he likens to an altar and tower he sees as a metaphor of the temple.⁴⁵ "Others" to whom the vineyard will be entrusted are according to Iverson Gentiles specifically disciples and/or early Church.⁴⁶ or more.

The main theme of the parable is pointing out the actions of the wicked tenants who refuse to give the share of the produce to the owner. Vineyard is an important biblical motif as is also bearing fruit. The motif of tenant or servant and owner or master is found in many parables as well.

The protagonist of the story is man, his servants and his beloved son, representing God, his prophets and Jesus. From the perspective of pericope, Jesus, his disciples and the crowd. Antagonists are tenants who represent the chief priests, the scribes and the elders. The parable was addressed to them, even though they are not mentioned specifically. The reader can learn about their character from the story itself.

The chief priests, the scribes and the elders came to Jesus to inquire about his authority, but they themselves went away reprimanded. We can say that their behavior changed from position of authority to position of self-indicted. We can also speculate that some of the chief priests, the scribes and the elders may have been motivated by genuine curiosity and they perhaps went away really changed in heart, but there is no indication of that in the text and therefore we should probably assume that they rather all went away with bitterness and hate in their hearts, because they could not get rid of Jesus due to their fear of crowds. They refused to change.⁴⁷ Jesus' position seems to be the same. It is hard to imagine a gentler way to reprimand someone than leading them

⁴⁵ De Moor, "The Targumic Background of Mark 12:1-12," 70.

⁴⁶ Iverson, "Jews, Gentiles, and the Kingdom of God," 306-307, 326.

⁴⁷ Compare with Robert S. Snow, "Let the Reader Understand: Mark's Use of Jeremiah 7 in Mark 13:14," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 21:4 (2011) 472.

towards realizing their own mistake by themselves.

This parable targets primarily Jewish leadership, however it can be applied to anyone in position of authority and/or responsibility: to his disciples and their successors, but also to everyone else as well. Even though the disciples were not the immediate target at that moment, the parable served also as an advice or warning for them for the future, to prevent them from becoming wicked when they will once become authorities.

He began to speak to them in parables. (Mk 12:1) Who are they? The chief priests, the scribes and the elders, the crowd around him? Disciples, all of them?

The parable is narrated from the third person point of view, Jesus as a teacher was telling it to those gathered around him. The narrator is omniscient, he knows what all the characters in the parable think. Interestingly in the parable none of the characters speak directly. After answering the question from the parable, the scribes did not say a word. They were seeking to arrest him, but they feared the crowd, for they realized that he had addressed the parable to them. So they left him and went away. Horne underlines this conclusion: "the true voice of God belongs not to the Jerusalem temple authorities, but to Jesus, who indicts the temple authorities for their failure to comply with the Moses tradition."⁴⁸

This parable may be suitable to recite when talking about misuse of power or authority, like senseless murder of a black man by the police, or priests abusing minors or adults. It is known under different names: Parable of the wicked tenants, Parable of the tenants, Parable of the vineyard, Parable of wicked husbandmen.

⁴⁸ Edward H. Horne, "The Parable of the Tenants as Indictment," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 21:71 (1999) 116.

The parable of the wicked tenants was told not only to the chief priests, the scribes and the elders, it was a message also to the disciples. They too were warned against becoming wicked tenants of the early Church that God has planted. Their authority handed down to their successors - bishops, and in broader sense the care of the Church entrusted to priests and deacons with help of other ministers, all are called to responsibly continue returning to the Lord from the produce the vineyard is bearing. The Jerusalem crowd heard the parable as well and we may say it speaks to all of us. Anyone entrusted with a responsibility whether as a person in a position of authority or more generally responsible for each other and for him/herself is reminded to be a trustworthy tenant of whatever or whoever the Lord entrusted to us. It may be not stretching too far to say that Judas may have been present when Jesus was speaking in parables. It did not stop him from keeping for himself not the produce of a vineyard but 30 pieces of silver, which by the way may have come from money not paid by the priests as they should have been. But that is another story.

The process of the research gave me an opportunity to ingest different views on the same pericope from different scholars. This reminds me of the diversity of people in my ministry or in my church. Listening both with ears as well as the heart and seeking the true meaning of the words said is something I would like to practice more. Being sensitive to the expressions of people, subtle hints as well as being attentive to their customs, culture, and bring up.

The parable is a reminder that power, position, responsibility and authority should be used for the common good of the Church instead of misused for own benefit. The responsibility that we have is not only what we show towards others. It springs from

the depth of one's soul. It is difficult or impossible to be responsible to others without doing our best to be responsible also to oneself. We must grow in our virtues and avoid opportunities to turn the entrusted power and authority into a multiplier of our own brokenness.

We should not forget to see Christ in other people and not only in a sense that he wants something from us, but to be grateful for his trust in us and happily share with him a portion of the produce that we are collecting in the form of a gift of people he sends who cross our paths.

In this paper I studied the parable of wicked tenants in Gospel of Mark using narrative criticism. I tried to answer a question: “What are the symbols and who are the people in the parable of the Tenants (Mark 12:1-12)?” I discussed the literary form, literary structure, characters of the story and perspective of the account. Rich symbolism, context of the parable in the studied pericopy as well as in the gospel and its connections to the Old Testament reveal its significance for today’s reader, especially for people who were entrusted with something or someone or those in a position of authority. Authority and responsibility are gifts from God who is the absolute owner. He patiently touches our lives to make sure we do not forget him. We should be grateful for these gifts and responsibly give him his share of the proceeds. I particularly appreciate that the goal of these studies aims to deepen my reliance on God and not on myself. That it focuses on improving the foundation and therefore also quality of my service. I wish to become a good tenant that returns what I learn through my service to the Church

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