

Resisting and Imitating the Empire

Imperial Paradigms in Two Matthean Parables

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God's parabolic word always comes in cultural garb. Although employing the rhetoric and values of the imperial hegemony, the parables—and Matthew's gospel in general—render a trenchant critique.

Exciting work on Jesus' parables in the twentieth century has drawn attention to their performative language, their world-challenging and world-constructing functions, and their engagement of the imagination.¹ But these insights have also come at a cost. So often this work has edited and reconstituted parables, shearing them of supposed distortions imposed by unwitting gospel redactors. It has detached them from their confining and sometimes distorting gospel frames and contexts. It has offered scant respect for a parable's function within its gospel narrative. In response, scholars have employed narrative or audience-oriented approaches to focus attention on the parables' final form and to explore their functions *within* the gospel narratives.²

Most twentieth-century scholarship on Matthew has approached the gospel as a "religious" writing. For contemporary Western readers, the gospel is concerned with distinctively religious or spiritual and personal issues such as divine presence, salvation, righteousness, discipleship, grace and works, and eschatology. But some recent scholarship has begun to challenge this notion.³ An essential dimension of this challenge has been the awareness that

¹D. Gowler, *What Are They Saying About Parables?* (Mahwah: Paulist, 2000).

²W. Carter and J. P. Heil, *Matthew's Parables: Audience-Oriented Perspectives*, CBQMS 30 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association, 1998).

³M. Crosby, *House of Disciples: Church, Economics, and Justice in Matthew* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988); W. Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000); idem, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2001).

in the first-century world—the language and conceptual framework for Matthew’s telling of the gospel story—religion was not a self-contained, separate and separated, individualized entity. In a world dominated by Roman imperial power, religion was intricately woven into the political, social, economic, and domestic structures of daily life. After all, Rome and the emperor claimed that their sovereignty over the world represented the will of the gods. For example, Seneca writes of Nero musing about his divine election and the immense power the gods have given to him:

Have I of all mortals found favor with heaven and been chosen to serve on earth as vicar of the gods? I am the arbiter of life and death for the nations; it rests in my power what each man’s [sic] lot and state shall be: by my lips fortune proclaims what gift she should bestow on each human being: from my utterance peoples and cities gather reasons for rejoicing; without my favor and grace no part of the whole world can prosper; all those many thousands of swords which my peace restrains will be drawn at my nod, what nation shall be utterly destroyed, which banished, which shall receive the gift of liberty, which have it taken from them, what kings shall become slave and whose head shall be crowned with royal honor, what cities shall fall and which shall rise—this is mine to decree.⁴

Numerous coins match images of emperors with a god. Numerous writers—Virgil, Statius, Silius Italicus, Martial, and Tacitus—salute Jupiter and other deities for choosing Rome and for manifesting their rule and blessings through emperors. Hierarchical imperial society was divinely sanctioned.⁵ To speak religiously in the ancient world was to speak politically, socially, economically, and culturally.

Recognition of this imperial reality provides a very different starting point for engaging Matthew’s gospel. Consider, for instance, Jesus’ frequent conflicts with the Jerusalem leaders. Scholars have typically regarded these priests and scribes as exclusively “religious leaders” and their disputes with Jesus as concerning restricted religious or spiritual issues.⁶ Largely absent, though, is any recognition that Rome frequently ruled in alliance with local elites such as landowners, priests, and scribes.⁷ These allied groups shaped a society to promote and protect their mutual interests at the expense of the remaining taxable ninety-five percent of society. It seems reasonable, then, to understand Matthew’s presentation of Jesus’ conflicts with the Jerusalem-centered, temple-based chief priests and scribes as concerning not narrowly “religious issues” but social visions, societal structures and practices, arrangements of power, and the theological sanctions invoked to maintain (or challenge) society under Rome’s imperial control. In this context Jesus collides with a socio-political system that benefits the small ruling elite at the expense of the many, and Jesus reveals the system

⁴Seneca, *De Clementia* 1.1.2; Loeb Classical Library.

⁵For details, see Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 17–29, 36–49; idem, *Matthew and Empire*, passim.

⁶As I (along with many scholars) regrettably do in my earlier work: *Matthew Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996) 229–41.

⁷G. Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966) 256–66; J. Kautsky, *The Politics of Aristocratic Empires* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982) 81–83, 161–66; A. J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society. A Sociological Approach* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1988) 35–49; K. C. Hanson and D. E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 63–159.

as contrary to God's will and purposes.

These two developments in recent scholarship—attention to the intratextual dimensions of the parables within the gospel and to the gospel's Roman imperial context—provide the framework for this discussion. I will focus on two Matthean parables, the unforgiving king and his retainers (18:23–35), and the king, the wedding feast, and the burned city (22:1–14). I will discuss them in relation to these two contexts of imperial power and Matthew's narrative. Employing an audience-oriented approach, I will make explicit the knowledge of imperial structures and practices that the authorial audience taps in making sense of the parable. By "authorial audience" I refer to the audience that the gospel assumes and addresses. This audience has historical location (late first-century Antioch) and competencies that are both literary and cultural. That is, in engaging the gospel, it employs knowledge gained from the rest of the gospel narrative and from its cultural understandings of the various political, social, economic, and religious practices, systems, and traditions that the text assumes but frequently does not make explicit.⁸

Attention to both imperial and narrative knowledge discloses a fundamental paradox in Matthew: in depicting the reign or empire of God, the gospel *both resists and utilizes* an imperial paradigm. As a counter-narrative, Matthew's gospel resists Rome's power and anticipates its demise under divine judgment at the final establishment of God's triumphant empire (or reign, *basileia tōn ouranōn*, 24:27–31). Yet the very language and content of God's triumph over all ironically draws upon the same imperial paradigm to present God's empire.

THE UNFORGIVING KING AND HIS UNFORGIVING RETAINER: MATTHEW 18:23–35

As is commonly recognized, the parable in Matt 18:23–35 urges forgiveness. To know God's forgiveness is to forgive others. The initial "therefore" (v. 23) links the parable to Jesus' response to Peter's question about forgiveness in vv. 21–22 and to the discourse about the community of God's reign that comprises chapter 18. Just as the king forgives his official (slave), so the latter must also forgive. His punishment for failure to forgive is just. The parable issues a dire pastoral warning to all disciples who lead lives committed to the "kingdom of heaven." By not forgiving, they fail to imitate their heavenly father.

But while forgiveness links the parable's frame (vv. 21–22) to the parable itself (vv. 23–35), it is not quite that simple. In vv. 21–22 Jesus exhorts repeated forgiveness among disciples. Yet in the actions of both the king and the official, the parable exemplifies the very opposite! The king forgives initially (v. 27), but then refuses to forgive again (vv. 32–34). And worse, by imprisoning the slave, the king withdraws the forgiveness that he had previ-

⁸For elaboration, see Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 1–49.

ously extended (18:34). Of course, the official does not forgive at all.

Who is the king? Such actions by the king surely raise questions about his identity. It is commonly claimed that the king depicts God. Both Jesus and God have previously been identified as kings (2:2; 5:35). To identify this king as God is both possible and tempting given the subsequent references to servants or slaves (an image of disciples) and to the topic of forgiveness. But this identification can only be maintained if numerous intratextual echoes are ignored. The fickle actions of this king seem at odds with the presentation of God in the gospel's opening genealogy, which emphasizes God's constant and faithful purposes despite vast human unfaithfulness (1:1–17). The king also acts in a way that runs counter to the gospel's claim that God graciously blesses all (5:45).

In depicting the reign or empire of God, the gospel both resists and utilizes an imperial paradigm.

The gospel has asserted that God is not like human rulers. The tradition of the “kings of the earth” who oppose God (e.g., Ps 2) is invoked to establish the contrast between kings and God (Matt 17:24–27).⁹ The contrast appears again in 20:25–28, in which life in God's reign is marked by service, not by the domination exhibited by Gentile rulers and powerful men. Jesus later mocks that dominant paradigm of royal power in a parabolic piece of street-theater with his non-triumphal entry to Jerusalem in Matthew 21.¹⁰ His coronation on a cross is the ultimate display that God's kingship is not like human kingship.

It would seem, then, that the parable proceeds by contrasts and opposites, as evidenced by the parable's opening formula, “The kingdom [empire] of heaven is like a king who. . .” (18:23). Previous parables employ this phrase (and variants) to compare God's present empire not to flashy royal rule but to such lowly or everyday entities as a sower (13:24), a grain of mustard (13:31), leaven (13:33), treasure (13:44), a merchant (13:45), and a net (13:47). Chapter 18 begins by reinforcing such surprising associations. Jesus answers the disciples' question about greatness in God's empire by depicting it as a socially marginal, unimportant, and vulnerable child (18:1–5). To begin *this* parable, then, by linking God's empire with a king is a striking deviation from this narrative pattern. The noun “king” (*basileus*) commonly denotes Rome's emperors, the most central, important, and powerful figure in the imperial world.¹¹ The use of this image suggests that the key to the parable lies in contrasts and opposites, not similarities.

Nor is this the first time that Matthew elaborates God's empire with contrasts and opposites. Jesus has consistently demonstrated that God's empire is not like human

⁹For a developed reading of this pericope, see Carter, *Matthew and Empire*, 130–44, esp. 137–38.

¹⁰Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 413–18.

¹¹See Josephus, *J W* 4.596; 5.563.

empires. Whereas empires like Rome's remove food from the vast (predominantly peasant) majority by taxation and tribute for the benefit of the elite, Jesus provides abundant food in anticipation of the establishment of God's just reign marked by plentiful food and access to land resources (Matt 5:5; 12:1–8; 14:13–21; 15:32–39; cf. Isa 25:6). Whereas empires like Rome's render people sick through deprivation of resources and intimidation, Jesus provides healing in anticipation of the establishment of God's just reign (cf. Isa 35:5–6).¹² Whereas an empire like Rome's guards its hierarchy closely and expresses it in meal practices that reinforce social status by order of seating, quality and quantity of food, and quality of eating utensils, Jesus uses meals to break down hierarchy and include those marginalized by imperial society (Matt 9:9–13).

A further factor cautions against unquestioning identification of the king in this parable as God. Kings have had mixed press in the gospel, even though Jesus (2:2) and God (5:35) have been positively identified as kings. The audience knows a long tradition of God as Israel's king that makes the human institution both problematic and (ideally) a representative of God's just reign (1 Sam 8:7; Ps 72).

But Matthew has stacked the negatives high against identifying this king as God. One of the three sections in the opening genealogy swiftly narrates the tragic history of the kings' mis-rule "from David to the deportation to Babylon" (1:6–11). Fifteen kings are named. Only two appear in 1–2 Kings and 1–2 Chronicles as good (faithful) kings. The rest receive either mixed or completely negative evaluations. The kings constitute a long tradition of unfaithfulness that brings disastrous punishment from imperial Babylon (1:11–12).

King Herod, Rome's vassal king, greets as a threat the magi's politically unwise inquiry about "the one born king of the Jews" (Matt 2). In classic imperial mode, he maintains control by using his resources: his allies the chief priests and scribes (2:4–6), deception (2:7–8), and murderous violence (2:16–18). The empire, predictably, strikes back at God's threatening initiative, but God thwarts Herod's plans through dreams, angels, prophets, faithful folks, and, ironically, Herod's own death, rather than Jesus' (2:12–23). The world is not safe, though, from the destruction kings can effect. Archelaus rules "in the place of his father" (2:22).

In a non-flattering reference, King Solomon appears briefly in contrast to the "lilies of the field" (6:29). Solomon's wealth and splendor—acquired, contrary to the edicts of Moses and Samuel (Deut 17:15–17b; 1 Sam 8), through the exploitative strategies of heavy taxation, military conscription, forced labor, requisitioned property, and slavery—do not compare with God's gracious provision for the lilies. Solomon is the archetypal "anxious person" who unlike the lilies does not trust God for what he needs but resorts to his own greedy and oppressive acquisition of excessive wealth.

¹²Health and food are prominent in the eschatological reversal and vision of 2 Bar 29 5–8, 73 1–2. On psychosomatic and social scientific approaches to sickness and demon possession in imperial and colonial contexts, see Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 123–25, 196–98, and notes with bibliography.

Kings are identified as those who use their power against followers of Jesus (10:18). Herod Antipas, identified as a king (14:9), demonstrates precisely this resistance to God's purposes when he executes the prophet John the Baptist (14:1–12). And the phrase “kings of the earth” is used to describe the taxing ways of rulers (17:25). The particular reference is to the tax imposed on Jews after the fall of Jerusalem by the emperor Vespasian (70 C.E.). It was used to maintain the temple of the victorious Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome! Significantly, the phrase “kings of the earth” appears in Ps 2:2 to describe kings who “take counsel against the Lord and his Christ [anointed].” God, though, laughs them into oblivion (Ps 2:2–11).

In the Matthean narrative context, the presumption that the king of 18:23 is to be understood as God is difficult to sustain. The previous negative presentations of kings suggest that the parable proceeds, at least initially, by contrast. The imperial world provides a stark contrast to God's radically different, forgiving ways.

The king is in his counting house. The description of the king's activity as “settling his accounts” confirms this conclusion (18:23b–24). We have entered the political world in which the powerful elite accumulate resources and wealth at the expense of the rest.¹³ The gospel's audience has probably never directly experienced the “proverbial” elite world of royal courts with their retainers and skilled officials who carry out the king's military, administrative, financial, and religious policies. The audience has, though, certainly experienced their imperial policies in action on a daily basis.

The king uses underlings to administer his will (so also Herod in 14:2). The official could be a free(d) person of considerable status, wealth, and skill. The term “slave” would then designate loyalty and service to the king. Or the term could refer to a literal slave. Although we commonly associate slaves with poverty and physical labor, slaves frequently had highly developed economic, administrative, and legal skills. As representatives of rulers, landowners, and traders, they could exercise considerable power.¹⁴ In the political realm, such slaves belonged to the retainer class, a skilled part of the small aristocracy (about five percent of an empire) that carried out the king's policies. Loyalty to their powerful and possessive master or lord could be well rewarded both financially and with the honor and status that derived from being the slave of a king (cf. 18:25, 27, 31, 32, 34).

Attention is focused on financial matters (18:23–24). The particular account to be settled comprises a debt of ten thousand talents. The context (royal politics), the personnel (king and official), and large amount (ten thousand talents) likely point to the collection of taxes and tribute, not to a personal debt. As Jesus has indicated, taxes are the primary means by which kings and the attendant elite in an imperial society sustain themselves

¹³My reading partially resembles that of W. R. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994) 131–49, though surprisingly Herzog focuses only on the historical Jesus.

¹⁴Philo (*Gaum* 26.166–78) complains about Helicon, the slave of emperor Gaius Caligula, because he impedes the access of Philo's delegation to the emperor.

(17:25). Taxes enact the “proprietary theory of state” by which a ruler sees the territory and resources under his rule as legitimate plunder. They are the means of transferring wealth from its producers to the political elite.¹⁵ The burden on peasants and artisans could be great, perhaps as high as half of production. The early second-century orator Aristides heaps praise on the abundance and diversity of quality food from the whole empire available to the Roman elite. But not once does he pause to consider the origin of food, its means of extraction, and the immense suffering its presence in Rome has caused (*Roman Oration* 11).

One official has been charged with raising “ten thousand talents,” probably income from a tax or tribute levied on a particular area. The sum is large, but not unrealistic. Josephus refers to a tax collector named Joseph who promises Ptolemy that he will double the 8,000-talent tribute from Syria, Phoenicia, Judea, and Samaria (*Ant.* 12.175–76). Ironically, 10,000 talents was the amount that the Roman general Pompey levied when

Rome took control of the newly subjugated Judea in the 60s B.C.E. (Josephus, *Ant.* 14.78)! The figure, then, evokes Rome’s (and any empire’s) strategies of exploiting the land it claims to rule in order to secure wealth for its elite. Moreover,

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the sum indicates the political importance, economic skill, and administrative power of the slave to whom the king entrusts such a task.

Burst bubble. The slave, however, has not been up to the task. For unspecified reasons, he has failed to raise the amount to be paid to the king. He has dishonored the king by doing something that is intolerable to tyrants; he has shown that the king’s word is not law! One of the king’s own officials, he has momentarily burst the bubble of royal invincibility and power.

His vulnerability exposed, the king must be seen to reestablish his authority, demonstrating that his word and will are all-powerful. Identified by the narrative as “his lord,” the king powerfully “orders” the man, his household, and possessions to be sold (v. 25). The point is not repayment but swift and brutal punishment. The king’s action is not unusual. Diogenes Laertius narrates a similar fate for a tax collector who fails to raise his contracted amount (*Lives* 4.46–58).

But this slave did not rise to an elevated position of power without knowing how imperial politics work! Exhibiting great submission, he prostrates himself before the king,

¹⁵Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, 214, 246.

begging for more time to accomplish the king's will (v. 26).¹⁶ This demonstration of subservience and renewed commitment to do the king's will seems to satisfy the king's honor. The debt, the stipulated amount of income to be collected, is set aside (i.e., forgiven, v. 27; cf. 4 Macc 2:8).

Is this a model of God's forgiveness? The reference to "pity" recalls Jesus' motivation in the Matthean narrative (9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34). But once again, invoking Jesus' actions suggests contrast rather than similarity. In each display of Jesus' "pity," the other party benefits as a transformation takes place. The desperate person, not Jesus, gains something new and life-changing: encounter with God's reign, healing, food, sight, and insight.

The king's action is not of this kind. The one who benefits most from not selling the slave is the king! If this official, powerful and skilled enough to be entrusted with raising such a huge sum, cannot do it, then it probably cannot be done. If the king sells him, he will lose the man's expertise. By not selling him, the king gains a slave even more "indebted" to him, even more submissive and controllable—not to mention a region even more grateful that it has not been taxed so heavily! The king's "pity" is a self-serving act that reinforces his own power.

Same song, second verse. This scenario of power and honor is repeated, though now with the roles reversed (18:28–30). The official immediately finds himself placed in the king's position in relation to another slave. The language of verse 28 closely links this new situation with the previous one: "that same slave, as he went out. . . ."

The fellow slave who owes a hundred denarii is probably a lower-ranked official in the court, a client dependent on the power of his more powerful patron. It is not clear whether the amount owed is a personal debt, or, more likely, an amount to be raised by taxes that the first slave has delegated to an official of lower rank. Since day laborers received a denarius for a day's wages (20:2), the amount is not huge, though worth collecting.

The higher-ranked official greets the announcement of non-payment with instant force: "seizing him by the throat he said, 'Pay what you owe!'" (18:28). In the world of court politics, this violence is not surprising. The official has just come from a shameful encounter with the king where his own inability to raise a required amount of income has been exposed and the limits of his power unveiled. Now it is time to reassert *his* authority. From a position of vulnerability, the official sends a message of invincibility to all those below him.

Of course, various strategies are available for raising the money: longer time period; reduced amount; reassigning the task; even canceling the debt. But the immediate issues concern perceptions of power and status. The official has to show that despite what has happened with the king, he still has the power of life and death over others. So he is unmoved by the lower-ranked slave's pleas for mercy and imprisons him (v. 30). Now is not

¹⁶The verb, like the cognate noun *proskynēsis*, denotes the political act of obeisance and prostration before a king or ruler, common in the east since Alexander (Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 111 and notes)

the time for mercy. To forgive the debt would be perceived as a display not of power but of weakness.

Though the official's imprisoning the lower-ranked slave seems to contradict the king's treatment of him, both acts are quite similar. Both exert control. Both employ bullying tactics to secure power over another. The slave, who is to be tortured until he pays the amount (v. 30), will need agents to do so. Even more people will be intimidated and become indebted to the more powerful official. He has learned his lessons well from his imperial master!

Other officials in the king's court are immediately worried by this assertion of power (v. 31). They seek protection by going over the slave's head to the king, a more powerful patron. The king's response is swift: he imposes torture (not prison), withdraws forgiveness, and reinstates the slave's task of raising the large amount. Why is the king so angry? Is it simply because his example of "mercy" was not followed? That is unlikely since his earlier action was only superficially one of pity and much more about establishing his own control. In a sense, his anger is hypocritical because the official has only imitated the king!

The king's anger must be understood in the context of imperial politics. It is all about perceptions of power. The official's action against one of lower status appears unambiguous, tough, and decisive: failure to carry out his task means punishment. The king's action toward the same official, by comparison, appears ambiguous. While his "forgiveness" further indebted the slave, it could also be perceived as an act of weakness. The official's brutal, ruthless action against a lower-ranked slave has shamed the king. It has exposed him to the perception that he is vulnerable and weak. To counter that perception, the king retaliates by imposing torture (the perennial favorite of tyrants).

Thus far in the parable, the requirement that disciples live their lives marked by forgiveness has been contrasted to the way of the world, to "imperial-politics-as-usual." In that world, forgiveness is a calculated, self-benefiting, once-only act! The king is not God. God's empire is not like the king's self-interested, oppressive, fickle, and harsh rule in which perceptions of power, status, and wealth determine actions.

But—verse 35! Verse 35 brings a major surprise: "So my heavenly father will do to you." The king's final act of punishing the unforgiving slave is now said to resemble God's action. God will behave like an imperial tyrant! God will do similar things to disciples who do not forgive repeatedly. After a contrast has been drawn between God's ways and the bullying, self-enriching king, suddenly a similarity is established. While God's life-giving reign shapes a way of life that differs from the king's reign in many ways, it is similar in that there are accountability and punitive consequences for ignoring God's will. Finally, the parable renders to God the things that are Caesar's.¹⁷

¹⁷A.N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York and London: Free Press, 1929, 1979) 342.

THE KING, THE WEDDING FEAST, AND THE BURNED CITY: MATTHEW 22:1–14

Four chapters later, Jesus narrates another parable concerning God's empire and a king. This parable completes a sequence of three—with the two sons (21:28–32) and the householder and vineyard tenants (vv. 33–46)—that employs extensive allegory and is addressed to the Jerusalem elite (vv. 15, 23–27, 45–46). In the narrative context—with Jesus' entry to Jerusalem, his attack on the elite's power base (the temple), and rejection by the elite—the parables depict inevitable judgment. The Jerusalem elite have not done the father's (i.e., God's) will (vv. 28–32). They will kill the householder's son (vv. 37–39) and have not produced the required fruit from the vineyard (i.e., Israel; vv. 41–43). The householder (God) disqualifies and replaces their leadership (without rejecting Israel).

The central authority figure of the two previous parables represents God, and with this extensive use of allegory, there is little doubt that in 22:1–14 the king is God. Although the gospel presents human kings in a negative light and hesitates to adopt this image for God (18:23–35), it has also tapped the biblical tradition of God as king (5:35). As king, God reigns over the world (Ps 24), the nations (Ps 47:3), and their gods (Isa 41:21). God reigns over Israel (Ps 97:1–5) and redeems Israel from the nations (Isa 52:7). The “kings of the world” resist God and God's anointed king, who represents God's just reign in Israel (Ps 72), but God's reign will extend over them, too (Ps 2; Isa 24:23).

As much as the gospel re-describes “empire” and counters the imperial paradigm, it employs this same paradigm to image God's work, present and future.

The allegory establishes Jesus as the king's (God's) son. This identification has been established throughout the gospel (Matt 2:15; 3:17; 11:27; 16:16; 17:5; 20:18) and reinforced in the previous parable (21:37–39). The son's wedding feast invokes several traditions. The marriage metaphor depicts God's covenant relationship with Israel (Hos 1–3; Jer 3:1–10). Eating and feasting express participation in God's purposes both in the present (Prov 9:1–2; Isa 55:1–3) and in the future completion of God's purposes. Then all the nations will gather at Zion to acknowledge God's reign and to share “for all peoples a feast of rich food” (Isa 25:6–10; Matt 8:11). Throughout the gospel, meals have provided the context in which Jesus manifests God's justice. Contrary to imperial practices, divine justice bestows rather than removes (through taxation) adequate resources to sustain human life (Matt 6:11, 25–31; 14:15–21). Meals demonstrate God's inclusive mercy, which, contrary to imperial social hierarchies, extends to the social margins (9:10–13). That is, the wedding feast provides a

multivalent image of the establishment of God's empire and purposes already underway, in part, in Jesus' ministry

The imperial political sphere continues to shape the parable's development as the king sends his slaves to summon the elite who have been invited to the feast. Their sending expresses the king's authority (in the preceding parable, cf. 21:34, 36, 37), as do the presence and obedience of the slaves (officials) and the verb "summon" or "call." The allegory continues. The verb "call" denotes God's commissioning of Jesus (1:21, 23) and Jesus' calling of disciples (4:21, 9:13). The term "slaves" designates disciples (20:28), and prophets sent by God to the people (Jer 7:25, Amos 3:7). In the previous parable, slaves sent to the elite leaders are violently rejected (21:34–36), just as prophets were (Jer 7:25–27, 2 Chr 36:15–16, Dan 9:6) and disciples will be (Matt 10:17–18). Hence the sending in 22:3 emphasizes the king's authority, anticipates rejection, and interprets its significance as a blatant rejection of God.

Consistent with the imperial paradigm (confirmed by vv. 9–10), the invited guests now being called to the wedding feast are drawn from the social elite. Clients of the king's patronage, they demonstrate allegiance by loyally doing his will, and benefit with power, status, and wealth. The invitation honors them and provides them with an opportunity to demonstrate reciprocal honor and submission. But for whatever reason, "they did not wish to come" (v. 3b). They dishonor the king, flout his authority, and rebel against his will. Like the second son, they say "yes" but do not come (21:30). Like the tenants, they do not keep their agreement with the householder (21:34–39).

Imperial violence. The king tries again, begging for their compliance (v. 4). But his extra effort—an ambiguous gesture perhaps of benign despotism, perhaps of weakness—is also flouted. Some simply prefer their daily business, while others, like the vineyard tenants (21:35–39), resist with violence. Violence spirals into violence. Faithful to the imperial paradigm, the king cannot tolerate such insubordination. The king's anger, presented in this context as being quite justifiable (like the king's in 18:34), is authoritatively expressed in a further "sending." But this time he sends troops to kill the insubordinate elite and burn their city. Fire is a common symbol of judgment (e.g., Isa 10:15–19, 34:8–10).

The act of attacking a city, burning it, and killing its inhabitants is a standard strategy in repertoires of imperial control and revenge. Countless rulers have employed it.¹⁸ Indeed, some ten or so years before Matthew's gospel was written, the emperor Vespasian's son Titus burned the temple and city (Josephus, *J W* 2:395–97, 6:249–408, 2 *Bar* 7:1, 80:3).

This parable offers Matthew's interpretation of the burning of Jerusalem by the Roman army. Like numerous other authors and writings, he views the act as God's

¹⁸To cite just a few examples: Antiochus Epiphanes subjugating Egypt (1 Macc 1:19) and Jerusalem in the 160s B.C.E. (1 Macc 1:29–32); Judas against Transjordanian towns (1 Macc 5:5, 27–28, 35, 50–51, 65); the Roman general Pompey against Jerusalem in the 60s B.C.E. (*Pss Sol* 2:1–6, 8:1–5, 19–21) and Cestius the Roman governor of Syria in 66 C.E. against Chabulon villages and Bezetha (part of Jerusalem; Josephus *J W* 2:504–5, 508, 530).

punishment¹⁹ Rome serves as God's agent in enacting punishment, just as other imperial powers have done previously: Assyria (Isa 10 1–7), Babylon (Deut 28–30, 1 Kgs 9:1–9; Jer 25 1–11), Persia (Isa 44:28–45:3), Antiochus Epiphanes (2 Macc 6:12–17), and Rome (*Pss Sol* 2 1–4). But for Matthew, the punishment is quite specific. It is not a matter of generic sin, but of a particular one. The Jerusalem elite have rejected God's son and agent, Jesus.²⁰

There is little room for smugness or rejoicing. Whatever the particularities of the difficult final section (22:11–14), its warning is clear. People who repeat the elite's mistake and fail to recognize and honor God as king will also experience God's violent punishment.

TWO PARABLES, TWO KINGS: ONE IMPERIAL PARADIGM

The conclusion seems inescapable that the gospel presents a sharp critique of this imperial paradigm. The gospel critiques the imperial status quo and contrasts its ways with God's (18:23–31). The world needs saving from sins (1:21), as Herod, Rome's puppet king, readily demonstrates (chap 2). This imperial world is diabolical. The devil is presented as the one who controls the "kingdoms of the world" (4:8), the dominant one of which, of course, is Rome. He offers Jesus control over them. But for Jesus to accept the offer would be, in T. S. Eliot's words, "the greatest treason. to do the right deed for the wrong reason."²¹ Jesus is to enact God's purposes, not Satan's! The opening chapters provide an immediate, harsh, uncompromising disclosure of, and verdict on, Roman imperial society and any society organized for similar ends.

Nor do things improve as the story unfolds. Jesus inhabits a world peopled by the sick, the maimed, the hungry, the powerless. But he does something that is ultimately threatening to imperial structures. Jesus asserts that the world does not have to be this way. He demonstrates God's empire, an alternative order marked by healing, exorcisms, feedings, blessing, inclusion, mercy, justice, and service. His bold, alternative social vision means inevitable—ultimately fatal—conflict with, and resistance from, the imperial order, the alliance of Rome and the Jerusalem elite, which closes ranks to protect its (in)vested interests. The empire always strikes back.

In a sense, the narrative re-describes the metaphor of reign or empire in applying it to God's work. God's empire is fundamentally not like that of the great men of the Gentiles (20:25–28). It is underway in marginal places and people, in alternative communities, mercifully effecting life-giving social and economic structures (chaps 5–7). From the outset, the narrative also trains its readers to be suspicious of empires and their rulers. They typically bring havoc and destruction on people (e.g., 1:6–12; 2:13–18; 6:29; 22:1–14) from

¹⁹See, e.g., Josephus, *J W* 6 96–110, 2 *Bar* 1 1–5, 4 *Ezra* 3 24–36.

²⁰I disagree with readings of the parable that claim God rejects all Israel. The vineyard remains, but new leadership is provided. See Carter and Heil, *Matthew's Parables*, 168–76, Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 432–37 and notes.

²¹T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1971) 196.

which only God can save by establishing God's empire and rule over all at the return of Jesus in power and triumph (24:27–31).

But there's the rub. Finally, as much as the gospel re-describes "empire" and counters the imperial paradigm, it employs this same paradigm to image God's work, present and future. As we have observed in these two parables (illustrations of a much more pervasive presence in the gospel), the borrowing is not restricted to a few words. Rather, the gospel embraces the whole paradigm, its structures, practices, and commitments. Applying the entire paradigm to God, it renders the things of Caesar to God.

The word of God comes to the gospel's readers, as it always does, in cultural garb. There is no language for this gospel to employ other than the one that pervades and dominates its world. The gospel attests, then, the power of the imperial paradigm, the deep level at which it has been internalized, absorbed, and assumed by this gospel's traditions, communities, and author—members of the imperially-controlled society who nonetheless criticize and resist it!

The gospel raises, therefore, an important question for contemporary interpreters shaped by this very tradition. How appropriate is this paradigm, which pervades our scriptures and liturgy, to describe God's work of mercy and justice, and to image the gifts and accountability of discipleship? Are there preferable alternatives, not just of language (e.g., "kin-dom") but of the very conceptual and metaphorical frameworks by which we imagine and verbalize God's salvific work?²²

²²For example, L. M. Russell (*Household of Freedom: Authority in Feminist Theology* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987] 83–85) proposes an "alternative metaphor" of "household." W. J. Everett (*God's Federal Republic: Reconstructing our Governing Symbol* [New York: Paulist, 1988]) proposes "God's Federal Republic."



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