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The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids

(Matthew 25:1-13)

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Then the Kingdom of Heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five wise. The foolish ones took their lamps, but did not take oil with them. The wise ones took oil in flasks with their lamps. And when the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and fell into a sustained sleep.

And at midnight a cry went up, "Behold, the bridegroom. Come to meet him!" Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish ones said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out!"

But the wise ones answered, "No! There may not be sufficient for us and you. Rather, go to those who are selling and buy for yourselves."

And while they were away to make the purchase, the bridegroom arrived. The prepared ones went in with him into the wedding feast, and the door was closed.

Later on, the other virgins came, saying, "Lord, Lord, open for us." But he replied, "Verily, I tell you, I do not know you."

Therefore, keep vigilance continually, for you do not know the day or the hour.

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

THIS PARABLE OCCURS only in Matthew. It has been interpreted in a wide variety of ways. One scholar has understood it as an attack upon the hypocrisy of Jewish teachers in Jesus day.¹ Still another says that it can only be properly understood if we assume that the setting is Passover-night.² Bultmann and Donfried regard it as an allegorical creation of the early church.³ Dodd and Jeremias believe that it is a parable which at least in its outline, goes back to the historical Jesus.⁴ These varying attitudes indicate that one should examine the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids with a great deal of care.

TEXTUAL MATTERS

Verse 1: Since this parable is placed in a series of eschatological admonitions (chapters 24-25), it is probable that the opening *toie* refers to the Parousia as previously introduced in Matthew 24:44, 50. Except for the doubtful textual reading in John 3:5, the expression *basileia tōn ouranōn* can be found only in Matthew (29 times). Though Matthew also uses the more common *basileia tou Theou* (12:28, 19:24, 21:31, 43) and undoubtedly viewed the two expressions as near equivalents (cf. 19:23, 24), it is possible that this expression conveys an added nuance of meaning. If stress is placed upon the fact that the kingdom comes from heaven, this would underscore the view of the kingdom as reign rather than realm. Further, this emphasis on *tōn ouranōn* points to the fact that the kingdom is not an evolutionary development from within the processes of nature, but a divine intervention from without. In later Rabbinic idiom, "heaven" is a common substitute for "God."

The reading *tou numphiou kai tēs numphēs* is supported by D (sixth century Western witness), X (tenth century Alexandrian witness), H (ninth century Caesarean witness), the Vulgate (Western

witness), the Syriac (Western witness), and the Diatessaron (Western witness). For the reading *tou numphiou*, the manuscript support includes Aleph (fourth century Alexandrian witness), B (fourth century Alexandrian witness), K (ninth century Byzantine witness), L (ninth century Alexandrian witness), W (fifth century Western witness), certain Syriac and Coptic manuscripts, and a few of the church fathers (Basil, Chrysostom, John of Damascus). As the evaluation of the Aland text indicates, there is considerable doubt concerning which reading is correct. Though the reading *tou numphiou* is attested by earlier witnesses, it is striking that *tou numphiou kai tēs numphēs* is witnessed by various textual families. Due to the near balance of the manuscript evidence, many scholars have argued from other grounds. Hence, some have argued that . . . *kai tēs numphēs* is the original reading and that it fell out because it did not fit the church's pattern of Christ as the bridegroom who would come to his bride the church. Since the longer reading presupposes that the wedding was held, as was the Jewish custom, in the home of the bridegroom, and the shorter reading that the wedding was in the bride's house, the more difficult reading may well be the latter. Finally, the fact that the *numphē* is nowhere else mentioned in the parable would seem to support the shorter reading.

Verse 2: The word pair *mōrai . . . thronimoi* also occurs in Matthew in the context of the story of the wise and foolish builders (Matt. 7:24-27). Whether or not the builders' story is technically a parable, it is striking that in both of Matthew's usages it is a future event (the arrival of the bridegroom or the arrival of the rain) which determines the quality of the action under consideration. Before this watershed event both the virgins and the houses look alike. Tractate *Shabbat* 152b and 153a of the Babylonian Talmud contain two parables which use a similar contrast in contexts where the result of the *eschaton* is under discussion.

Verse 5: The inceptive aorist *enustaxan* indicates the point of entry into the state of sleeping. The imperfect *ekatheudon* denotes the virgins' continued sleeping.

Verse 10: The use of an open or closed *thura* to denote either God's grace or irrevocable judgment is as early as the eighth century B.C. (Is. 22:22). This same passage from Isaiah is directly applied to Christ in Rev. 3:7.

Verse 11: The repetition of *kyrie* may well express extreme urgency.

Verse 13: A small number of witnesses insert *en hē ho huios tou anthropou erchetai* after *hōran*. While the manuscript evidence decisively supports the shorter reading, it does witness to the fact that early copyists saw the eschatological theme which runs through our parable and those adjacent to it (cf. Matt. 24:44).

EXEGETICAL ITEMS

One of the key questions which must be answered in the interpretation of this parable is: "To what extent does Matthew 25:1-13 reflect the marital practice of first-century Judaism?" More than one

scholar has suggested that the details of these verses, especially the holding of the wedding in the bride's home (verse 1 with the shorter reading) and the nocturnal time of the wedding, could not have been drawn from the Jewish practice of Jesus' day. This evaluation of the story leads to the conclusion that we are not dealing with a parable of Jesus, but with an allegory which was created by Matthew to portray Christ's relationship to the church.⁵ On the other end of the spectrum stands Joachim Jeremias who argues that "it is utterly incredible that she [the church] should have produced an artistic picture of a wedding corresponding in every detail to reality as a mere fiction."⁶ The answer to this question seems to hinge on the extent to which we can, with confidence, reconstruct first-century wedding customs. Generally, those who regard our parable as incompatible with what is known concerning this aspect of Jewish life refer to the descriptive quotations in Strack-Billerbeck.⁷ On the other hand, those who find the details consonant with ancient marital practice in Palestine point to studies which cite parallel incidents and practices as they occurred in Jesus' day.⁸ The fact that recent research in this area is tending to support the latter position is shown by an article in which A. W. Argyle reverses his earlier position and states: "Jesus knew better than to tell, and the evangelist knew better than to record, a story which the hearers would dismiss as ridiculous."⁹ The force of this argument and the fact that Mt. 25:1-13 is followed by the parable of the talents (not explicitly called a parable in Matthew, but so classified in Luke 19:11) are sufficient grounds to view this material as a parable rather than an allegory.

The probability that all these incidents are drawn from the actual historical situation also suggests that there is no reason to deny the dominical origin of the parable.

If we look at the broader context of our parable, it forms a part of the last of five major teaching discourses by Jesus in Matthew.¹⁰ It is clear that chapters 24 and 25, and possibly 23, comprise a collection of Jesus' teaching which is oriented around preparation for the eschaton. Indeed, the closing admonition to *grēgoreite* (The present imperative stresses that we are *continually* to keep watch.) echoes the *grēgoreite* of Matthew 24:42, 43 and underscores the eschatological orientation of our parable. Since this parable does not occur in the other gospels, the context in Matthew provides the only canonical setting for its interpretation.¹¹ The nearer context of chapters 24 and 25 includes the following materials:

- 24:1-2 The Prediction of the Destruction of the Temple
- 24:3-14 The Beginning of Woes
- 24:15-28 The Great Tribulation
- 24:29-31 The Coming of the Son of Man
- 24:32-35 The Lesson of the Fig Tree
- 24:36-44 The Unknown Day and Hour
- 25:1-13 The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids
- 25:14-30 The Parable of the Talents
- 25:31-46 The Judgment of the Nations¹²

If, then, we have established that we are dealing with a *bona*

fide parable, which is set in an eschatological context, it is necessary to search for the point of comparison and to explore the imagery of the story. The point of comparison might well be thought to be the ten bridesmaids (*homoiōthēsetai . . . deka parthenois*). A proper understanding of the Aramaic background of *homoiōthēsetai* with the dative will, however, point us not so much to the virgins as to the wedding.¹³

All of the imagery in this parable would coincide with an ancient wedding in which the bride lived some distance from the bridegroom. Since the key elements of the ancient ceremony were the wedding procession and the wedding feast, we are introduced to the scene at the point where the bridegroom is soon expected to arrive and take the bride in festal procession back to his home. The late hour of his arrival (due to the distance he has travelled) necessitates that the bridal attendants provide lamps. Though such a late arrival is rare, we do have a rabbinic passage which associates the arrival of the bridegroom with a late hour:

Moses went (on the day of lawgiving) into the camp of the Israelites, and awoke them out of their sleep. 'Arise out of your sleep; surely the Bridegroom cometh and claimeth his bride . . .'
Pirqe R. Eliezer, 41.¹⁴

Jeremias finds a similar allusion in the *Mekilta*, Ex. 19:17, "where Deut. 33:2, 'Yahweh came from Sinai (on his right was burning fire),' is interpreted with the words 'like a bridegroom who goes to meet the bride'."¹⁵

It is doubtful whether the ten virgins were servants of either the bride or the bridegroom, since servants would not have been expected to provide oil for themselves. It is also improbable that we should regard them as bridesmaids for then they would be expected to stay with the bride. T. C. Burkitt has offered the helpful suggestion that the ten virgins are most naturally understood as friends or neighbors of the couple who go out to meet the bridegroom's procession as it approached the bride's house.¹⁶ The term *hupantēsis* can be a technical word for the "official welcome of a newly arrived dignitary."¹⁷

The identity of the *numphē* is another crucial element in the proper understanding of this parable. Should we identify the bridegroom with Christ? As the parable now stands its major emphasis is on *preparedness* for that critical moment when the bridegroom arrives. In this respect, no more should be read into the arrival of the bridegroom than into that moment of crisis caused by the arrival of a flood, a thief, or the master of the house. While Jeremias seems to indicate that Matthew has identified Jesus as the bridegroom in the parable, the present form of the text does not support such a conclusion.¹⁸ It is only by reference to such passages as Matthew 9:14-15, Mark 2:19-20, and Luke 5:34-35 that such an identification is made. Despite the absence of such an explicit identification in Matthew 25:1-13, the strong urge to identify the bridegroom with Christ is manifested already by the copyists who inserted into verse 13 the phrase *en hē ho huios tou anthrōpou erchetai*. Perhaps the final answer to this question will depend upon whether one thinks that Jesus

is here (as in Matthew 9:14-15 and parallels) making a point concerning that *person* who will bring about the eschatological crisis or about the *preparedness* which that crisis will demand. The latter interpretation, in view of the final exhortation in verse 13, seems the more probable. If, as some scholars surmise, Luke 13:24-30, should be viewed as drawing upon a common tradition with our passage, then there is additional support for stressing the point of *preparedness* for eschatological crisis, since this theme dominates the Lucan material.¹⁹

If it is agreed that the identity of the *numphē* is not the major point of the parable, is any identification with Christ justified? Since the Old Testament, and especially the prophet Hosea, develop the description of God as the marital partner of Israel, the Jews did have a conception of God coming as a bridegroom on the last day. Besides the rabbinic exegesis of Deuteronomy 33:2, we have a passage like Isaiah 62:5—"As the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee."²⁰

It is important to note, however, that this identification is nowhere extended to the Messiah in the Old Testament.²¹ Later Judaism greatly elaborates on this theme, but is also wanting in any Messiah-bridegroom identification. As we review the Old Testament's use of this marriage imagery, it is important to note that it is Yahweh's covenant with Israel which informs and gives theological meaning to the terms. Our parable, in which all of the virgins conceive themselves to be in a right relationship with the bridegroom (*kyrie, kyrie, anoixon hēmin*), tells of how some receive an almost Hoseanic rebuke (*Amen, legō humin, ouk oida humas*) and suggests that the Old Testament concept of covenant is an assumption of our parable. This is very likely if Hosea's *lō ami* is the equivalent of God saying, "Now I do not know you."²² It is very interesting that in Luke 13:24-30 those who are excluded by the owner of the house protest that they had a covenant with the owner—"Then you will say, We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets." The reply that greets them is very similar to verse 12 of our parable: "I do not know you or where you come from."²³ In the Lukan context it is very clear that Jesus is the home-owner, since verse 26 uses not the third but the second person.

Thus, though it is probable that many in Jesus' original audience thought of the bridegroom as God the Father, it is also conceivable that many had heard Jesus' explicit identification of Himself with the bridegroom (Matt. 9:14-15 and parallels) and rightly perceived that Jesus was transferring the Jewish expectation concerning the coming of God the Father to His own person and word just as He had done in Luke 13:24-30. Now Jesus is the mediator of the covenant and it is one's relationship to Him both now and at the Parousia, which makes all the difference. This interpretation would parallel one of Dodd's emphases when he writes:

In these three eschatological parables, then, we seem to have reflected a situation in the ministry of Jesus when the crisis He had provoked was hastening towards uncertain and unexpected developments, which called for the utmost alertness on the part of His followers.²⁴

If this interpretation is plausible, then we can determine in what sense the virgins can be viewed as the church. Jesus, as the Mediator of the new covenant, relates to His people just as God did in the Old Testament. His appearance at the Parousia will result in His people being gathered to Him. From the perspective of His ministry, it is impossible to distinguish his true followers (the prepared) from the false followers (the unprepared). It is only in the crisis of the bridegroom's entrance that all know which disciples are truly His. Thus, just as Jesus' closing exhortation shows that his hearers (the nascent church) were to identify with the virgins, so the church can today hear the admonition to preparedness in view of the approaching Parousia.

When one passes beyond the identity of the bridegroom and virgins, he encounters a variety of efforts to allegorize such elements of the story as the *lampades* and the *elainon*.²⁵ It is preferable to regard such details as the simple components of the story and no more. Similarly, much has been made of the fact that the bridegroom was *chronizontos*. Some regard *chronizontos* as proof-positive that the church was here at work explaining the delay of the Parousia.²⁶ It is more probable that the only function of this detail is to set the stage in the parable for the upcoming crisis. Without the delay, all would have had sufficient oil!

Verses 6-11 rehearse that sequence of events which was undoubtedly known to Jesus' audience. Besides Jeremias' excellent discussion of the details of such an event, it is only necessary to note that the "shutting of the door" would have had immediate theological significance for the first-century Jew.²⁷

It is often said that the concluding exhortation to *grēgoreite* is not compatible with the parable's description of the need for preparedness and hence should be considered a later addition brought over from Mark 13:35. This need not be the case, however, since the broader usage of *grēgoreō* can include the idea of being presently prepared as one is watching.²⁸ The likelihood that the substance of this parable was known in the early church is increased by a comparison with Luke 12:35ff. An alternative to positing some sort of common tradition between these two passages or dependency of one upon the other is to consider the probability that Jesus, as an apt teacher, could use similar imagery on different occasions with telling effect.

In summary, the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, in the form in which we have it in canonical Matthew, lays its greatest stress upon the *preparedness* of the audience. Since all the virgins first dozed and then fell into sustained sleep, it is clear that the concluding *grēgoreite* is not to be understood in the narrow sense of rapt attention. Rather it stresses that sort of vigilant activity which results in preparedness at the eschatological appearance of the Bridegroom.

The point of comparison which would emerge from such an understanding of the parable might read: "When God is at work establishing His rule in, over, and among men, this activity brings about a present and future crisis in the lives of men in the same manner that the expectation of a bridegroom by virgins necessitates a

thorough and adequate preparation." All of the vivid, dramatic detail of the Parable converges to underscore the absolute necessity of preparedness. While superficially all of the virgins responded with enthusiasm at the bridegroom's approach, only the five with adequate oil acted in accord with their hope. In a real sense, from their first response, the foolish virgins were derelict and destined to exclusion. Their actions paralleled the unfaithfulness of the idle servant (Matt. 25:14-30) who finds himself excluded from the master's presence. Thus, the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids is not aimed so much at a future eschatological day and the details which will attend it, as it is directed against the lethargy and lackluster response of Jesus' audience to His person and work. Jesus knew that the future eschatological consummation was already anticipated in His own ministry. One's response to His person and work determines one's standing at the final eschaton.

FOOTNOTES

1. J. M. Ford, "The Parable of the Foolish Scholars (Matt. xxv 1-13)," *Novum Testamentum*, IX (1967), pp. 120-123.
2. F. A. Strobel, "Zum Verständnis von Matt xxv 1-13," *Novum Testamentum*, II (1958), pp. 225-227.
3. R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 119. K. P. Donfried, "The Allegory of the Ten Virgins (Matt 25:1-13) As a Summary of Matthean Theology," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, XCIII (1974), pp. 415-428.
4. C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Scribner, 1958), pp. 171-174. Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Scribner, 1963), pp. 51-53.
5. Danfried, *op. cit.*, p. 428. Also M. D. Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1974), pp. 438-440.
6. Jeremias, *op. cit.*, p. 174.
7. Herman L. Strack und Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar Zum Neuen Testament*, I (München: C. H. Beck'sche, 1926), pp. 501-518.
8. Besides the extensive bibliography in Jeremias, *op. cit.*, n. 72, one can mention the recent article on "Marriage" in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, II (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1971), pp. 1026-1051.
9. A. W. Argyle, "Wedding Customs at the Time of Jesus," *The Expository Times*, LXXXVI (1975), pp. 214-215.
10. K. Stendahl, "Matthew," in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, eds., M. Black and H. H. Rowley (London: Nelson, 1962), p. 792. The five discourses are: Matthew 5-7, The Sermon on the Mount; Matthew 10, The Commissioning of the Disciples; Matthew 13, Eschatological Parables; Matthew 18, Ecclesiastical Admonitions; Matthew 24 and 25, Eschatological Admonitions.
11. Possible allusions to this parable or employment of its imagery by the other synoptic authors will be discussed later.
12. Eschatological themes which permeate this discourse and play a part in our parable include: a Separation Theme—"Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left" (Mt. 24:40, 41); "Throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness . . ." (Mt. 25:30); the Coming of the Master Theme—Mt. 24:30-31, 24:37-37, 24:50-51, 25:19-20, 25:31-33, the Delay Theme—Mt. 24:48, 25:5. Cf. Danfried, *op. cit.*, p. 421.
13. Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, (Rome: Scripta Pontificii Instituti Biblici, 1963), p. 22. Cf. also Jeremias, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-102.
14. Strack-Billerbeck, *op. cit.*, p. 970.

15. Jeremias, *op. cit.*, p. 172. On this page he also posits that another plausible explanation for the delay of the bridegroom's arrival would be a lengthy dispute over the marriage settlement.
16. F. C. Burkitt, "The Parables of the Ten Virgins," *Journal of Theological Studies*, XXX (1929), p. 268.
17. Otto Michel, *hupantaō*, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, VII (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), pp. 625-626.
18. Jeremias, *op. cit.*, p. 51.
19. Jeremias, *op. cit.*, p. 53.
20. Jeremias, *op. cit.*, p. 172. The Rabbinic interpretation of Dt. 33:2 is cited here.
21. Joachim Jeremias, *numphē*, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. IV (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967), p. 1101. One very late and insignificant reference has been found. Cf. Jeremias, *Parables*, p. 52, n. 13. I want to thank Professor Douglas Judisch for bringing to my attention another exception. Psalm 45, in speaking of the Messiah (cf. Hebrews 1:8-9), employs the imagery of a wedding (vv. 10-11, 12-14) and, though it nowhere uses the term "bridegroom," clearly views the Messiah in that role.
22. John L. McKenzie, "Knowledge of God in Hosea," *Journal of Biblical Literature* LXXIV (1955), pp. 22-27.
23. Jeremias believes this to be a scholarly formula by which a pupil was denied access to the teacher for seven days. Jeremias, *The Parables*, p. 175.
24. C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), p. 136.
25. Most recently, K. Donfried, *op. cit.*, p. 423, suggests that the *elainon* represents good works and the *lampades* are the equivalent of the public display of good works.
26. Jeremias, *The Parables*, p. 51.
27. Cf. the textual note on this verse.
28. Albrecht Oepke, *grēgoreō*, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, II (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964), pp. 338-339.