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"Talents" and the Meanings They Make

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Abstract

In this article, I wish to explore specifically Jesus's parable of the talents in the biblical texts using the three-fold descriptive model, depicted as riddle, example and challenge parables, by John Dominic Crossan. I aim to analyse the theme, structure and delivery of this parable employing ideas of orality as represented by Walter J Ong and Alessandro Portelli. I argue that the parable represents a complex formulation of ideas and reflections, including a cultural-political critique of the history and culture of 1CE Palestine. By way of conclusion, I submit that Jesus's talents parable goes beyond simple moral narrative to critical, provocative reflections of lived experience, its culture and its politics.

Keywords: Riddle, Example, Challenge, Attack, Orality, Mnemonic

In the March/April of 4BCE, Archelaus, cruellest of Herod's sons, set sail to Rome to win Caesar's approval to be crowned Supreme King of Judea. His father has died in faraway Jericho from an unknown disease eponymously called "Herod's evil" (Josephus, trans. 1981, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book XII, chs.8-13). Herod leaves behind a country shorn by religious strife and a family invested in political acrimony. Herod earns the wrath of the Jewish people, because he mercilessly slaughters two of Judea's greatest teachers, because they object to his erecting a golden eagle above the Second Temple—to appease Rome—in Jerusalem. Antipas, Archelaus' brother, encouraged by the family, also travels to Rome to scuttle Archelaus' claims, while Phillip, the other brother, stays behind to rule the kingdom on his brothers' behalf. Fearing rebellion, before his departure, Archelaus orders the massacre of the Jewish faithful, drenching Jerusalem in a swathe of blood and gore. Meanwhile, embassies from Judea chosen from the Jewish faithful travel to Rome to challenge Archelaus' claim to the throne. (Jacobson, 2001, pp. 22-38)

Though Rome is unsure, it follows Herod's fourth and final will. Rome divides the kingdom among the three sons with Archelaus named ethnarch i.e., owning two-thirds of the lands while Antipas and Phillip share the rest with their sister. They have become Rome's client kings, agents of

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power, ruling as vassals of Caesar. The quarrelsome Antipas has agreed to collaborate, while Phillip unconditionally accepts his portion, however small by comparison. On Archelaus' return, he ascends his throne in great pomp and splendour, hunts down his dissenters, the embassies, and kills them mercilessly (Josephus, trans. 1981, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book XII, chs.8-13).

There are key features in the above episode of Judaic history that appear in Jesus's parable of the talents in the New Testament of the Bible. They are:

a) the travel king or master or wealthy men undertake; they are not pilgrimages but well-programmed journeys for power and profit;

b) the betrayers, who after sufficient appeasement with power and profit, turn collaborators and

c) the heroic dissenter, who speaks "truth to power" (Said 1994, p. xiv)

These elements shape and deliver the plot and structure of Jesus's parable of the talents. But this story also raises serious questions about contemporary history, society and culture. They are:

1) What does this parable seek to expose and what is it critical about?

2) In what ways, does this story make sense then and now?

In this article, I wish to respond to the above questions by exploring the parable's complexities, including its narrative structure and symbolic characterisation, while referencing the Archelaus incident in Jewish history. For that purpose, I wish to invoke ideas of orality as represented by Walter J. Ong (2002) and Alessandro Portelli (1991), and employ the historical-Jesus scholar, John Dominic Crossan's perspectives (2013) to reflect about Jesus' teaching and life. I also use four critical theorists to support my conceptualisations: Michel Foucault for ideas about discourse and power (Foucault, 1980) including "author function" (Foucault, 2007, p.199); John Berger, for "ways of seeing" as episteme (Berger, 1972, p.1), Edward Said for his understanding of intellectuals and "truth to power" (Said, 1994, p. xiv) and Pierre Bourdieu for his sense of "misrecognition" (Bourdieu 1977, pp. 168 & 170). I employ two historians, one, Flavius Josephus and the other, David Jacobson for descriptions of I CE Judea/ Israel (Josephus 93) and the nature of client rule then (Jacobson, 2001, pp.22-38).

Jesus's Stories and Orality:

Stories form an integral part of Jesus's mission and ministry. They are parables, often read simplistically as moral instruction. But they are actually rooted in the Jewish people's social conditions, and invoke highly liberating social and political meanings.

The *oral* nature of Jesus's stories is embedded in Jewish ethnicity. Wherever ethnicities remain important, oral stories search after knowledge and "truth" (Ong, 2002, p. 22). Oral narratives resist elite knowledge and truth but write the history of the "non-hegemonic classes" (Portelli, 1991, pp. 49,57), where truths are "aggregative" and "additive" (pp. 37-38), not merely logical and selective. They reinvent earlier truths, changing their meanings radically. Hence, meanings remain in struggle between old and new. Besides, oral stories use the "mnemonic" of cultural satire and memory-recall (Ong, 2002, p. 70) for purposes of meaning-making. Given these characteristics, oral stories tell people's histories, offer people-centric truths, and reject privilege. But these narratives appear "subjective" (Portelli, 1991, p. 56) and are "never the same twice" (p. 57). Yet they signify empowering community meanings for common folk because of their cultural location. Therefore, Jesus's parables live in this context of oral story-telling, implicated in thickly layered truths and significations and contest elitist linear knowledge.

Story-tellers— like Jesus Himself—are key to the utterance of the tale. They repeat tales but revise them unrecognisably; they erase and rewrite them like in a "palimpsest" (Salgado, 2023, para. 8) provoking their audiences to comprehend their world differently. They turn everything upside-down, promoting a down-up view of the world. Jesus's parables carry such "author-function" (Foucault, 2007, p. 199) that constantly references Jewish folk's contemporary history. Jesus effectively embodies the inimitable oral story-teller, prophetic in practice and invested in His culture and times.

Jesus's stories reverse plotlines as "good guys" turn into villains and "bad guys" turn out good (Crossan, 2013, p. 60). The Good Samaritan parable is an example. The most unexpected character helps, thus changing the expected normal emphatically. Serious ethical questions apart, it also satirises the powerful and privileged elite, priest and Levite. Indeed, through the form of satire as mnemonic (Ong, 2002, p. 70), Jesus vocalises the silences of history, righting the wrongs of unjustness and critiquing the hegemony of Jewish exclusiveness.

In what follows, I intend to reflect upon the form and method of Jesus's stories in order to uncover the historical and cultural conditions of His time.

Jesus's Parables: Lineage, Form and Method:

For the 1CE Palestinian-Jewish communities, social and political relations were rigidly stratified between master and slave; between urbane, cruel ruling classes and the subjugated, suffering peasantry. There were the intermediaries, the broker- classes, searching after upward mobility and eager to join the rulers in the Jewish nation. Politically, there was emperor Caesar and his cohorts, followed by client-vassal-Jewish rulers, the former, the hegemon, and the latter, the hegemonised (Jacobson, 2001, pp. 22-38).

The peasant masses, the lowest rung of the hierarchy, the incompletely hegemonised classes, brought up the rear, and suffered under the double burden of empire and client ruler (p. 22-38). Jewish culture was deeply complicit with Roman authority and Jewish middle men, behaving worse than Caesar himself. The oral tale in such a stratified context signified non-hegemonic knowledge that the traditional religious texts, because of their absolutisms, failed to communicate (Crossan, 2013, p. 63). In using the parabolic form, Jesus chose the cultural immediacy of His context in order to communicate to and for the struggling peasantry/masses. He offers them the wisdom of social history.

In what follows, I wish to outline the three different forms of Jesus's parables, employing Crossan's three-fold typology about Jesus' story-telling for analysis and argument. Any parable—including those of Jesus— is a "metaphor" that expands into a "story" (Crossan, 2013, p. 8) and means more than it utters; it also invokes meaning well beyond the story and its telling (p. 9). Note:

> …a parable, that is, a *metaphorical story* always points *externally* beyond itself, points to some different and much wider referent. Whatever its actual content is, a parable is never about *that* content. Whatever its internal subject, a parable always points you toward and wants you to go to external referent (p. 9)

Thus, a story, not limited by itself and/or by its own language and signification, becomes a parable. It makes meaning by referencing the cultural context and the social fabric the audiences live in. Its characters are archetypes of society, and its plot reinvents contemporary experience. They tell plural "truths" (Ong, 2002, p. 8) about an unequal society. They challenge thinking because they are unencumbered by prior utterance or knowledge. While they remember historical failures, they also foreground social injustice. They promote diversity of meaning everywhere, while always critiquing the privileged elite.

There are three kinds of parables that Jesus tells his Jewish people. They are 1) riddle 2) example and 3) challenge (Crossan, 2013, p.6). Each one has a specific structure and is easily identified by the people, while their unusual content provides opportunities for alternative meaning making.

The riddle as social text presents a complex puzzle and expects its respondents to solve it appropriately, failing which the respondent suffers grave punishment (p. 6). The story itself is contingent on fear, though it claims wisdom and morality for itself. In the highly Hellenised world of Jesus, the Greek tragic myths constitute the model for such stories. For example, in Mark's retelling of the Lamp under the Bushel Basket parable, the ending

indicates severe admonition for the disciples, who despite knowing, do not share that spiritual knowledge, that Jesus communicates to them (p. 25). Consider:

> For those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away from them (Mark 4: 25 NRSV)

Many theologians assume that this is Mark's own redaction, because he assumes that Jesus offers his disciples special knowledge about the great truths about God and His vision for the world. God expects them to communicate such truths to common folk; otherwise, they face severe punishment.

Mark's representations of Jesus' parables follow this pattern: a discipline-and-punish system that moralizes more than enables. In Mark, metaphorically or otherwise, Jesus scolds both his detractors and his followers into awareness. Notice how Mark places the disciples' query about the rationale for parables, just prior to but soon after Jesus's strident explanation of Sower Parable:

> "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.'" (Mark 4 :11-12)

Mark's "way of seeing" (Berger, 1972, p. 8) then has a two-fold function. The first suggests a closed mystical ethnocentricism in Jesus, which is not particularly resonant, given Jesus's otherwise liberal views of the gentiles—particularly the Samaritans. The second implies what Crossan points out as "counterrejection" (Crossan, 2013, p. 27), which seems to be unlike Jesus again, because of the moral tit-for-tat it implies. Though Jesus in Mark's gospel quotes Isaiah's description of who the messianic message is for, his messaging in and through Mark's redactions appear far too prejudiced against his opponents and too suspicious of his followers. Hence Mark's re-telling of Jesus's parables characterises Jesus as a socio-cultural despot, tyrannising His chosen inheritors into a religious morality that would cast out gentiles from His vision of the kingdom of God. Effectively, Mark sees Jesus's mission more as a Judaic reform movement than as an inclusive emergent faith. It is Mark's episteme (Foucault, 1980 pp. 109-133 & 197), his way of telling, that mediates such riddle parables. But, given the eschatological-apocalyptic view of the Judaic world, including that of Jesus, Mark's redaction appears unsurprising.

Similar endings to parables are visible in Mathew as well. Mathew's account of Jesus's stories carries moral instruction. But they are not riddle parables. In Mathew's language, there would be fire-and-brimstone punishment for failed discipleship but they are more muted than in Mark's accounts (Crossan, 2013, p. 42). Either way, Jesus's voice seems muffled. That is because it is less Jesus and more Mathew as he retells the parables as "example" parables (p. 32).

Example parables imply a cycle of tasks and rewards. They suggest moral decision making as faith discernment. But they are softer on the Jewish people. In Mathew's accounts, God's wrath against sinful callousness is visible, but avoids violent punitiveness, though the tone remains that of scolding and reprimand.

The third kind is the challenge parable and as Crossan suggests is the model that Jesus uses recurrently. Luke's writings predominantly follow this model and retells Jesus's stories accordingly. Crossan posits:

> Challenge parables *mean*—that is, intend to make us probe and question, ponder and wonder, discuss nd debate, and above all else practice that gift of the human spirit known as thinking… About the absolutes of our religious faith, the certainties of our theological vision, the presuppositions, presumptions and prejudices of our social and economic traditions (p. 111)

The challenge parable is reflective, contesting dogmatic understandings of the spiritual experience, the blindness of one's faith and the unjust nature of one's material conditions. Crossan further adds that "permanent questioning" (p. 111) of the Jewish world— its reprobate despotisms, its institutionalised violence and its systemic injustices—is central to Jesus's teaching. His story-telling is provocative. Crossan claims that such repeated patterning (p. 109), i.e. recurrent questioning, is integral to oral story-telling. Both the oral "story-teller" (p. 111) and his "hearers" (p. 111) need/expect provocation to new thinking: i.e. imminent critique and new hope. Like Portelli and Ong, Crossan also demonstrates how Jesus's challenge stories "submit their destiny to their audiences" (Crossan, 2013, p. 110), fostering free and unencumbered reading/reception. The challenge parables conceptualise the kingdom of God afresh; they permit resisting readings of the signs of the times; they expose the epistemic break that Jesus uses to tell His stories. In other words, they alter ways of seeing (Berger, 1972, p.1) the world by reversing the Judaic cultural sensibility. In Jesus's episteme, the traditional "good guys" fail and the "traditional bad guys" succeed (Crossan, 2013, p. 91). This beats dogmatic Jewish ritualism and posits cultural-material transformation

The Talents Parable: Analysis and Discussion

The talents parable is riddled in representational difference, because of the differing versions in the Gospels of Mathew and Luke. Besides, other recordings like the "*Gospel of the Nazarenes*" (Crossan, 2013, p.102) complicate matters further. In this version the first slave squanders the money on prostitutes, the second multiplies it and the third hides it in the ground. The first is "imprisoned", the second "rebuked" and the third, "accepted", making the "hider", the ideal one (p.103). But Mathew and Luke, though dissimilar, render a different narrative template altogether.

Below, I outline the parable and indicate the differences between Mathew and Luke. In Mathew's version, the master/owner in the story hands over five, two and one talent(s) to three different slaves—"each according to their ability" (NRSV Matt 25:15). The first and second slave increase their donations/investments; the third returns the one talent intact, having safely buried it in the ground. There is reward for the first two and scolding for the last.

In Mathew's telling, the reward for the first slave is "more responsibilities" and the "master's joy" (25:21*d*), whereas in Luke's rendering the first gains charge of "ten cities" and the second, "five". Again, in Mathew, the third slave is punished into "the darkness outside, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth" (NRSV Matt 25:30), whereas there is no penalty imposed on Luke's last slave. Instead, much else happens.

There are enormous differences in the overall structuring too. Luke's beginning suggests not three slaves but ten to whom a "pound" each is given; each one is expected "to trade with these until" the master's "return" (19:13). Luke also indicates that the citizens hate the master, reject their assigned duty, and send "a delegation" (19:14) against him. Not so, in Mathew! For the rest of Luke, the Matthean formula, especially regarding sharing in the master's joy remains. But Luke adds material rewards. Further, what happens to the "wicked slave" (Luke 19:22) also differs: in Luke, only severe admonition but no exile into darkness, no gnashing and grinding of teeth (Matt19: 30). Instead, the master/owner rounds up his dissenters, "enemies of mine" (19:27) and slays them.

Luke's story shares similarities with Archelaus' story. Jesus does not repeat, but uses the story as symbolic of the cultural-material conditions of the times. With Mathew, the historical input remains muted but Jesus nevertheless deploys it as a critique of unjust systems of power. It exposes both the structural and literal violence of the Judaic/ Israeli kingdom. That apart, it represents the historical concerns of the times, especially authoritarian power accruing from being complicit client kings. Hence the political nature of the story is unmissable.

Now for contextual inconsistencies. Mathew sets his retelling within an intimate audience of Jesus's disciples. It is as if Jesus is sharing an intricate truth with his apostolic audience. But in Luke's rendition, both Jesus's expectation—the authorial imprint—and his audience's response—their reading— differ. If in Mathew, Jesus's closest disciples, hear expert and insightful spiritual knowledge, but do not share it democratically with both Jew and gentile alike, they do deserve admonition. As part of the long "Mt Olives" discourse in Mathew, the eschatological Jesus warns and scolds His disciples about end-times. when in Mathew the disciples prior to the parables ask,

> 'Tell us when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age? (NRSV Matt 24: 3)

Jesus responds with a series of lessons, first about persecution and death (Matt 24: 9-14), "the desolating sacrifice" (24: 15), the arrival of false prophets (24: 23-24) and the second coming (24: 29-32); then and only then appear the parables about the expectant waiting for the fulfilment of the kingdom and the "watchfulness" (24: 36-44) for final redemption. Theologians are often at odds on the eschatological-apocalyptical construction of the gospel texts. Many assume that the kingdom of God lies in the future. Even John, the Baptist, believes so (Crossan, 2013, pp. 125-128). Others assume, that it has already arrived because Jesus himself is in the world. Crossan identifies with the latter and insists that Jesus posited a "paradigm shift" in positioning the kingdom *not* as an "imminent" and "any-day-now event" (p.125) but as "*the Great Divine Cleanup of the World*" (p. 119), "present" as "God's transformative advent" (p. 125). By implication, because of the presence of Jesus, the promised messiah, the kingdom has already arrived. But the Jewish world—and all the world—failed *to "accept it, enter it, live it and thereby establish it"* (p. 127). What is absent is human collaboration with the great Cleanup for a world of justice and righteousness. The kingdom is of the present, not in the future. Hopefully, there will be no break-up with God again.

With Luke however there is greater contextual clarity. It differs from Mathew. Zacchaeus has been converted and people repent, promising everyone equity and justice. Luke's texts propose that the kingdom is among the people already. Notice:

> Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, 'The Kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, "Look, Here it is" or "There it is!" For in fact, the kingdom Of God is among you (Luke 17: 20-21[b])

This disjunction between the gospels raises questions about the Kingdom of God and resists the normative meanings regarding the second coming.

The next contextual inconsistency, in the talents stories, is linguistic. This concerns the units of money because a talent differs from the pound in value. That apart, there is the original name, the Minas, which equals a pound in English translation and hence closer to the Lukan depiction of the Judaic economic conditions. Effectively, each talent was worth six thousand denarii but each pound, a hundred only. If in ancient Judea/Israel, the average worker earns one denarius per day, a single talent equalls wages for 20 years signifying enormous economic power (Crossan, 2013, p. 99). In Matthew's texts, one imagines client-kings like Herod and Archelaus, ruling large satrapies and kingdoms implicated in exploitative debt-traps for the masses. For Luke, it is subtler, speaking more of co-optative middle-income stewards, constructing wealth for their masters, while impoverishing their more vulnerable working classes. Yet in Luke's ending, not just the Roman Empire but also Jewish client-ruler oppression and brutality are referenced, implying symbolic similarities with the Archelaus story (Jacobson, 2001, pp. 22-38)

What follows will engage the differences and similarities in the cultural symbolisations, the character-arrangement and the implied voice in Mathew's and Luke's renditions of Jeus's parables. There are *three* phases in the plot-line of the "Talents' parable, both in the Matthean and Lukan renditions. I will identify and explain each one of them, using Crossan's perspectives.

Phase 1: The characters in Mathew are different from those in Luke. Simply, "a man" going on a "journey" in Mathew's rendition (NRSV Matt 25: 15) contrasts with "A nobleman went to a distant country to get royal power for himself and then return" in Luke's telling (Luke 19:12). In Mathew's version there is an anonymous man going on an anonymous journey. He seems rich, because he distributes "talents" (Matt: 25: 15), high denominations of money in Judea/Israel. Only after his return, one understands he has power, whereas in Luke, there is already a "nobleman" (Luke 19: 12) journeying out for economic and political power. The journey itself, while overt in Luke, is covertly in Mathew, a business/political trip, not a social visit or pilgrimage. The journey is riddled in uncertainty, but the man/nobleman/master risks his property at the hands of his slaves. He expects trust from them but also wields power over them. The man/nobleman could symbolically refer to minor client rulers, whose co-opted managers, their slaves constitute their kingdom. To equate Jesus's all-merciful God to such satraps seems rather odd. In fact, it is blasphemous. Luke discards this form of symbolisation but Mathew maintains it only to point to the rapid arrival of judgement day (NRSV Matt 25 31-33), with all hell and darkness (Matt 25: 30) associated with it.

For Luke, the nobleman resembles Archelaus and therefore remains historical, his symbolisation located in the here and now of Jewish politics and its cultural economy. Besides, there is no reference to hell or the gnashing of teeth and the darkness. No slave is harmed, not even the third stubborn one. Instead, there is a re-enactment of Archelaus's behaviour with the nobleman slaughtering the subjects, "citizens", (Luke: 19:14) that hate him and reject him as ruler (Luke: 19: 13-16). Therefore symbolically, in Luke's rendition, the nobleman is a historical character in a parabolic narrative, i.e. Jesus deploys "fictional events about factual characters" (Crossan 2013, p.5). This historical figure is certainly not godly at all, but represents the cruelty of an over-ambitious satrap; the two good slaves are comprador, while the stubborn one resembles the resisting activist, almost like the Jesus- figure in real time

Phase 2: Next, the characters' actions and the arrangement of events: Mathew and Luke characterise the slaves differently. In the Matthean version, three are specifically chosen and they are appointed caretakers of the wealth of the master. They may be suspect but they have the master's trust. In the Lukan story, ten slaves are chosen to validate the master's trust and fulfil their stewardly responsibilities. Only after the two of the ten trade well, do they become "trustworthy" (NRSV Luke: 19: 17). The third is a stubborn failure. The actions of only the three, among the chosen ten, are finally called to account. The rest seem to merge with "the bystanders" (NRSV Luke: 19:26), that represent the silenced but discontented subjects of the authoritarian regime. Yet only the last slave endures condemnation because he dares to speak the truth, not just about a "master" who is cruel and "reaps" where he does not "sow" (NRSV Luke:19:21). The master extorts from where he does not "deposit" (19:21). Hence, the last slave not only rejects exploitative trading but also denounces the nobleman's behaviour. The last slave is among the dissenting public, who constitute the nobleman's "enemies" (19:27). Hence symbolically the last slave articulates dissent where others fail and becomes the dissident, unlike the silenced "bystanders" (Luke: 19:26) who indirectly become comprador collaborators with the ruling classes. Symbolically, there is a powerful ruler, subordinated to an emperor, systematically annihilating a dissenting citizenry on behalf of the emperor. He chooses to reject a heroic dissident but subtly supports complicit frightened middle men. The symbolisation cannot equate the nobleman to God because the benevolent God of Jesus's perspective does not fit the bill.

For further analysis, I describe below the social, economic and political context of 1CE Judea/ Israel to evaluate how the storyline functions historically and culturally. Judea and Israel arrange their economics, politics and culture in terms of client-tenant farming systems. Most times, the tenant farmer borrows money from rich landowners or professional money-lenders— sometimes they are tax collectors— to farm small pieces of land.

The usury for such borrowing is usually very high. Hence small farmers survive, if crops are good, but turn destitute poor, if crops fail. Overall, the system of interest-earning is so exploitative that they impoverish large sections of the struggling majority, usually farm-labour who eke out a living from small farms. Hence any business investment is about loaning to the desperate majority; and if one earns well, one obviously over-charges interest; or otherwise takes over land on default. Hence profit-making lives off impoverishment. Client rule as Caesar desires is completely dependent on structural violence of this nature. By contrast, in Jewish tradition and law, in the "Torah", such forms of usury are an abomination (Crossan, 2013, p. 105). Hence usury is immoral, despite Roman law fostering it (2013, p.105).

In both the Matthean and Lukan renditions, the salutations and rewards for successful slave-caretakers reinforces the unjust and exploitative tendencies of Roman capitalism. Jesus could not have supported such a cultural value system because it runs counter to His egalitarian messaging. Hence, Jesus's parables could only satirise the political-economy, in remembering these historical tales. Symbolically, even in Mathew, which is about discipleship, there is underlying mockery over the moral crudity of acquisition over distribution.

Phase 3: Besides the contextual differences, there are differing forms of characterisation with equally variable functions across the Matthean and Lukan versions of the parable. I argue here that, framed by the challenge parable episteme, the unsuccessful slave-caretaker is the hero of the story. Historically, one remembers Phillip who governs Judea/Israel in his brothers' absence accepting whatever he inherits without fighting or conspiring against Archelaus. But unlike Phillip, the failed slave upholds Jewish law over Roman legality. Although condemned by the master, his heroism, particularly in voicing dissent goes beyond the liberal comprador that Phillip is. Through his heroism, the dissident slave perceives precisely how authoritarian political economy and the empire's agents function. He becomes the public/organic intellectual speaking truth to power (Said 1994, p.xiv). Some people call the heroic-unsuccessful slave, the lone voice, embodying the meaning of the "Great Clean-up" (Crossan, 2013, p. 119) that Jesus teaches. It is only those that break-up with the already established kingdom that deserve the discerning separation between goats and sheep, between heaven and hell (NRSV Matt 25: 31). Hence, the ending recasts the Second coming and Judgement Day differently from any audiences' expectation and reinvents the eschatological-apocalyptical nature of Jesus's messianic mission as well. Moreover, it refigures the heroic differently implying that symbolically Jesus himself is that lone dissident of the parabolic narrative.

What breaks through, despite the Matthean and Lukan epistemic determinations, is Jesus's own voice, and his core message: "the Great

Cleanup" (Crossan, 2013 p. 119) of society vs the grave break-up with God. Jesus's prophetic sensibility is pitted against the grand decadence of the Jewish world. In His parables, Jesus's characters and their actions embody failed decadence, but simultaneously and contradictorily, they epitomise the critical potential to mend social decay. The stories have co-opted collaborators, silenced dissenters and stubborn dissidents. Effectively, Jesus's stories are critical social commentary that include moral instruction, intellectual provocation and cultural questioning. But unlike most commonplace views, they do not simplistically moralise. Even in the Matthean texts, Jesus exposes what failed discipleship is about: the refusal to democratise spiritual knowledge and insight, for the outsider, the fugitive, the exile, the gentile in the Judaic/Israeli context. It is as if Jesus prophetically anticipates emergent clericalism and its cruel privilege. Remember, the name-calling: "You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things, when you are evil?" (NRSV Matt11:34 & 23: 33). Despite Matthew's epistemic eliding, Jesus's story-telling unravels the challenge parable in the talents story.

But the Lukan version unclutters Jesus's voice and unpacks the Talents story as a challenge parable, adopting Jesus's episteme more appropriately. Jesus here sets up the social-political context more explicitly, reinventing the historical experience of his time, in order to ethically challenge the failed nature of the Jewish value system and its culture. Jesus thus writes the historical-cultural experience of the non-hegemonic classes, delivered by the truth-telling potential of the oral tradition, focussed on common people and against Jewish privilege. The socio-political messaging is obvious: the ethical failures are made transparent and individual and cultural alienation made real. Being a suspected gentile himself and the peripheral other in Jewish society, Luke unleashes Jesus's provocative questioning of the varied systems of power in the political and cultural economy of Judea/Isreal. Effectively, there are two stories between Mathew and Luke respectively: one about unshared spiritual knowledge and the other about unjust material conditions. Both expose the culture of injustice prevalent in Jewish society.

Conclusion

In commonsense readings of biblical texts, there is grave "misrecognition" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 168 & 170) that elides the ideological gap between what is true and what is declared as true (p. 168 & 170). Most believe that the parables are moral instruction and therefore behave either as riddles or examples—according to Crossan's formulation. But Jesus's parables are expository, declarations and depictions of the place and time, with all their implications in history and society, challenging, if not provoking His people to resist its legal and cultural habits. In misrecognition, there is injustice because it keeps people in fear and prevents transformative resistance as are proposed by the fire and brimstone punishments proposed in the riddle and example parables.

The parable of the talents in effect uncovers a serious struggle for meaning. It carries a triangulation of complexities that encompasses the problematics between riddle, example and challenge. Jesus's ultimate trajectory is epiphanic-expository, challenging people into a transformative consciousness. But it counters what the Jewish people know. In the Lukan version, the messianic mood is post-Isaiah, and therefore constructs a servant-steward-messiah who is just and equal and cares rather than punishes. But the Matthean version remains pre-Isaiah and is punitive. In Luke, the talents' parable is a challenge parable and includes moral/ethical resistance against economic and political exploitation. Unlike in Mathew, Luke's version does not impose a discipline-and-punish system. It even makes heroic the last man standing against usury, offering a lesson in Jewish jurisprudence, justice and reform. In that respect, it is radically transformative. In Matthew's texts, the talents story is about theological work, a lesson in evangelical pedagogy and a condemnation of clerical privilege. It is typically an example parable, but it cannot escape Jesus's questioning voice as challenge to the privatisation of intimate spiritual knowledge. In Luke, the parable is a wake-up call to recognising exploitation and effectively contesting it. But neither gospel-writer represents the parabolic riddle, except marginally, as recurrent parabolic challenge underpins Jesus's narrative structure.

The Kingdom of God thus visualised is less about the great Clean-up gone wrong and the consequent alienation of humankind—the great break-up as I call it, from the warmth, joy and the happily-ever-after. Jesus's parable mourns the struggle of the Jewish masses against Roman tyranny and a failed Jewish society. Effectively, Jesus's own martyrdom is the cumulative destiny of an already silenced and oppressed community of poor and powerless people. Jesus's brutal end embodies and completes the lone dissident's heroism and substantiates people's large-scale dissidence as well. In this manner, Jesus's liberation narrative becomes an "attack" parable—modelled systematically through John's gospel style— that underscores unwavering challenge, against limitless political and economic power. (Crossan 2013, p. 153).

But it is England's great post-Renaissance poet, John Milton, who situates this struggle to meaning most effectively in the poem titled, "Sonnet 19: When I consider How my Life is spent" (Milton, 1673/2024). As a blind poet, Milton explains how his condition prevents him from using his poetic talent for God's greater glory. Employing the talents parable as the symbolic frame, the poet reflects on how God could continue to extract "day labour, light denied?" (Milton Sonnet 19, 1673/2024, stanza 2). He realises that the all- powerful God requires neither the exercise of his talents nor praise, "when his light is spent" (stanza1) because "thousand at his bidding speed" (stanza 4) to fulfil His expectations. Suffice it to "to bear his mild yoke", for "they serve him best" (stanza 3) like the oppressed Jewish masses, making

sense, fighting but tragically failing against an empire of brute power and the intimate enemy of Jewish elitism. Milton's resolution proposes: "They also serve who only stand and wait" (Milton Stanza 4). It configures the lone soul, the stubborn dissident of the talents parable, standing against the vagaries of power in Jewish society.

Despite the highly personalised nature of the narrative, the poem implies that the true hero of the parable "stands" and "waits" (Milton 1673/2024 Stanza 4)—like the slave who rejects multiplying his talents in order to resist exploitative usury. Like Jesus, this dissenting slave fights for justice for a devastated people.

At the end, I wish to draw the limits of this exegesis. This is but one more perspective in the large plurality of explorations concerning Jesus's parables. Using historical Jesus-scholarship, oral history ideas and story-telling habits, this article attempts an epistemological break that resists trite moralising but employs alternative social commentary of the biblical texts and their times. Beyond that it claims nothing for itself.

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