The Parable of the Wicked Tenants:
An Exegetical Analysis of Matthew 21:33-41

Brenda Jackson

Northwest Nazarene University
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33 “Hear another parable. There was a householder who planted a vineyard, and set a hedge around it, and dug a wine press in it, and built a tower, and let it out to tenants, and went into another country. 34 When the season of fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants, to get his fruit; 35 and the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other servants, more than the first; and they did the same to them. 37 Afterward he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ 38 But when they saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.’ 39 And they took him and cast him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40 When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” 41 They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.” (RSV)

Setting

This parable is included in Jesus’ temple teachings in Jerusalem that led up to the gospel climax of the crucifixion and resurrection. It is assumed that both Matthew’s and Luke’s versions of the parable are taken from Mark, as Mark is widely considered to be the earliest gospel. In Matthew’s gospel, the parable of the wicked tenants is preceded by the questioning of Jesus’ authority by the chief priests and elders (Matt. 21:23-27) and the parable of the two sons that did and did not do the will of the Father (Matt. 21:28-32); it is followed by the failed attempt of the chief priests and Pharisees to arrest him due to the fact that they “feared the multitudes” (Matt. 21:45), and the parable of the great supper (Matt. 22:1-14).

Within the setting of Jesus’ life and ministry, as related in all three synoptic gospels, this parable is delivered within the last few days of his time on earth—he has already entered Jerusalem, and is now delivering his final public teachings in the temple. The comparatively positive and didactic parables of Jesus’ earlier ministry, which were primarily addressed to sympathetic crowds or his own disciples, are here being superseded by teachings of a more confrontational and accusatory nature, likely aimed at the chief priests and Pharisees. It is believed by some that it was these final teachings in the Temple which finally prompted their subsequent arranging of Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion (Hultgren, 2000). For the early church as well as the
Evangelists, this parable was interpreted and redacted as an eschatological allegory, the components of which will be addressed below (Hultgren, 2000).

Exegetical Analysis

There are several words and phrases of the parable that need to be explored further in order for the most complete and accurate interpretation. Those which will be addressed here include: householder; vineyard; tenants; servants; son; and let out the vineyard to other tenants...

**Householder.** The householder, as he owns property and can afford to build an extensive vineyard, is obviously a wealthy and powerful man. He took great care in the construction and protection of his estate, as is evidenced by his building of the hedge, wine press, and tower. However, as it was common for wealthy people in first century Palestinian culture to leave their rural estates for homes in the city where they could conduct business and attend to political duties, the householder leaves his vineyard with tenant farmers hired to maintain and care for the vineyard in his absence. The cultural expectation in these types of arrangements was that, when the harvest was ready, the tenants would give the owner his share of the fruits. In the allegorical interpretation of the parable, the householder represents God (Hultgren, 2000).

**Vineyard.** The vineyard was a common symbol for Israel throughout Jewish literature, and the allusion of the opening lines to the Song of the Vineyard of Isaiah 5:1-7 likely strengthened that connection further; thus, the original Jerusalem audience likely immediately made that association and interpreted the rest of the parable with that symbol in mind (Hultgren, 2000). However, it has also been asserted that, as verse 43 refers to the vineyard as the kingdom of God which must be turned over to a new nation, Israel could not be the symbol Jesus intended (Hare, 1993). It could be that Jesus expected this initial correlation between Israel and the vineyard, and intentionally turned it on its head so as to challenge his listeners to the realization that Israel and the kingdom of God are not synonymous terms.
Tenants. The tenants in the parable are hired to care for the vineyard, but are still subject to the owner and owe him his share of the fruits in season. However, when the owner sends his slaves to collect his due, the tenants refuse. This behavior could be understood to be wicked and delinquent; however, some interpreters have argued that the tenants’ refusal could be attributed to the amount of time that lapsed between the master’s leaving and his initial sending for collection—as it takes a while for a vineyard to mature enough to bear fruit, there could have been as many as five years of silence (Scott, 1989). Thus, it could be that the tenants reacted the way they did because they felt that, due to his extended silence, the owner had forfeited claim of his vineyard to them and no longer deserved the fruits. Either interpretation supports the accepted allegorical recognition of the tenants as the political and religious leaders of Israel—either they scorned the owner’s authority and claimed ownership out of greed, or they felt that their rejection of his ownership was justified due to his extended absence; either way, they did not hold up their end of the bargain (Hultgren, 2000).

Servants. The servants (or slaves in some translations) are sent to collect the master’s due of the harvest fruit, and in such a capacity they represent the master’s authority over the tenants. Thus, the tenants’ nefarious treatment of them—beating, killing, and stoning in Matthew—is a bold-faced effrontery to the owner’s claim on the estate. Allegorically, the servants are interpreted to represent the prophets sent by God throughout Israel’s history, which were consistently rejected, beaten, and killed for their words. Matthew’s two sendings of servants, the second larger than the first, is believed by some to represent the former and latter prophets represented in the Hebrew scriptures (NIB, 1995).

The Son. The sending of the son to these heretofore murderous tenants is perceived by some as sheer foolishness on the part of the owner (Scott, 1989). However, the father’s belief that “they will respect my son” (Matt. 21:37) also demonstrates a refusal to give up and a persistent effort to give the tenants the benefit of the doubt; despite their previously horrendous behavior, the
householder still expects to be given his due of the harvest, and hopes that the sending of his son will finally make clear his claim on the vineyard. However, seeing the coming of the son and heir as evidence that the master is dead, the tenants decide to kill him so as to “have his inheritance” (Matt. 21:38)—under the existing law of possession by occupancy, if there was no legitimate owner to lay claim to the estate, then it legally fell to the tenant farmers who had lived there and cared for it all those years (NIB, 1995).

As Mark’s earlier version has the son being killed and then cast out, the casting of the son out of the vineyard prior to killing was likely a post-Easter construction of Matthew, intended to allude to Jesus’ crucifixion outside Jerusalem at Golgotha (Hultgren, 2000). Thus, Matthew allegorically interprets the son as representing Jesus as the son of God, which was likely the universal interpretation of the post-Easter church; but it is unlikely that the original listeners of the parable would have made the connection, as Jesus was not yet widely perceived as the son of God. It is more likely that the historical audience would either have seen the son as representing John the Baptist, who had recently been killed, or perhaps Jesus, in the capacity of the final prophet (rather than God’s son); they also could have left the son without a specific allegorical referent, identifying his function as providing further emphasis to the picture of the master as long-suffering and horribly wronged (NIB, 1995).

Let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons. This is the response of the crowd to Jesus’ question in verse 40—“When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” Taking into the account the extent of the tenants’ crimes against the owner, it is only fitting that he repay them in kind by putting them to a “miserable death” (Matt. 21:41) and finding new tenants to care for his vineyard that will give him his due of the harvest when he comes collecting. This, along with the accompanying statement by Jesus that “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it”
(Matt. 21:43), is interpreted by many scholars to signify the transition of the kingdom of God from the Jewish leadership to the Christian leadership, or to the disciples of Jesus.

Message

To Matthew and within the early church, this parable was perceived as an allegory depicting the passion and the kingdom leadership shift from Jewish to Christian, as is evidenced by the gospel applications that include Jesus’ quoting of Psalm 118:22. Thus, the early church interpreted this parable as evidence that the vehicle of God’s kingdom had passed from the Jewish leadership of Israel to the new “nation” of Christianity, due to Israel’s rejection of God’s prophets and Son, as well as its failure to produce fruit (Hultgren, 2000). However, considering the pre-Easter perspective of the original Jewish audience to which Jesus addressed the parable, it is more likely that it was intended and would have been received as a warning of coming judgment and a call for repentance in order to prevent such ultimate condemnation, rather than as a final rejection of Israel or her leadership as tenders of the kingdom of God (Hare, 1993).

Application

For the modern reader, the main point to be taken away from the parable is that all who have entered into a relationship with God and claim to be followers of his will have a personal responsibility to bear fruit in accordance with that will. We are each accountable to Christ for our actions, and if we bear his name as Christians, we need to bring glory to his name through our daily lives; if we fail to hold up our end of the bargain, judgment will not be favorable. This parable especially applies to those who have been placed in positions of leadership within the church—as they are charged with the tending of the vineyard of the kingdom, they must bear fruit for that kingdom in the form of lives and communities changed; if they simply take up residence and ignore or reject the over-lordship of God, then they face the same judgment as Israel’s leaders, and will be replaced by those who will give God his due in season (Hultgren, 2000).
Footnotes

1. A form of this parable also appears in Mark 12:1-9 and Luke 20:9-16. Major differences in the three versions include: Luke does not go into the detail of planting the vineyard as Matthew and Mark do; in Mark, the owner sends one servant at a time an indefinite amount of times, one after another is beaten up or killed, and then “one other, a beloved son” is sent; in Luke, three servants are sent out one at a time, are beaten and “treated shamefully,” and then he decides to send his “beloved son”; in Matthew and Luke, the son is cast out of the vineyard and then killed, while in Mark he is killed and then cast out; the three also have different applications in the verses that follow their version, though all at some point quote Psalm 118:22, about the “stone which the builders rejected” (Aland, 1985, p.243).

2. All biblical references are taken from the Revised Standard Version of the scripture used by Aland in Synopsis of the Four Gospels (1985).