Listening to the Listeners: A Study of the Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:1-12)

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I. Introduction

While exegetical works on the Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:1-12) abound, it is interesting that the plethora of scholarship do not yield a consensus in interpretation. Discrepancies between exegetical works vary along multiple dimensions. First, the source of the parable is contested with some arguing that the parable derives from a pre-synoptic source while others argue that it is an inauthentic parable (e.g. not attributed to the historical Jesus) constructed by an early Christian community in light of the death of the messianic leader. Of the various conclusions scholars have reached regarding the earliest template for the parable are: Crossan who argues that, of the synoptic gospels, Mark’s version is the earliest although Mark also borrowed from a pre-synoptic source more accurately reproduced in the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas1); Snodgrass who argues that Matthew’s version is the earliest account2); and Black who argues that Mark and Luke independently

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represent earlier accounts. The debate about the origins of the parable is not simply a discussion about source and as Snodgrass notes, “How one views the origin of the parable is determinative for interpretation.”

This leads to the second category of debate regarding the meanings and motivations attributed to the parable. While most interpretations revolve around the identification of the murdered son of the vineyard owner as Jesus, other biblical scholars have argued that the parable is not about Jesus at all. These variations in interpretation include discrepant identifications of the murdered son such as John the Baptist or representatives of the Roman hierarchy. To further complicate the matter, some have argued against this general allegorical interpretation of the parable. Drawing upon the classic distinction between “parable” and “allegory” made by Adolf Jülicher, Crossan argues that the inconsistencies in interpreting the parable as an allegory are too many and that allegorical interpretation is most likely the redaction of the early church. At once, we can conclude from past scholarship that there still remains many different readings of this parable.

This article reviews the literature regarding the Parable of the Wicked Tenants and contextualizes these studies with broader scholarship on the holistic message of Mark’s gospel. In response to the many variations in interpretations, alluded to above, this article argues that while it is doubtful that we will ever know the “true” meaning of the parable as meant by the author(s) of the text we can still approximate how the parable was “heard” by different contemporary communities. For this goal of approximation, it is a helpful heuristic to imagine multiple interpretative communities that interpolated different meanings from the parable relative to their varying socio-cultural positions in Jewish society. By analytically distinguishing between these multiple interpretative communities, the

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contemporary exegete can better understand the different ways in which the parable “works” for various social groups within the text. Underlying this hermeneutical approach is the assumption that it is reductive and limiting to assign only one meaning to the parable as the parable possibly held different meanings for different communities. By making salient the various meanings attributed to this parable by multiple communities we can better understand the discrepancies in past exegetical works on this parable. The purpose of this study, therefore, is not to decisively adjudicate between past interpretations of the parable but rather to explicate the usefulness of the hermeneutical method in fomenting new understandings of the parable limited by the information gleaned from the text itself.

II. Past Scholarship on the Parable of the Wicked Tenants

1. The Larger Marcan Context

Richard Rohrbaugh argues that the audience for the Gospel of Mark consisted of those in the lower echelons of Israeli society. According to Rohrbaugh, Mark’s audience is marginalized in at least two ways. Geographically Rohrbaugh places the first audiences of Mark’s gospel in the village communities of upper Galilee. Thus, Mark’s audience is physically removed from the cultural centers of the urban city (e.g., Jerusalem). Second, and more importantly, Mark’s audience is marginalized in relation to their social location in the rigidly stratified social system of that time. As other biblical scholars have argued, this particular social position of Mark’s audience is significant when interpreting the motives for the writing of Mark as well as how Mark was received by its first listeners.


7) See for example, Richard A. Horsely, Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in
These scholars argue that Mark is not to be understood as a story of transcendent spirituality, nor a “nationalist” narrative about the colonial relationship between Israel and the Roman Empire colored by the political turmoil in the first century, but rather a story of those socially marginalized in Israeliite society. As Horsley puts it, Mark is a story about those who are ruled and those that rule.8)

2. Various Interpretations and Sources

From the interpretative lens that Horsley advocates, Mark is a story of liberation for those socially and geographically marginalized by the elites of society. Jesus’s mission, then, was a movement for village restoration and renewal over and against the incursions of Roman expansion and the increasing polarization of social class amongst the Israelites themselves. Biblical scholars working with this kind of political-liberationist hermeneutic have for the most part given an allegorical interpretation to the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. It must be noted, however, that this tendency to interpret the parable allegorically takes two related but distinct paths: 1. A critique of Israel’s leaders and 2. A foreshadowing statement about Jesus’s identity as the martyred son of God. Here, the emphasis is on the first allegorical interpretation of the parable. More will be said regarding the second interpretation below.

In an effort to “bring the gospel down to Earth,” Myers stays true to his overall political reading of Mark’s gospel and interprets the Parable of the Wicked Tenants as Jesus’s critique of Israel’s leaders.9) Myers argues that this parable is the central political parable that captures the es-

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sence of Jesus’s ministry. Myers’s interpretation identifies the murderous tenants with the Sanhedrin who have betrayed their duty as caretakers of God’s chosen people. Rather than working for the owner of the vineyard (God), the Sanhedrin have only looked out for their own interests even to the point of beating and murdering servants sent by the owner of the vineyard. This betrayal culminates in the murder of the son of the vineyard owner whom Myers identifies as Jesus. Without further elaborating on what this final identification of the son with Jesus means Christologically, or how it relates to Mark’s passion narrative, Myers is content to limit his interpretation of this parable to a political critique of the rulers of Israel.

Other biblical scholars, while generally agreeing with Myers’s conclusion that the son of the owner is indeed Jesus himself, offer a more complex interpretation of the parable. In his article, “The Source of the Parables of the Bridegroom and the Wicked Husbandmen,” O’Neill argues that the latter parable is indeed a messianic Christological statement: the owner of the vineyard is God and the son is Jesus. The parable foreshadows Jesus’s crucifixion as the tenants (Israelite leaders) murder the son in the vineyard. The interesting point, however, is that O’Neill is not content to accept blindly that this messianic Christological statement was a self-statement. That is, in O’Neill’s view, it could not have been a parable uttered by Jesus himself but rather must have been a parable spoken by John the Baptist about Jesus to warn the audience of the latter’s death.

The conclusion that the parable is the word of John the Baptist, and not Jesus, is reached by a thought provoking and complex order of logic. The dilemma for O’Neill is that although Mark’s gospel equates “the son” with Jesus in at least two places (Mark 1:11 and Mark 9:7), Jesus never makes any claims of messiahship himself. In addition, if this parable is not authentic (e.g. spoken by Jesus) and is a later redaction of the early

10) Ibid., 309.
church, who has the benefit of hindsight (e.g. Jesus’s death and resurrection), it is a wonder why the parable only mentions the death of the son but no account of a glorious resurrection. This omission was spotted by Crossan as well who argues that it is infeasible for the parable to be meant as an allegory of Jesus’s death when the resurrection was such a fundamental part of the theology of the early church.\(^\text{12}\) Because the resurrection was so important and salient to their faith both O’Neill and Crossan conclude that this parable was probably not a construction of early Christians. Rather, an alternative possibility is that it was indeed a messianic Christological parable about Jesus but not spoken by Jesus nor constructed by the early church, but rather originates with John the Baptist who fulfills his role as the prophet who prepares the way of the Lord.\(^\text{13}\) Thus, O’Neill argues that Mark’s rendition of the parable is an appropriation of an earlier pre-synoptic parable tradition associated with the ministry of John the Baptist.

Others who reach the same allegorical conclusion that the parable is a statement of Jesus’s identity, albeit a different route, include Boucher and Evans.\(^\text{14}\) Boucher argues that Mark’s version of the parable utilizes a Hebrew scriptural referent that provides a clue as to the meaning of the parable and how it was heard by the first audience. According to Boucher, Mark 12:1 clearly is an appropriation of Isaiah 5:1-2. The latter pericope about building a vineyard included not only digging and clearing a land of stones but also the construction of a watchtower:

> Let me sing for my beloved a love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He digged it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it,

\(^\text{12}\) Crossan, “The Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen,” 455.

\(^\text{13}\) Ibid., 489.

and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. (Isaiah 5:1-2)

This same watchtower reemerges in Mark’s parable and Boucher concludes that it is a direct appropriation of the earlier Hebrew scriptural passage. This appropriation is the key to understanding Mark’s parable because the “Isaian passage . . . would have been familiar to Jesus’s Jewish audience.”¹⁵ This familiarity with Isaiah 5:7 would have led listeners of the parable to associate the owner of the vineyard with God: “For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel.” To continue the logic of this hermeneutic key, Mark’s appropriation of Isaiah would have led to the interpretation that the tenants were the religious leaders taking care of the house of Israel and thus, the wickedness of the tenants was a critique of the religious leaders during the time of Jesus.

Evans takes a similar approach by associating Isaiah 5 with Mark 12. Like Boucher, Evans concludes that Mark’s use of Isaiah 5 leads to the interpretation that the Parable of the Wicked Tenants is “a description of the wicked behavior of Israel’s religious leaders and [as] a warning of coming judgment. The vineyard symbolizes Israel, or the people of God, the tenants symbolize Israel’s religious leaders, and the various servants no doubt are meant to be understood as the prophets of old.”¹⁶ Evans adds to Boucher’s basic argument by highlighting not only the similarities in content of the Isaian and Marcan passages but also the consistency of their parabolic form. Evans argues that Isaiah 5 satisfies at least four criteria of the parabolic genre.¹⁷ The first criterion, that of articulating a simple lesson, leads to the understanding of Isaiah 5:1-7 “as a prediction of the temple’s destruction” which has a historical correlate in the destruction of the temple in 70 AD.¹⁸ According to Evans, it was this warn-

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¹⁵) Ibid., 150.
¹⁶) Evans, "On the Vineyard Parables of Isaiah 5 and Mark 12,” 84.
¹⁷) Ibid., 82.
¹⁸) Ibid., 83.
ing of the temple’s destruction, derived from Isaiah’s parabolic message that Mark used in his conscious appropriation of Hebrew scripture. For Evans, Mark’s Isaian informed parable is a critique of the religious leaders who have consistently rejected God’s chosen prophets sent as servants to realign Israel’s path with God’s. This rejection of servants culminates in the murder of God’s son, Jesus, thus inviting God’s wrath in the form of the temple’s destruction during the First Jewish-Roman War.

While most exegeses of the Parable of the Wicked Tenants argue for an allegorical-identity reading, a minority of exegetes is not convinced. Some argue that the parable has nothing to do with Jesus’s identity, predicted passion, or Israel’s religious leaders. For example, in a thought-provoking article Newell and Newell argue that the parable must be understood as a critique, not of Israel’s religious leaders but rather, against those radical leaders inciting the people to revolt against Roman colonization.19) This conclusion is reached through a historical-contextual analysis of the agrarian situation of that time.

Newell and Newell remind us that during the time of Jesus many estates were owned by foreigners.20) They also go on to remind us that the immediate audience of this parable was probably located in Galilee, the center of the Zealot movement. Given that part of the Zealots’ agenda was land reform and that the popular hearers of this parable were most likely from the lower echelons of society, many in the audience could have been tenant farmers themselves thus leading to a natural identification with the tenants in the parable. For Newell and Newell then, the parable tells the story of grieved tenant farmers ready to take up arms against their foreigner absentee landlords. Newell and Newell argue that this parable is not to be understood as pure allegory nor having Christological application, but rather represents a real life situation in Galilee where radical and violent movements like the Zealots were


rampant.\textsuperscript{21)}

If these were the true identities of the characters in the parable, then Jesus’s concluding remarks in the parable can mean only one thing: it was meant as a critique of the radical and violent movements of Israelites who were willing to take up arms against foreign incursion, Mark 12:9 points to Jesus’s understanding of the logical conclusion of this kind of armed resistance conducted by groups like the Zealots. For Jesus, armed resistance would have only led to self destruction as the more powerful Roman military would repress any political mobilization on the part of the Israelites. The land, in turn, would have been given to others who were more willing to work within the colonial system; an ancient version of scabs so to speak, Newell and Newell make the important point that although the parable is a critique of movements like the Zealots, “Jesus does not attack the goal of the tenants (or the Zealots), but only their methods.”\textsuperscript{22)} Thus, Newell and Newell conclude that the parable reveals Jesus’s sympathy with the plight of the grieved tenants of Galilee but also his rejection of utilizing violent means to ameliorate the oppressive situation which, to Jesus, could only lead to Roman retaliation and ultimately self destruction.

In an equally thought provoking article, Lowe argues that the Parable of the Wicked Tenants is not about Jesus but rather part of a sequence regarding John the Baptist.\textsuperscript{23)} While most other characters remain the same as the majority interpretation (e.g. owner = God, tenants = religious leaders, sent servants = prophets of old), the critical difference here is that the son of the vineyard owner is identified as John the Baptist and not Jesus, Unlike Newell and Newell’s historically minded interpretation, Lowe approaches the parable through a comparative textual analysis that includes non-canonical texts such as the Gospel of Thomas. Through this

\textsuperscript{21)} Ibid., 235.
\textsuperscript{22)} Ibid., 236.

Lowe makes salient the textual flow of the Marcan pericope so that the Parable of the Wicked Tenants is substantively continuous with the questioning of Jesus’s authority, Jesus’s reaction-question about John’s status as a prophet, and the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. Through this narrative, Jesus continues the discourse on John in the parable and Lowe argues that the death of the son of the vineyard owner coincides with the beheading of John and it was this association that was “perceived” by the religious leaders thus motivating them to attempt to silence Jesus.25)

This interpretation has the double advantage of solving O’Neill’s concerns that Jesus hardly ever speaks about his own messiahship (because it isn’t about Jesus at all) and the missing resurrection theme in the parable (the resurrection theme was associated with Jesus and the early church and not with John). Furthermore, the association with the death of the son

24) While further discussion is outside the scope of this paper, I mention here that Lowe feels that because Matthew is the only gospel with all of the Baptist-sequence intact (but in a different order), there must have been a proto-Matthew source that the other gospels drew from. Thus, in this way, Lowe challenges the privileging of Mark and the Two-Source Hypothesis.

25) One point that Lowe overlooks is that the religious leaders in attendance at the saying of this parable were “chief priests, scribes and elders” (Mark 11:27). The death of John was specifically an act of Herod and maybe Herodians and it is uncertain as to whether the religious leaders in attendance included those directly responsible for John’s death. But still, it is clear that Herodians did associate closely with these particular religious leaders as the former were sent by the latter to test Jesus immediately after the parable saying (Mark 12:13).
and John’s death as perceived by the religious leaders would have been much more direct if not for any other reason than that John’s death already occurred while the plot against Jesus was still being laid.

As the above literature review reveals, exegetical works on the Parable of the Wicked Tenants leave open the possibility for many readings. While most argue that the parable should be read allegorically, pertaining to the identity of Jesus as the son of God (the vineyard owner), others argue that the parable has nothing to do with Jesus’s identity at all. Other important identities in the parable can also be equally unclear and as Snodgrass argues, “while the story was being told, it would not have been clear who was reflected by the tenants.”

To reiterate, it is uncertain that we will without any doubt be able to uncover the true motive and meaning of the parable as meant by its teller. Rather than to pursue that elusive goal, the purpose of this study is to show the ways in which the parable could have “worked” amongst the different social groups that heard the parable. For this end, we must work within the text to delineate the different groups present during the telling of the parable and bring to light their idiosyncratic experiences that contribute to their interpretative frames. In doing so, this study reveals that the parable could have meant, and probably did mean, something different for the various interpretative communities that heard the parable with their own hermeneutical proclivities, thus giving rise to multiple localized interpretations.

III. Identifying Interpretative Communities within the Text

There are at least seven different distinguishable social groups who are present to witness Jesus’s highly publicized entry into the city of

Jerusalem (Mark 11:7-11). Following Rohrbaugh’s categorization, the first social group is identified as the urban mass. Mentioned in Mark 11:15-16, merchants “who were selling and those were buying in the temple” were part of this larger urban mass. Two other social groups are present during Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple (Mark 15:15-18). First are the chief priests and scribes. Priests and scribes constituted the highest level in the stratified system. According to Rohrbaugh, chief priests and scribes were part of an urban elite that accounted for roughly 2% of the population.27) The third social group that is present during Jesus’s outburst at the temple is the “crowd” or the “multitudes” (Mark 11:18). We are not privy to the specific characteristics of the crowd but we know at least that its members are differentiated from ruling groups such as the priestly elite and economic actors such as the merchants.

Other groups in the text that are part of the ruling elite are the “Pharisees and some Herodians” (Mark 12:13) and the “Sadducees” (Mark 12:18). According to Rohrbaugh’s typology, Herodians would be included in the urban elite while Pharisees and Sadducees were retainers who “depend for its position on its relation to the urban elite.”28) Notwithstanding, Pharisees and Sadducees are implicated further because they were the most salient manifestation of the ruling apparatus in the rural areas of upper Galilee.29) And finally are the Romans who are not physically present in the text but are brought into the dialogue indirectly through reminders of the colonial legal structure that the Jewish people faced everyday. It is difficult to ascertain what Jesus felt about the Romans based on his cryptic answer to the Pharisees’ question regarding paying Roman taxes but at the very least we know he clearly distinguished between the Roman Empire and the Kingdom of God.

Highlighting the subject positions of the different social groups pres-

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28) Ibid., 118.
29) Ibid., 119.
ent at the time Jesus told the Parable of the Wicked Tenants will allow us to delineate the various ways in which the parable was heard by these distinct social groups. While it is unclear whether all the social groups were present at the telling of the parable, we do know for sure that the chief priests, scribes, and elders were present (Mark 11:27). We also know that the multitude must have been there to indirectly divert the attempt to arrest Jesus (Mark 12:12). To understand better how these different social groups might have interpreted the parable we must first assess the prior knowledge they had in regards to the identity of the characters in the parable. For this end, we must look back to the interactions between these social groups and Jesus, and make salient the information conveyed between them.

1. Discovering Hermeneutical Keys within the Text

A central question we must ask is: Were any of these social groups predisposed to the idea that Jesus might be the “beloved son” in the parable? We find in Mark 1:11 that “A voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'” While this is clearly a public statement associating Jesus with the “beloved son,” we must be aware of the audience at this baptism who may have possibly overheard this association. We find in Mark 1:5 that those who went out to see and hear John the Baptist were “people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem.” Theoretically then, we can assume that in the audience at the time of Jesus’s baptism by John, were these multitudes from Jerusalem and the Judean countryside. Likewise, we find Jesus associated with the son in Mark 3:11 where the unclean spirits shout “You are the Son of God!” This proclamation by the spirits could have been overheard by “a great multitude from Galilee . . . (and) great numbers from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon” (Mark 3:7-8) who were all following Jesus. Again, we cannot be sure if they did or did not overhear the unclean spi-
rits’ proclamation (especially in light of Jesus’s stern order to “not make him known” – Mark 3:12) but we must at the very least be open to the possibility that those people nearest to Jesus did overhear the spirits.

Again in Mark 5:7 we find an unclean spirit – Legion – asking, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?” Here the association between Jesus and the son of God could have only been overheard by the disciples because Jesus “left the crowd” in Mark 4:36 on the way to the country of the Gerasenes. We also find an indirect identification of Jesus as God’s son in Mark 8:38. In this scene, Jesus has “called the crowd” (Mark 8:34) and is addressing them directly. In that address, Jesus states the criteria for those who wish to be his followers and concludes with a stark warning that “Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38). While the title “Son of Man” is used throughout Mark’s gospel as a referent to Jesus, the critical part of this verse is the mentioning of the “Father with the holy angels.” This surely was a reference to God and thus Jesus’s identification as God’s son was known to the crowd who were present. Finally, we find in Mark 9:7 a second account of a voice from Heaven declaring “This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!” Like the first voice from Heaven, this seems to be a direct identification of Jesus as God’s son but here, the audience only consisted of Peter, James and John (Mark 9:2) who were also the only witnesses to Jesus’s transfiguration.

The second motif we must consider is the theme of the death of the son. While the identity of the son in the Parable of the Wicked Tenants is critical to understanding how different social groups heard the parable, we must also wonder if these groups were predisposed to the idea that the son was to be killed, thus further informing the hermeneutic filter that aided in the interpretation of the parable. Throughout Mark’s gospel, there are three times when the motif of the death of the Son of Man arises. These passion predictions are found in Mark 8:31, Mark 9:31, and
Mark 10:33-34. The setting for the first of these is on the road to the villages of Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8:27) and the audience comprises only of his disciples. The setting for the second prediction was also on the road, this time passing through Galilee. Again, here we find that Jesus is specifically addressing only his disciples. Finally, in the final passion prediction, we find that Jesus went out of his way to take “the twelve aside” (Mark 10:32) before informing them of his murder and subsequent resurrection. Thus, we can conclude that the social groups (especially the multitudes) who were the immediate audience for the Parable of the Wicked Tenants were not predisposed to the idea that Jesus was to be killed.

Of course, the motif of death and killing was salient in the minds of the religious leaders. We know this from almost the beginning of the gospel where in Mark 3:6 we find the Pharisees and Herodians conspiring to “destroy” Jesus. Also, the Herodians’ part in the death of John the Baptist would have made killing a conspicuous theme. It must be concluded that while the religious leaders did in fact have a predisposition to interpret the death of the son in the parable as the killing of either John or Jesus, the multitudes did not have the hermeneutical key to interpret the son’s death in the parable. This conclusion is attested to by the fact that the religious leaders “realized that he had told this parable against them” (Mark 12:12). But still, it is uncertain whether this realization was based on the past murder of John the Baptist or the planned murder of Jesus.

IV. Discussion

The goal of this study was to better ascertain the ways in which the immediate audience of the Parable of the Wicked Tenants might have been predisposed to any one particular interpretation of the parable. This, however, does not preclude the fact that Jesus intended his own
meaning in the parable. The purpose here is to simply “distinguish between what Jesus himself meant, and the way in which his audience understood him.”30) In addition, it is interesting to note that the discrepancy between what Jesus meant and the interpretation by the audience might have been intended. In Mark 4:12, for example, Jesus informs his disciples that the parable is a genre specifically used to cause misunderstanding and misperception. Only for his disciples did Jesus go out of his way to “explain everything” about the parables (Mark 4:34).

Through a reassessment of the possible pre-knowledge that the multitude and the religious leaders had to interpret the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, we find that the association of Jesus with the “beloved son” was made clear on numerous occasions to a number of people. In contrast, the motif of the death of the son was only revealed to the disciples by Jesus and thus the multitude would not have had a pre-acquired schema to interpret the death of the son in the parable. The religious leaders, however, would have been privy to this interpretative lens by way of their own scheming to arrest and murder Jesus. In addition, we must remember that the construction of these “hermeneutical keys” did not occur in a vacuum and the different social groups brought with them years of experiences relative to their social class, gender, geographic region, etc.

For the multitudes the agrarian backdrop of the Parable of the Wicked Tenants would have been familiar, especially if 90% of the population lived in village-agrarian communities.31) If we accept Rohrbaugh’s argument that agrarian disputes between tenants and landlords were one of the most salient conflicts during Mark’s time we can assume that there was a very adverse relationship between ruling landlords and working tenants. As Rohrbaugh notes, “peasant debt leading to loss of land was epidemic” and “taxation . . . was crushing.”32) Given this adverse rela-

31) Rohrbaugh, “The Social Location of the Marcan Audience,” 120.
32) Ibid., 120.
tionship between tenant and landlord, it is interesting that a parable that addresses the most salient oppressive situation of the multitude listening to Jesus in no ways challenges the existing agrarian-social system. Indeed, if the multitudes simply identified with the tenants in the story, as Newell and Newell presume, the parable has the opposite effect of justifying the absentee landlord and condemning the tenants who do not fulfill their duties as workers of the land.

While the identification of the multitude with the tenants in the parable is possible, they were also aware that the son of the vineyard owner may have been a reference to Jesus. This provides a complex picture of how the multitude may have interpreted the parable. Following Boucher it is also possible that the setting up of the parable, with the Isaian informed construction of the watchtower, could have led the multitudes to understand that the owner of the vineyard is God. They might have recollected the different moments when Jesus was identified as the “beloved son” and thus may have readily identified Jesus as the son of the vineyard owner and ultimately the son of God. Specifically, the adjectives “one” and “beloved,” both used by Mark to denote the son of the vineyard owner are not found together in any of the other gospels. This suggests that Mark’s particular rendition of the parable lent itself more to an interpretation of Jesus as the “beloved son of God” than the other gospels.

It seems, thus, that the multitudes did have the hermeneutic key to interpret the parable as one that identifies Jesus as the son of God. This must be seen in addition to their natural proclivity to identify with the tenants in the parable because of their own social status and occupational position. If we follow through on this seemingly contrasting logic, we end up with a synthesis of the more common interpretation of the parable that identifies Jesus as the son of God and the more provocative interpretation by Newell and Newell that this is a parable criticizing radical and violent social movements occurring in Galilee at that time. It is possible that while some of the multitude may have identified with the tenants who revolted against a seemingly oppressive landlord, they also realized
that that same landlord is identified as God and the son, as Jesus. What we have, then, is the peculiar situation where Jesus is indirectly admonishing the multitude for their unspoken desires to revolt violently against their oppressors by throwing himself directly in their path as the murdered son of the parable.

Also of interest is how the multitudes interpreted the death of the vineyard owner’s son. If the multitudes were aware that the owner of the vineyard was indeed God and the son, Jesus, then this might be an instance where Jesus is indirectly making his coming death known to everyone and not just his disciples as in the previous three passion predictions. That is, the Parable of the Wicked Tenants might actually be the fourth passion prediction found in Mark and is unique because it is the first time Jesus openly tells of his fate to the multitudes. The religious leaders, on the other hand, would have been more aware of the Isaian informed identity of the owner of the vineyard as God, as well as Jesus’s identification as God’s son throughout his ministry. This coupled with their own plans to arrest and murder Jesus would have made the parable seem like a clear statement against them as they observe in Mark 12:12.

This study attempted to show first that it was possible for different social groups mentioned in Mark’s gospel to hear and interpret the Parable of the Wicked Tenants in their own particular ways. The process of interpreting the parable, however, was not an arbitrary one but was informed by the unique experiences of each social group. By carefully looking back at their interactions, we highlighted the information conveyed between Jesus and these social groups that possibly contributed to the hermeneutical keys used to interpret the parable. It was the assumption of this study that these interpretative keys are to be found within the text itself in order to make salient the agency of the social groups utilizing their “working memories” to actively interpret even the most cryptic of Jesus’s sayings. The hermeneutical approach opens the possibility of a dialectical relationship between speaker and listener and as Crossan reminds us, the parable is a “functional form, distinctive of Jesus’ teaching
activity . . . that drives towards participation rather than information."\(^{33}\)
By looking within the text to discover different possible hermeneutical keys we have the best chance of “hear(ing) the parables as Jesus’ listeners would have heard them.”\(^{34}\)

**Keywords**

parable, wicked tenants, hermeneutics, exegesis, interpretative communities

\(^{33}\) Crossan, "The Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen," 462.
\(^{34}\) Snodgrass, *The Parable of the Wicked Tenants: an Inquiry into Parable Interpretation*, 77.
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국문초록

악한 소작인의 비유(마가복음 12:1-12)에 관한 성서해석학적 접근

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성서해석학의 최근 연구들은 성서 텍스트가 전달하는 의미를 발견하기 위해 텍스트 본문 자체에 집중하는 문학비평적 접근을 채용하고 있는 경향성을 보인다. 본 연구는 악한 소작인의 비유(마가복음 12:1-12)를 이러한 해석학적 방법론에 의거하여 분석하며, 특히 당시 비유의 원독자를 구성하고 있는 사회적 집단들이 지닌 세계관(worldview)과 주체적 위치(subject position)를 고려해야 함을 주장한다. 이 논문은 비유가 말해질 당시의 성서 텍스트 자체가 이러한 상이한 사회적 집단들을 명확하게 구분하고 있으며, 이러한 사회적 집단들이 지닌 배경정보(background information)에 따라 독자들이 어떻게 차별적으로 비유를 “들었는가”를 보여주고 있다. 이러한 분석방법은 텍스트 자체에 내재하는 정보에 의존함을 통해서, 비유의 청중이던 당시 사회적 집단들이 지닌 선이해(pre-knowledge)를 추적하고, 그 결과 비유의 다의성이 해석학적으로 가능하다고 제안한다. 이러한 접근법은 문학비평적 방법의 한 예를 제공하며, 다른 성서 본문 연구에도 일반적으로 적용가능한 것이다.

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