

THE ALLEGORY OF THE TEN VIRGINS (MATT 25:1-13) AS A SUMMARY OF MATTHEAN THEOLOGY

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THE story about the ten virgins in Matt 25:1-13 has been subject to the most varied interpretations. Jeremias believes that it originally stems from the historical Jesus;¹ Bornkamm views it as a formulation of the early church.² Dodd categorizes this text as a parable;³ Bultmann as an allegory.⁴ Even for those who share the latter evaluation, the key which unlocks the allegory is often sharply divergent. According to Strobel it is only when one recognizes the Passover-night setting of the pericope that its mysteries become unravelled,⁵ while for Ford the virgins symbolize Jewish teachers and much of the allegory is directed against their hypocrisy.⁶

How does one evaluate these wide-ranging suggestions⁷ and how should one proceed in light of them? Is it possible to employ a methodology which is so precise that, if an error is discerned, the critic can determine exactly at which step in the process of interpretation it was made, without, therefore, necessarily accepting or rejecting the interpretation as a whole?

¹ Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Scribner, 1963) 51ff.; "ΑΑΜΠΙΑΔΕΣ Mt 25 1.3f.7f.," ZNW 56 (1965) 196-201.

² Günther Bornkamm, "Die Verzögerung der Parusie," *Geschichte und Glaube* (Munich: Kaiser, 1968), 1. 46-55. Among others supporting this position are Erich Grässer, *Das Problem der Parusieverzögerung in den synoptischen Evangelien und in der Apostelgeschichte* (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1960) 125-27, and Eta Linnemann, *Gleichnisse Jesu* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1964) 132.

³ C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Scribner, 1958) 171-74.

⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963) 119.

⁵ F. A. Strobel, "Zum Verständnis von Matt xxv 1-13," *NovT* 2 (1958) 199-227.

⁶ J. Massingberd Ford, "The Parable of the Foolish Scholars (Matt. xxv 1-13)," *NovT* 9 (1967) 107-23.

⁷ See also R. H. Fuller, *Worship* 46 (1972) 500-10; J. Duncan M. Derrett, "La parabola delle vergini stolte," *Conoscenza Religiosa* 4 (1971) 394-406; I. Maisch, "Das Gleichnis von den klugen und törichten Jungfrauen: Auslegung von Matt 25, 1-13," *Bibel und Leben* 11 (1970) 247-59; W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Gospel Parables in the Light of Their Jewish Background* (New York: Macmillan, 1936) 131-42. Important also are the brief notes by F. C. Burkitt, "The Parable of the Ten Virgins," *JTS* 30 (1929) 267-70 and H. L. Goudge, "The Parable of the Ten Virgins," *JTS* 30 (1929) 399-401.

Quentin Quesnell, in his redaction-critical study of Mark,⁸ proposes a method which, with certain modifications, appears to be applicable to a broad range of NT problems. His basic proposal is that one begin with the smallest circle, viz., the immediate text, and then gradually move to larger circles, viz., the entire NT, and only then to parallels beyond the NT when this becomes necessary. Thus, one always tries to interpret the text from the smallest possible circle, the one which is closest to it, and only when this does not suffice does one move to the next larger circle.

In the case of Matt 25:1-13 the following major elements need to be clarified if one is to understand the entire story: (a) virgins (παρθένοι); (b) lamps (λαμπάς); (c) to meet the bridegroom (εἰς ὑπάντησιν τοῦ νυμφίου); (d) foolish (μωρά); (e) wise (φρόνιμος); (f) oil (έλαιον); (g) delay (χρονίζω); (h) slumber and sleep (νυστάζω — καθεύδω); (i) cry at midnight (μέσης δὲ νυκτὸς κραυγὴ γέγονεν); (j) arose (ἐγείρω); (k) trim (κοσμέω); (l) marriage feast (γάμος); (m) door - shut (ἐκλείσθη ἡ θύρα); (n) Lord, Lord, open to us (Κύριε, κύριε, ἀνοιξον ἡμῖν); (o) I do not know you (οὐκ οἶδα ὑμᾶς); (p) watch (γρηγορέω).

By adapting the general approach suggested by Quesnell to Matt 25:1-13, we will attempt to analyze these elements using the following steps, remembering that we shall only proceed from one to the other when it becomes clear that the given step under analysis can yield no finally persuasive interpretation: (1) an interpretation of Matt 25:1-13 by itself; (2) an interpretation of Matt 25:1-13 from its context in Matthew's fifth discourse, Matthew 23-25; (3) an interpretation of Matt 25:1-13 from its setting in Matthew's Gospel; (4) an interpretation of Matt 25:1-13 in light of the entire NT; and (5) an interpretation of Matt 25:1-13 in light of its setting in the first-century religious context.

The basic presupposition of Quesnell and all who use the redaction-critical method is that, in the case of each gospel, a final redactor has put that gospel into its present form and that he was writing for a definite audience to whom he was attempting to communicate intelligibly and with the expectation that it would be intelligently understood. From this widely shared presupposition, Quesnell develops four corollaries, parts of which will be cited. (Other than abbreviation, the only change made in Quesnell's text is the substitution of "Matthew" for "Mark").

Corollary 1: Since this final redactor . . . is by definition responsible for the existing text of the Gospel, the investigation of his meaning, purpose, and message must stick as close as possible to the existing text.

Corollary 2: The intention of the author (What is he trying to tell us?), the meaning of the text (What is this supposed to convey?), and the anticipated (by the author) understanding of the audience for whom the author wrote (What did he think they would get out of this? How did he expect them to react?), are all three identical as to content.

⁸*The Mind of Mark: Interpretation and Method through the Exegesis of Mark 6,52* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1969).

Corollary 3: The key to the author's thought and message is most likely to be found in the redactional elements of the gospel or in the redactional aspects of the tradition-elements.

Corollary 4: Since the author had something intelligent and intelligible to say, intelligible unity can be used as a norm of interpretation.⁹

I

Our first step will be the attempt to interpret Matt 25:1-13 by itself without reference to other texts, either within or beyond Matthew's gospel. In other words, is it intelligible on its own terms or does the story itself, by its unintelligibility, force us to progress to the next larger circle (step two)? Matt 25:1-13 is trying to illumine and illustrate what "the kingdom of heaven" *shall* be like:¹⁰ it shall be like ten virgins who took their lamps as they were going to meet the bridegroom. The lamps assume critical importance in the account since a division is made among the virgins on the basis that five had sufficient oil for their lamps and that the five others did not.¹¹ It is on this basis of sufficient or insufficient oil that some are and some are not admitted to the marriage feast with the bridegroom. The central point of the account is that possession of sufficient oil is the basic criterion for admission to the marriage feast; clearly, admission to the marriage feast is not automatic. This comparison of "the kingdom of heaven" with the virgins only achieves meaning if the term "oil" is intelligible to Matthew's congregation. However, the immediate context of these thirteen verses does not help us in our comprehension of this concept other than to indicate that the "oil" is used as a fuel for the lamps.

The entire account is difficult to understand as an intelligible and clear comparison since, in the first place, what is related in the text does not describe normal Jewish nuptial practice.¹² In the second place, this difficulty is further accentuated by the fact that no description is given of the "virgins," of the "bridegroom," of the "marriage feast," or even of the more minor details in the story. These and a host of other problems in the story inevitably push us beyond the limits of these thirteen verses for some more intelligible understanding,¹³ since it is not reasonable to assume that Matthew would have devoted more than half the story to the lamp/oil motif unless it had some intelligible significance to himself and his audience.

⁹ Quesnell, *Mark*, 46-48.

¹⁰ *δησώ* is a frequent Matthean word. Here, as in Matt 7:24, it is used in the future (as opposed to its use in the eschatological allegory of the tares in 13:24).

¹¹ Jeremias ("ΛΑΜΠΑΔΕΣ," 201) does not sufficiently recognize this critical importance of the lamps. For a further discussion of the term "lamps," see G. Bornkamm, "Verzögerung," 52; and Strobel, "Verständnis," 210-11. Since an actual marriage is not being portrayed, it is somewhat senseless to determine what kind of "lamp" is intended.

¹² Bornkamm, "Verzögerung," 51: "Man darf also gar nicht den Versuch machen, die Einzelheiten der Parabel mit zeitgenössischen Hochzeitsitten in Einklang zu bringen." See also the discussion and literature cited by E. Stauffer in *TWNT* 1 (1933) 646-55.

¹³ Against Dan O. Via, Jr., *The Parables* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967) 122-24.

Before we press on to step two, it is necessary first to ask concerning the type of story with which we are dealing, particularly since it does not allow us to discover its meaning or intention from itself, due primarily to the ambiguity of the symbolic language employed. The most likely suggestion is that this story is an "allegory." This is underscored by the fact that the various elements in Matt 25:1-13 cohere not with each other but, in some detail, with a theological framework which appears to be outside the story itself.

In view of both the justified criticism made against Jülicher, Dodd, and Jeremias that their distinction between allegory and parable is overly sharp and rigid,¹⁴ and the suggestion than one should speak of a "sliding-scale"¹⁵ between parable and allegory, are we justified in distinguishing between parable and allegory and in asserting that Matt 25:1-13 should properly be categorized as an allegory? The recent contributions of Via¹⁶ and Crossan¹⁷ suggest that such a distinction is justified,¹⁸ even though such a classification must be carried out more cautiously and in a more sophisticated manner than the previous generation of parable researchers thought necessary.¹⁹ Crossan, for example, distinguishes between two general categories of metaphors: "there are metaphors in which information precedes participation so that the function of metaphor is to illustrate information about the metaphor's referent; but there are also metaphors in which participation precedes information so that the function of metaphor is to create participation in the metaphor's referent."²⁰ The first type of metaphor represents allegory; the second, parable. Whereas in allegory the thought is before the sign and the signified is separate from the signifier,²¹ the parable creates a new deep structure which by its very language fuses thought with sign and signified with signifier and thus transposes the participant into a new realm of existence. This is precisely what Bornkamm means by his cryptic comment that "the parables are the preaching itself."²² In this sense, then, the parables

¹⁴ For example, Raymond E. Brown, "Parable and Allegory Reconsidered," *New Testament Essays* (London: Chapman, 1965) 254-64.

¹⁵ John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973) 9.

¹⁶ Dan O. Via, Jr., *The Parables*.

¹⁷ John Dominic Crossan, "Parable as Religious and Poetic Experience," *JR* 53 (1973) 330-58; *In Parables* (note 15 above).

¹⁸ For a further discussion concerning the relationship between parable and allegory, see also Matthew Black, "The Parables as Allegory," *BJRL* 42 (1960) 273-87, esp. 282-83; E. J. Tinsley, "Parable and Allegory," *CQ* 3 (1970) 32-39.

¹⁹ For a thorough and perceptive discussion of past and current approaches to the study of the parables, see especially the two articles by Norman Perrin, "The Parables of Jesus as Parables, as Metaphors, and as Aesthetic Objects: A Review Article," *JR* 47 (1967) 340-46; "The Modern Interpretation of the Parables of Jesus and the Problem of Hermeneutics," *Int* 25 (1971) 131-48.

²⁰ Crossan, *In Parables*, 14.

²¹ See Jorge Luis Borges, *Other Inquisitions 1937-1952* (Austin: University of Texas, 1964) 154-57.

²² Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960) 69.

of Jesus are not allegories; while they surely employ "imaginative resonances"²³ one must continue to insist on the organic unity and single thrust of the genuine parable.

Dodd was not far off the mark when he characterized allegory as a "merely decorative illustration of teaching supposed to be accepted on other grounds"²⁴ Via moves in an essentially similar direction. Speaking of allegory he suggests that "the structure, shape and interconnections of an allegory are determined by something outside itself — by its meaning or referent."²⁵ It is impossible, therefore, for the reader to understand an allegory fully on its own terms. "Because an allegory is dependent on its meaning or referent, the situation to which it relates, the reader must be familiar with the latter in order to understand the story. Thus an allegory can only pass on hidden information to the initiated. . . . An allegory, then, communicates to a person what he already knows, though it communicates it in symbolic and altered fashion."²⁶ What is it that the reader of the allegory of the ten virgins knows? What is that body of knowledge which is here being communicated to him in symbolic and altered fashion? We now turn to step two, the setting of Matt 25:1-13 in the larger context of Matthew 23-25, to determine whether that broader context can provide an answer to these questions.

II

It is common knowledge that basic to Matthew's Gospel are five major teaching discourses:²⁷ Matthew 5-7, the Sermon on the Mount; Matthew 10, the commissioning of the disciples; Matthew 13, eschatological parables; Matthew 18, ecclesiastical admonitions; Matthew 23-25, eschatological admonitions. While there is some uncertainty²⁸ as to whether the fifth discourse includes only chs. 24-25, or also 23, the entire advice in 23:3ff., "so practice (ποιήσατε) and observe (τηρεῖτε)," coheres so well with chapters 24-25, and especially 25:31-46, that this speaks for the inclusion of Matthew 23 in this final eschatological discourse.²⁹ As we proceed, we will quickly observe a particularly close relationship between the fifth and the first discourses.³⁰ Both are especially concerned with ethics and eschatology. In the first, the primary stress is on ethics with a con-

²³ A phrase used by Professor Amos Wilder in private correspondence with me.

²⁴ Dodd, *Parables*, 23.

²⁵ Via, *Parables*, 5.

²⁶ Ibid., 7.

²⁷ See K. Stendahl, "Matthew," in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (eds. M. Black and H. H. Rowley; London: Nelson, 1962) 770.

²⁸ Ibid., 792.

²⁹ So also W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1964) 15.

³⁰ To a more limited degree we will also note a close relationship between discourses five and three (Matthew 13), especially with reference to the allegory of the tares and the wheat and the allegory of the dragnet.

cluding exhortation about the future judgment; in the fifth, the primary stress is on eschatological judgment—a judgment based on ethics.⁸¹

In attempting to shed additional light upon Matt 25:1-13 in view of the context in Matthew 23-25, it is important to observe that this entire discourse is concerned with practicing (ποιέω) and keeping (τηρέω) that which has been commanded by Jesus.⁸² Both beginning (Matt 23:3-4) and conclusion (Matt 25:45-46) stress this motif that only by doing the deeds inherent in the Christian life will one be found acceptable at the final judgment. Matt 25:31-46, the great judgment scene,⁸³ spells out in detail some of the specific actions which are implied in the more general command to do the will of the Father: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, and visiting those imprisoned. Unless Matthew is inconsistent, there is a strong probability that the allegory of the ten virgins is somehow related to this same overall emphasis of the fifth discourse. Let us explore whether there are specific interrelationships between themes found in Matt 25:1-13 and this larger context and whether such an investigation may clarify certain allegorical details in the story of the virgins.

A number of themes found in the allegory of the virgins are paralleled in Matthew's fifth discourse. The division motif is found not only in Matt 25:2 (five and five), but also in Matt 24:40-41,⁸⁴ where on the last day there will be a separation between two men in the field ("one is taken and one is left") and a separation between two women grinding at the mill ("one is taken and one is left"). Also the parable of the talents in Matt 25:14-30 speaks more sharply of a separation between those who have multiplied their talents and the one who has buried it in the ground than does Q. The judgment made upon this one-talent man is unequivocal: "cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness." In the virgin allegory the separation is between those who are foolish (μωρά) and those who are wise (φρόνιμος), whereas in the talents story the separation is between the "good and faithful servant" (25:21) and the "wicked

⁸¹ The close relationship between ethics and eschatology in Matthew is persuasively demonstrated by G. Bornkamm, "End-Expectation and Church in Matthew," *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (eds. G. Bornkamm et al.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963) 15-51.

⁸² This concern is also evident in Matt 28:20. See Bornkamm's analysis, "The Risen Lord and the Earthly Jesus: Matthew 28.16-20," *The Future of Our Religious Past* (ed. J. M. Robinson; New York: Harper and Row, 1971) 203-29.

⁸³ See also Matt 13:41. Fuller (*Worship* 46 [1972] 508-10) argues that the judgment in Matt 25:31ff. is based on acceptance or rejection of the disciples—the "shaliach" principle—and, as a consequence, acceptance or rejection of the sender of the accredited agents. Many of Fuller's comments are suggestive and deserve further investigation and careful scrutiny. Until such time we prefer the analysis of K. Stendahl, "Matthew," 794: "But the function of this parable is totally within the framework of what has preceded it, viz. instruction to the disciples about the demands on them while waiting with the church for the Parousia." See also R. Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 123-24.

⁸⁴ Of course, elsewhere in Matthew as well, e.g., 13:36-38 and 13:47-49. Note also the further references in this paper, particularly in section three.

and slothful servant" (25:26), and in Matt 24:45 it is between the "faithful and wise servant" and the one who is not faithful and wise. Throughout the fifth discourse the wise and faithful ones are the ones who are active in doing good deeds, as the culmination of these chapters, the great judgment scene, makes so abundantly clear. It is thus likely that the separation between the five foolish virgins and the five wise virgins is related to this overall theme of practicing, observing, and doing (Matt 23:3; 24:46; 25:40, 45). It is also probable that the allegory of the virgins is related to the warning not to be like the hypocrites (condemned in Matthew 23) who "outwardly appear righteous to men, but within . . . are full of hypocrisy and iniquity" (vs. 28) and who "are like white-washed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness" (vs. 27).⁸⁵

Other themes found in the virgin allegory also abound in the fifth discourse. The coming of the master and the theme of eschatological judgment are found throughout (Matt 24:30-31, 36-37, 50-51; 25:19-21, 31-33). One factor involved in Matthew's composition of this discourse was to deal with the fact that this coming of the end had been delayed (24:34, 48; 25:5),⁸⁶ and consequently to urge the Christians in his congregation not to lessen their performance of good deeds. The real danger in Matthew's situation is that "most men's love will grow cold" (Matt 24:12); one central point in the exhortation is that "he who endures to the end (in the performance of love) will be saved" (Matt 24:13).

Matthew deals with the delay of the parousia from at least two different angles: the warning to *watchfulness* (the end can come at any time) and the warning about *preparedness* (just because the end may not come during one's lifetime is no excuse for not being prepared). Matthew may have intended the allegory of the ten virgins to serve as an illustrative story dealing with this second area of concern. Those who go to sleep (= die)⁸⁷ prepared will be like the five wise virgins who had enough oil for their lamps, and not like those foolish virgins who had lamps but an insufficient supply of oil. There may be some relationship between this oil/lamp illustration and the hypocrites in 23:27-29 who look good on the outside, like the white-washed tombs and the pseudo-righteous, but inwardly are devoid of righteousness and full of iniquity and dead men's bones. It has already been observed that the oil has a critical

⁸⁵ Might this be related to lamps without oil?

⁸⁶ We would agree with Bornkamm ("Verzögerung," 50, against Dodd, Jeremias, and Kümmel) concerning the function of the "delay of the parousia" motif in Matt 25:1-13. Rather than urging that it is central (as it surely is in Matt 24:48-50 and in the original setting of Matt 25:13), we would view it as a basic presupposition of the entire allegory. With Grässer (*Parusieverzögerung*, 119-20) it is important to recognize that while there is a similarity between Matt 25:5 and Matt 24:42-44 in the delay motif, there is also a difference. In Matt 25:1-13 the stress is *not* on the delay, as in Matt 24:48, but on the *insufficient oil*. As Grässer states, "der Skopus des Gleichnisses ist nicht die Ankündigung der anbrechenden Hochzeit, sondern die Frage, wer an ihr teilnehmen darf" (120).

⁸⁷ See section four below.

significance for the story and, given our understanding of the intentions of the fifth discourse, it probably serves as a symbol for the good deeds³⁸ mentioned throughout and highlighted and brought to culmination in Matt 25:31-46. Whether this preliminary interpretation has merit and whether it can be confirmed and amplified by moving to steps three and beyond must now be explored.

III

We have already observed that a close connection exists between Matthew's fifth and first discourses (Matthew 5-7). Because of this fact we must see whether our preliminary understanding of Matt 25:1-13 can be confirmed and deepened by an examination of the Sermon on the Mount. Of particular importance is Matt 7:13-27, where parallels to this pericope abound. Although Matt 7:24-27, dealing with the foundations of sand and stone, is taken from Q (cf. Luke 6:47-49) Matthean redaction is easy to detect. First, Matthew adds the distinction between the "wise" and the "foolish" in precisely the same manner as he does in Matthew 25. Second, he alters Q's account of the second house. In Matthew the second man builds his house upon a foundation of sand. Is this another example of that false piety which is not acceptable at the end-time — it looks good but it is weak and without lasting strength? The foolish man is like the tree that does not bear fruit (7:17-19) or the person who says "Lord, Lord" (Matt 7:21 and 25:11) but does not do the will of the Father; he is, in fact, very similar to the foolish virgins who do not have sufficient oil.

In addition to the similar conceptual relationships about the "foolish" and the "wise," the conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount shares an almost identical phrase with the allegory of the virgins. In Matt 7:23 we read, "I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers," and in Matt 25:12, "Truly, I say to you, I do not know you." While the wording is different, the content is the same. It is significant that the wording at Matt 25:12 is identical to Luke 13:26-27. It may well be that this Q logion served as a basic element in Matthew's construction of the allegory of the ten virgins and that in Matt 7:23, due to its probable polemic against a formative and threatening post-70 A.D. Judaism,³⁹ Matthew is purposely giving a literal translation of a Jewish "Bannformel."⁴⁰ In Matthew 25, "I do not know you" serves as a formula of rejection for those who are not properly and adequately prepared; in Matthew 7, for those who hear the words

³⁸ Oesterley (*Gospel Parables*, 138) senses that "oil" is of importance to the story but asserts that it simply means a "lack of the sense of responsibility" without offering any firm reasons. Supporting our understanding of "oil," but not our overall interpretation of this allegory, are J. M. Ford, "Foolish Scholars," 117; and J. D. M. Derrett, "La parabola," 403-4.

³⁹ So W. D. Davies, *Setting*, esp. 256-315; also R. E. Brown, K. P. Donfried, and J. Reumann (eds.), *Peter in the New Testament* (Minneapolis and New York: Augsburg and Paulist, 1973) 75-107.

⁴⁰ For a further discussion, see K. P. Donfried, *The Setting of Second Clement in Early Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 1974) 66-67.

but do not do them (*μὴ ποιῶν αὐτοὺς*, vs. 26). For Matthew, it is important to stress this element of being adequately prepared. While the ones who are rejected in both places come with certain credentials (in Matthew 25 the foolish virgins who are rejected did have some oil, and the rejected ones in 7:21-22 come and say, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?"), they are not rejected because these actions are wrong, but because they are inadequate, since it is only "he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" who shall enter the kingdom. If there is any relationship between Matthew 25 and 7, then the likelihood is increased that the oil is another of several symbolic expressions [e.g., "bearing fruit" and not doing *ἀνομία* (7:23)] employed by Matthew for the concept "doing the will of the Father."

In the virgin allegory, just before the formula of rejection, one learns that the door (*θύρα*) is closed. This is an important theme for Matthew. On the eschatological day, Jesus will stand at the door (24:33) and will admit those properly prepared (Matt 25:10; 7:21). That entrance through the door is not easy is vividly stressed in 7:13-14: "Enter by the narrow door; for the door is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter it are many. For the door is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few." It is exactly because entrance through the door is not automatic, as we have already had occasion to note, and involves doing the will of the Father, that Matthew is so critical of the false piety (6:5-6) represented by the Pharisees: "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because you shut the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither enter yourselves, nor allow those who would enter to go in" (Matt 23:13). Why? Because "they preach, but do not practice" (Matt 23:3).

We have noted above the critical importance of the lamp/oil symbol in Matthew 25. Although this is the only Matthean reference to the oil, there are several significant references to lamps and light which are compatible with our suggestion that the "oil" in Matthew 25 refers to nothing other than "good deeds," viz., doing the will of the Father. Central among these references is Matt 5:14-16: "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light (*λάμπει*) to all in the house. Let your light so shine (*λαμψάτω*) before men, that they may see your good works (*καλὰ ἔργα*) and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."⁴¹ Why does one "light a lamp"? So that one's good works (*καλὰ ἔργα*) will give glory to the Father. When this is not the case, when one's righteousness does not exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, then that person "will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (5:20). Similarly the ten virgins lit up (*ἐκόσμησαν*) their lamps before the bridegroom, but in the case of the five

⁴¹ On this verse, see J. Duncan M. Derrett, *Law in the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1970) 189-207. Note also the similar language in the conclusion to the interpretation of the story of the weeds in Matt 13:43: "Then the righteous will shine (*ἐκλάμπουσιν*) like the sun in the kingdom of their Father."

foolish virgins their oil, their *καλὰ ἔργα*, was not sufficient. When the real test of their oil, their *καλὰ ἔργα*, arrived, the result was similar to the house built on a sandy foundation: it was found to be inadequate.

It will now be helpful to discuss references to the terms "bridegroom" and "marriage feast" in Matthew. In Matt 9:15 we have not only a connection between the bridegroom and the wedding guests but the explicit identification of Jesus as the bridegroom. The theme of the wedding feast is elaborately presented in Matt 22:1-14. Once again this Q pericope is redactionally enhanced by Matthew, particularly vss. 11-14. The situation of a man is presented who was given entry to the wedding feast in error. Perhaps the separation between the "bad and good" (vs. 10) had already been made, and one of the bad "slipped in." Be that as it may, the point is that he had "no wedding garment (*ἐνδυμα γάμου*)."⁴² Consequently he was cast into the outer darkness.⁴² Once again Matthew uses symbolic language to describe the proper assets necessary for admission into the kingdom of heaven. As Stendahl correctly concludes from his observation of Rev 19:8, the wedding garment in Matthew "symbolises the ethical quality expected in the church."⁴³ Just as Matthew can here describe the *καλὰ ἔργα* as a "wedding garment," so can he describe them as "oil" in Matt 25:11; in both places, interestingly, the symbols are used in the context of a marriage feast.

There is yet one cycle of events in the allegory of the virgins which must be examined in light of other references in Matthew's gospel: (a) the fact that the bridegroom is delayed (*χρονίζοντας*); (b) consequently, that the maidens slumbered and slept (*ἐνύσταξαν καὶ ἐκάθευδον*); and (c) when the bridegroom finally arrived at midnight,⁴⁴ they rose (*ἤγέρθησαν*). We have already noted that the delay in the parousia is a nuanced, yet characteristic Matthean concern (cf. Matt 24:48; 25:19). It is difficult to ascertain Matthew's intentionality in using the language of sleeping and rising, since he uses the terms infrequently in his own creative way; methodologically it is, of course, not very helpful to refer to those usages which are clearly dependent on Mark. *Νυστάζω*, in the entire gospel, appears only in this pericope; *καθεύδω* is found in a distinctively Matthean context only in 13:25; and, *ἐγείρω*, in a clearly independent Matthean sense, only in 10:8 (*νεκροὺς ἐγείρετε*), although one can detect Matthew's hand in changing the Marcan *ἀνίστημι* to *ἐγείρω* in 9:25, 16:21 and 17:9. What is clear from this overview is that in all those places where Matthew uses the verb *ἐγείρω* independently of his sources he is referring to a real rising from physical death (9:25; 10:8; 16:21 and 17:9). It is likely that he intends it to be so understood in 25:7. If this is the case, it makes it overwhelmingly probable that for Matthew *καθεύδω* in 13:25 and 25:5 can only mean "death,"⁴⁵ in contrast to Mark 5:39, where "sleeping" (*καθεύδω*) is contrasted to "death" (*ἀποθνήσκω*). From the overall

⁴² A Matthean phrase; cf. Matt 25:30.

⁴³ "Matthew," 791.

⁴⁴ On this term, see section four below.

⁴⁵ This interpretation will be confirmed by other NT references to be cited in section four below.

context of Matthew's Gospel, then, it is likely that the symbolic language of Matt 25:5-7 refers to the death and resurrection of the virgins. Matthew may be suggesting to his congregation that even if some will die before the delayed parousia comes, they had better not let that factor lead them to believe that the final entrance-criteria into the kingdom had become less rigorous.

Let us summarize our findings up to this point in step three. Matthew composed the allegory of the virgins as a warning to his congregation not to be caught short for lack of sufficient oil, a symbol we understand from the context of Matthew's Gospel to mean "obedience to the will of Father," specifically, the performance of *καλὰ ἔργα*. This exhortation is urgent not simply because the parousia was delayed, but especially because many were now becoming aware that they might well die before the end. Thus, simply because the end was not to come necessarily during their lifetime is not to excuse them from obedience and the bearing of fruit, since at the resurrection only those who have performed *καλὰ ἔργα*, only those who have sufficient "oil," will be accepted through the narrow door to the wedding feast. It is only those with sufficient oil who are clothed with the proper wedding garment.

It will now be necessary to proceed beyond the limits of Matthew's Gospel and to see whether our understanding of "oil" can be supported in steps four and five. It will also be important in these next steps to ascertain whether the image of the virgin (*παρθένος*) had a nuance in primitive Christianity which would have enabled Matthew to use this symbol to communicate his intentions effectively, in fact, more effectively than by using the image of the bride (*νύμφη*), the absence of which has puzzled many commentators,⁴⁶ especially those who have attempted to relate this pericope to prevalent Jewish marriage customs.

IV

As one turns to the wider NT witness for assistance in discovering the precise meaning of "oil" as it is used in Matthew 25, one receives no help. It can be employed in a variety of ways; among them, as a "healing potent" (e.g., Mark 6:13; Jas 5:14), or metaphorically as the "oil of gladness" (Heb 1:9), or simply as part of the ordinary necessities of life (Rev 6:6).⁴⁷ Since the interpretation

⁴⁶ Fuller (*Worship* 46 [1972] 500) writes: "It is often argued that this parable is an allegory and therefore could not have come from Jesus. But it is not a pure allegory even in Matthew. Any allegory concocted by the early church would have surely made the bride central to the story, for in the early church's ecclesiology the church was the bride of Christ." However, Paul never uses the term *νύμφη*; with Matthew he prefers the term *παρθένος*. Even though certain Western and Caesarean witnesses add *καὶ τῆς νύμφης* at 25:1, they are certainly the result of later interpolation. See the excellent discussion by Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971) 62-63.

⁴⁷ In addition, see Schlier, *TWNT* 2 (1935) 468-70; W. Bauer, W. Arndt and F. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1957) 247; and Samuel Daiches, *Babylonian Oil Magic in the Talmud and in the Later Jewish Literature* (London: Oxford University, 1913).

of oil suggested above is not found in the NT, it is either incorrect or Matthew was aware of and employed an understanding of this symbol from his cultural and religious milieu which other NT writers were either not familiar with or elected not to use. Further explorations into the background of Matthew's religious environment must await step five.

The wider NT context does yield considerable help, however, for an understanding of Matthew's selection of the term "virgins" (παρθένος) in this story. It is likely that as Jesus is the νυμφίος for Matthew, so the church is the παρθένος which meets her bridegroom at the wedding banquet. The primary support for this comes from Paul in 2 Cor 11:2: "I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a παρθένον ἀγνήν to her one husband."⁴⁸ The Corinthian church, as παρθένος, will be tempted from "her pure devotion to Christ" and consequently will be judged to be inadequate. The eschatological dimension is as central to 2 Corinthians 11 as it is to Matthew 25 and Lietzmann is quite correct when he asserts that "das παραστήσαι findet bei der Hochzeit d.h. Parusie statt."⁴⁹ It is, therefore, probable that the term παρθένος in Matthew 25, just as in Paul, refers to all Christians in the interval before the marriage which will occur when Christ returns at the parousia.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Paul, in 1 Thes 4:15-17, also describes the meeting with the bridegroom in language quite similar to Matthew 25 (e.g., similarity of κραυγή and φωνή; εἰς ἀπάντησιν)⁵¹ and also provides additional support for the propriety of interpreting ἐκάθενδον in Matthew as, in all likelihood, referring to those who had died (Paul: τοὺς κοιμηθέντας, further specified in vs. 16, οἱ νεκροὶ ἐν Χριστῷ ἀναστήσονται πρῶτον).⁵²

Matthew uses this type of symbolic language to express to his congregation

⁴⁸ For a discussion of the "betrothal" in relation to Jewish marriage customs, see Oesterley, *Gospel Parables*, 134ff.

⁴⁹ Hans Lietzmann, *An die Korinther I/II* (HNT 9; Tübingen: Mohr, 1949) 145. A similar view is held by Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (ICC; Edinburgh: Clark, 1956) 293; "St. Paul assumes for himself the part of the person who has arranged the betrothal, and who watched jealously over the bride's conduct in the interval before the marriage, which is to take place when Christ returns at the παρουσία." Paul and Matthew are using the term παρθένος to express thoughts similar to those of John 3:29 where John uses νύμφη: ὁ ἔχων τὴν νύμφην νυμφίος ἐστίν. Clearly, νύμφη is also used to refer to the "messianische Gemeinde" (so R. Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium* [HTKNT IV/1; Freiburg: Herder, 1965] 454).

⁵⁰ Important also are the observations of Burkitt ("Parable," 268): "The Virgins stand for all the Disciples, for any Disciple: that they represent the Disciples, not the world in general, is shown by the fact that they are going forth to meet the Bridegroom." To this Goudge ("Parable," 400) adds: "The virgins are not 'little girls,' but the adult and self-devoted followers of the Lord." See also Grässer, *Parusieverzögerung*, 119. Thus, Matthew deliberately employs the term παρθένος because it serves his intention, making it senseless to speculate why the term bride (νύμφη) is absent.

⁵¹ See E. Peterson, "Die Einholung des Kyrios," *Zeitschrift für die systematische Theologie* 7 (1930) 682-702; and Grässer, *Parusieverzögerung*, 123-24.

⁵² See the further discussion and references in Ernest Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972) 185.

that not all who are invited (cf. Matt 7:21-23) will be present at the consummation of the marriage. Only those whose righteousness has exceeded that of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt 5:20), only those who have practiced and performed the good deeds (Matt 25:31-33), only those who have been obedient to the will of the Father (Matt 7:21), and, yes, only those who have sufficient oil (Matt 25:4) and the proper wedding garment (Matt 22:12) will be welcome at the final consummation of the wedding feast. That such a final decision will occur is suggested at a variety of points in Matthew's Gospel, such as in the allegory of the tares in the wheat (Matt 13:24-30), the allegory of the dragnet (Matt 13:47-50), and in the great judgment scene (Matt 25:31-46), to mention only a few such references.

V

There is one item which could not be identified with precision either in terms of Matthew 23-25 (step two), the whole of Matthew's Gospel (step three), or the entire New Testament (step four): the "oil" of the virgins. Although we have attempted to interpret it with reasonable assurance on internal grounds, it would be most welcome if one could find an external identification of the "oil" which would be congruent both with the general religious environment in which Matthew's Gospel was written⁵³ and which would confirm the internal meaning of the term suggested above. This is exactly what we find in the *Midrash Rabbah* to Numbers. In *Num. R.* xiii 15, 16, referring to the phrase "mingled with oil" in Num 7:19, the midrash comments that this "alludes to the Torah, the study of which must be mingled with *good deeds*, in accordance with that which we have learned."⁵⁴ We find here an explicit identification of "oil" with "good deeds." This usage of oil is identical to what we have suggested the symbol "oil" means in Matt 25:3, 4 and 8. Once this identification of "oil" with "good deeds" is clear it becomes most intelligible why the five wise virgins would not transfer their oil to the five foolish virgins: it is impossible to transfer "good deeds" or "obedience" from one person to the other and it is equally absurd to purchase good deeds from the dealers (25:9).⁵⁵ Is this impossibility of transfer not the point of Matt 7:16-20? "You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? So, every sound tree bears

⁵³ We accept, in general, the delineation of this religious environment as outlined by W. D. Davies and Brown, Donfried, and Reumann (note 39 above).

⁵⁴ "Numbers II" in *Midrash Rabbah* (eds. H. Freedman and M. Simon; London: Soncino, 1951) 535 (our italics). Concerning the general theme of "good deeds" one should also consult A. Marmorstein, *The Doctrine of Merits in Old Rabbinical Literature* (New York: Ktav, 1968). The short article by Derrett, "La parabola," approaches our interpretation of oil, but via a very different method.

⁵⁵ That the five foolish virgins were unsuccessful in their attempt to purchase "oil" is clear from vs. 11. Even though the door had been shut (vs. 10), it is apparent that the bridegroom still gave them a hearing (vs. 11); but, because they are unprepared, he rejects them.

good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit. A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits."⁶⁶

Conclusion

In view of the bewildering interpretive possibilities of Matt 25:1-13 offered in the scholarly literature, we have adopted a systematic methodology, influenced by Quesnell, with the hope that such a procedure might produce new results. Sharing the presuppositions of redaction criticism, this methodology proposes that one always begin with the smallest circle, the text or pericope under discussion, and that one only move to the next step, the larger circle, as the previous one ceases to yield information for an adequate exegesis. We isolated the more important elements of Matt 25:1-13 which were in need of interpretation and then moved through the following five steps as it became necessary: (1) an interpretation of Matt 25:1-13 by itself; (2) an interpretation of Matt 25:1-13 in the view of its next larger context, the fifth discourse of Matthew's Gospel (chs. 23-25); (3) an interpretation of Matt 25:1-13 in the light of its setting in Matthew's Gospel as a whole; (4) an interpretation of Matt 25:1-13 over against its setting in the entire NT; and (5) an interpretation of Matt 25:1-13 in light of the setting of Matthew's Gospel in its first-century religious context. The fact that Matt 25:1-13 could not be understood on its own terms support those scholars who have viewed it as an allegory. This factor, coupled with such later concerns as the delay of the parousia, suggest that it does not stem from the historical-Jesus level but was created by Matthew on the basis of certain traditions which he had received. In the past, however, those scholars who have correctly viewed Matt 25:1-13 as an allegory have commenced their interpretation at our step five (specifically Strobel and Ford), immediately drawing parallels to Jewish literature. Our procedure has differed radically at this point by arguing that appeal to step five is only legitimate after one has worked through the preceding four steps. Proceeding through each step with care, it was discovered that the symbol "oil," which we interpreted as "good deeds" resulting from obedience to the Father, was of critical significance to the allegory of the ten virgins and, in fact, serves as its interpretative key. By focusing primarily on the smaller and larger Matthean context in steps one through three, we discovered not only Matthew's intention in creating the allegory of the ten virgins but also that this allegory summarizes much which is central to the theology of Matthew.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Of interest is the statement in *Lev. R.* iv. 2 (*Midrash Rabbah*, p. 50) that the soul "never has too much of meritorious acts and good deeds." While this may possibly assist us in understanding the point of Matt 25:9, Matt 7:16-20 is the immediate background.

⁶⁷ For a fuller exposition of the theology of Matthew, see G. Bornkamm's programmatic essay, "End-Expectation and Church in Matthew" (note 31 above).

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