

PERICOPE 203: WATCHFULNESS AND FAITHFULNESS

A Term Paper

Presented to Dr. Paul Pollard

Harding University

Searcy, AR

As a Requirement in

Course GRK 374

Synoptic Gospels

by

Greg McKinzie

November 2003

INTRODUCTION

The Synoptic Gospels, Matthew and Luke in particular, feature Jesus' teaching on watchfulness and faithfulness (Mt. 24:32-25:13; Mk. 13:33-37; Lk. 12:35-48). In order to address some of the issues that arise from the text, we will discuss three main: selectivity, arrangement and adaptation. While they at times overlap, we will make an effort to maintain a distinction between the results of each. Having these three methods of analysis in the exegetical tool bag, we move to other preliminary issues.

The easiest question to begin with is that of Q. The similarities between Matthew and Luke over against Mark must be dealt with, while at the same time carefully approaching the obvious differences between Matthew and Luke. The possibility of oral tradition always remains, and the very nature of a theory is that it ought to be tested, or it is no longer really a theory but rather an apriorism. In any event, the presence of a short Markan parallel somewhat muddies the waters and, at least, calls for investigation. It is, therefore, not as easy to answer the question of Q as it is to ask it.

It is not always appropriate for an exegetical endeavor to ask about the significance a text holds for the modern reader. However, in this particular case, there is an added incentive to consider that question. In Luke 12:41, Peter himself asked Jesus if this parable applied to "all." In addition, Mark 13:36 records Jesus saying "And what I say to you I say to all, watch!" As will be discussed later, this adds an interesting dynamic to the interpretation of these passages, which are often understood in light of a context suggested by particular historical events.

CULTURAL CONTEXT

Before engaging the text itself, a general overview of the cultural setting for these parables might shed some light on their significance. Unfortunately, many sources for New Testament backgrounds do not discuss the social significance of the pre-wedding ritual present in the Matthean verses or the stewardship ideas present in all three of the Synoptics.¹ The small amount that can be said about the virgins carrying lamps is that it was indeed a custom, and "... according to Rabbinical authority, such lamps carried on the top of staves were frequently used, while ten is the number always mentioned in connection with public solemnities."² H. E. Dana notes that, depending on the regional custom, groomsmen sometimes accompanied the bridegroom when he sought out the bride.³ This perhaps hints at who is shouting "Behold the bridegroom, come to his meeting place," in Mt. 25:6. The foolish virgins not being allowed entrance reflects what was customary once a banquet had begun.⁴ Kittle points that the lateness of the lord in Lk. 12:36 is presumably due to the custom of celebrating marriages far into the night.⁵ These details, though few, give some idea about the nature of the parables that Jesus was

¹ Paul Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999); C.K. Barrett, *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961); Sean Freyne, *Galilee, Jesus and the Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988); Edward Lohse, *The New Testament Environment*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976); Bruce J. Malina, *The Social World of Jesus and the Gospels* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Bruce J. Malina, *Windows on the World of Jesus* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993); Bruce J. Malina et al., *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002). These are certainly not all of the possible sources, but are enough to demonstrate a general lack of interest in these topics among mainstream discussion.

² Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life In the Days of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 155.

³ H.E. Dana, *The New Testament World* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1937), 151.

⁴ James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 40.

⁵ Gerhard Kittle, ed., *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 648.

telling. He did not simply make up the concepts, but applied that with which his audience was familiar to the spiritual truths he was imparting.

That the patron-client relationship played a large role in the Greco-Roman milieu is a foregone conclusion. Jeffers likens the servant-master relationship in Lk. 12:35-38 to the patron-client relationship,⁶ but this does not seem to catch the entire essence of the section. The situation portrayed in all three Synoptics is that of a lord who has left his household in the charge of a servant, presumably a permanent and trusted servant. This kind of stewardship does not parallel the patron-client arrangement, but more closely resembles just what the wording suggests--the slave-master or bondservant-master relationship. The semantic basis for this reasoning will be discussed in the adaptation section. As noted above, socio-cultural literature has not addressed the practice of household stewardship as presented in Mt. 24, Mk. 13 and Lk. 12. This, however, should not prevent us from drawing exegetically sound conclusions concerning the significance of the parable.

SELECTIVITY

Determining who “has” the text is interesting. The quick answer is Matthew and Luke, because they both have the main body of text about the faithful and wise servant. Yet, if the context of the question is widened to stewardship of the lord’s household, Mark’s minor parable meets that criterion. Only Matthew and Mark have the command “γρηγορεῖτε οὖν.” Only Matthew has the Parable of the Ten Virgins, but Luke does have a small section on readiness that revolves around the lord of the house being at a wedding feast, which also makes reference to burning lamps. Despite the imagery shared by Luke and John of a lord girding himself and

⁶Jeffers, “The Greco-Roman World,” 192.

serving the servants, the connection is a stretch, and we will not deal with the John passage any further in this study.

It seems that there were at least two traditions, whether written or oral, concerning readiness, which utilized the imagery of a wedding feast and its attendant circumstances. These two passages (Mt. 25:1-13 and Lk. 12:35-38) have so little in common that they must surely be considered M material and L material respectively. The complication, of course, is the injunction to “watch therefore, because you do not know the day or the hour” (Mt. 25:13). Assuming Markan priority, and setting aside the possibility of an overlap, it looks as though Matthew has borrowed, and very slightly modified, Mk. 13:35 for the first half of an inclusio that Matthew is using to bracket his two parables on readiness. If the Lukan omission of the Mk. 13:35 parallel before Lk. 12:39 reflects this Matthean editing rather than an original difference between M and L, then Mt. 25:13 is simply a further modified version of Mk. 13:35, placed at the end of otherwise unique material for the effect of bracketing these two parables on readiness.

Here we begin to broach the question of Q. The very definition of Q to which many subscribe--material common and exclusive to Matthew and Luke--circumvents the need to determine whether a text actually is Q material. “Actually” belies the fact that this study assumes there is more to the Q theory than that, but if one were to simply stop with selectivity, Mt. 24:43-51 and Lk. 12:39-46 certainly appear to contain the same material. It is interesting to think that if Matthew and Luke both had Mark and their source for the common material, they both independently opted for the common material to the exclusion of Mark’s much shorter similitude (notwithstanding that Matthew did indeed borrow the Mark 13:35 material).

Whatever the case, it appears that the quick answer is the most functional one: Matthew and Luke are in control.

ARRANGEMENT

One's understanding of the parables on readiness is especially influenced by their placement in relation to the material around them. It is common for Matthew and Luke to place "Q" material in relatively different parts of their gospels while otherwise following Mark. In this case at least, the result is a significant difference in thrust for what is, in part, the exact same parable. The Evangelists' use of various sections of the material make it somewhat confusing, but the following explanation will attempt to make a clear presentation of the dynamics.

Although Mark's passage is minor, it will be helpful to begin there, because Matthew follows Mark so closely in content and intention. For Mark this is an undeniably apocalyptic saying (cf. vv. 24, 25). It is connected to his much-disputed section on "the end of the age." One's beliefs about that passage might ultimately be determinate for the meaning of 13:33-37, as there is no way to divorce the two. At the same time, 13:33-37 may have something to say about the verses preceding it.

As is often thought, Jesus begins by warning his disciples about the fall of Jerusalem. However, it seems likely that in 13:24 ("but in those days, *following* that distress . . .") there is a transition to post-A.D. 70 events. It is difficult to imagine how chapter thirteen could *only* be referring to the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, when the dialogue is so tied up with the return of Christ, as is seen in Mk. 13. The lord-of-the-house figure is away, and his return is immanent. It would be a challenge to apply that figure to anyone other than Christ. If this, along with the language preceding it, is not enough, v. 37 seems to be a rather universal statement: "And what I

say to you I say to all, watch!” Admittedly, “all” might be interpreted more narrowly than “all people everywhere,” but this in addition to the notion that Mark is not writing to people in Jerusalem, leads to the conclusion that Jesus’ return is the topic of discussion. Matthew and Luke’s passages should help clarify this point. For now it will do to see that Matthew has inherited from Mark a warning about the second coming.

A brief overview of Matthew’s use of Markan arrangement will set the stage for further work. In both gospels, Jesus visits the temple, withers the fig tree and his authority is questioned. Matthew interjects the Parable of the Two Sons. Both have the parable of the Tenants, and Matthew adds the Parable of the Wedding Banquet. Both have the discussion on paying taxes to Caesar, but only Mark has the discussion on marriage at the resurrection. Both have the discourses over the greatest command and whose son is the Christ. Matthew has the Seven Woes and Mark tells about the widow’s offering. Both have the prediction of the fall of Jerusalem and then the readiness passages. Matthew follows with the Parable of the Talents, The Sheep and the Goats and then tells about the plot to kill Jesus. Finally, both have Jesus being anointed at Bethany.

Matthew’s context is thus similar to that of Mark in that the parables are placed in an apocalyptic setting. But Matthew has in fact enhanced the cautionary nature of the readiness passages by adding further material. This begins with the Seven Woes, which are a scathing indictment against hypocrisy and an obvious call to repentance. This leads directly into the A.D. 70 predictions, which, just as with Mark, lead into the readiness passages. While the transition between pre- and post-A.D. 70 is not as clear in Matthew’s account, it is there, and Matthew’s material is even more clearly eschatological in light of the parables that follow. In the pericope,

the lord-of-the-house figure is more clearly looking for faithful servants to reward or unfaithful servants to punish upon return. Equally, few would argue the bridegroom figure to be someone other than Jesus.

Still more evidence from the arrangement follows. The Parable of the Talents is almost universally applied to all believers, the teaching being one of responsibility now in preparation for a future reckoning with the master. It is but a breath away from the “end of the age” section and even less from the readiness parables. Lastly, The Sheep and the Goats is unmistakably a call to righteousness accompanied by the threat of punishment. All together this section of Matthew’s gospel appears to be a set of warnings, mostly dealing with the punishment of unrighteousness. It is within that context that Matthew placed his two readiness parables, implying that one should be ready for the return of Christ and all that it entails. The emphasis is on watching for the return of Jesus.

If Matthew follows Mark closely, Luke does not follow Mark at all. The only hint of similarity between Luke and the other two Synoptics is that in chapter eleven, shortly before Luke’s readiness passages, are his Six Woes. These seem to be disconnected from the teaching that more directly precedes the readiness parables and so do not carry the significance apparent in Matthew. Nonetheless, the passages preceding Luke’s material are extremely telling of his intention in arranging it as he did. The Parable of the Rich Fool and Jesus’ teaching on worry about earthly matters are directly before 12:35-48. It seems that rather than emphasizing watchfulness for the return, Luke is emphasizing how to live in the mean time. His unique material in vv. 35-38 offers one a perspective on why not to be concerned about earthly treasure. The lord of the house is returning soon, and the disciples should be preoccupied with that which

makes earthly treasure irrelevant. Readiness has blessings beyond earthly wealth, for the lord himself will serve those whom he finds watching.

The parable of the faithful and wise servant expands on the idea of stewardship, but not to the exclusion of punishment for unfaithful stewardship. The ideas of repentance and punishment are present in Luke's account, but not to the degree of intensity that they are presented in Matthew. Luke follows with, among other things, Jesus warning the crowd to interpret the present time, followed by a warning to repent or perish. It is of minor interest to note that Luke will shortly come to the teaching on the narrow door, which contains the parallel for the end of Matthew's Parable of the Ten Virgins, when they are outside the closed door seeking entrance. Finally, Luke has Jesus' lament for Jerusalem, which is found at the end of Matthew's Seven Woes.

Therefore, Luke is doing as he sees fit with the placement of these portions of scripture. His emphasis is different, while utilizing the same parable. What is most certain about Luke's understanding of this teaching on readiness is that it is not tied to the fall of Jerusalem, and should surely be understood as referring to the return of Christ. For Luke, that expectation is foundational for Christian living.

ADAPTATION

To begin the adaptation section, there are no major textual variants. The following will deal with what has been added, then what has been changed, and lastly what has been left the same in the respective Gospels. Some of what the evangelists added has been dealt with already and will not require review. M and L are, by default, what has been added to either Mark or the

material common to Matthew and Luke. Aside from what has been covered above, three passages of this text have yet to be discussed.

At the end of the faithful and wise servant parable, Matthew adds, “There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” The same phrase is used in 22:13 and 25:30, and seems to be indicative of the warnings of punishment theme in this section of Matthew. At the same place Luke supplies his unique addendum about the servant who knows the will of his master but does not do it and the servant who does not know the will of his master. Both are beaten, but there are degrees of punishment, which presents a perplexing theological question. At this point it is always handy to throw in the “parable” trump card and refuse to take the ambiguous parts literally or, to be honest, seriously. Instead, it may have to suffice to say that we don’t know what it means, but he probably meant something quite like what he seems to have said.

The third unique passage is Luke 12:41 where Peter asks the question for us. “Lord, do you speak this parable to us or to all?” As has been pointed out, in Mark’s similitude, Jesus had already made the wider application. How wide is uncertain in that context, but here Peter’s question can not be interpreted as “all who are in Jerusalem,” as it might have been in Mark. Rather, the Gentile Luke is writing to the Gentile Theophilus and doing a fine job of making a wider application of the gospel. Jesus, as usual, answered with a question, but the answer to his question might actually shed some light on the evasive meaning of 47, 48. In paraphrase, Jesus said “Whoever was given responsibility will be held responsible.” Then he followed up by adding “Even if someone was ‘unaware’ of their responsibility, they will still be held responsible.” In short, Peter, everyone.

Turning to look at the differences between Mark and Luke, we will finish considering the question of Q for this pericope and uncover further redactional intention. The focus now will be on Mt. 24:43-51 and Lk. 12:39-46. There are not a great number of significant redactional changes. The first of note is in v. 45 of Matthew and v. 42 of Luke. Here Matthew chooses the word δούλος, but Luke opts for οἰκονόμος. Kittle points out a range of possibilities for the meaning of οἰκονόμος, but suggests that cross-referencing the two Gospels indicates “a steward from among the slaves, who is over the whole household.”⁷ This brings back up the point made earlier that the patron-client relationship does not suffice to describe the dynamic present here. Another result of the Lukan use of “steward” is to focus again on the context in which Luke places the parable. The discussion of earthly and heavenly treasure has only just ended, and stewardship is the key.

A second noteworthy difference is Matthew’s use of οἰκετείας (v. 45) where Luke uses θεραπειίας (v. 42). The word οἰκετείας is a hapax legomenon simply meaning household servant. More interesting is θεραπειίας, which is semantically related to θεραπεύω (I heal) and can be translated “healing” or “servant.” If, as some believe, Luke was a former servant of Theophilus and a physician as well, it would be easy to guess what connection the Evangelist is making with this word.

It may be of minor importance to note that Luke portrayed the evil servant as beating the menservants *and maidservants* (v. 45), whereas Matthew only says “fellow servants” (v. 49). In any event, the final exegetically significant difference is in v. 51 of Matthew and v. 46 of Luke. The place of the unfaithful servant in Matthew is with τῶν ὑποκριτῶν (the hypocrites) whereas

⁷Gerhard Kittle, ed., *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 150.

in Luke is it with τῶν ἀπίστων (the unbelievers). Matthew uses the word ὑποκριτής fourteen times in his gospel compared with Luke's three times. Considering the severity and emotion of the Seven Woes, it is not a surprise that Matthew is still condemning hypocrites. The continuity of the section is again demonstrated in this word choice.

It is important that so much of the parable of the faithful and wise servant is the same in both gospels. At the same time there are a significant amount of small differences in word order and tense, enough to make one wonder about the validity of a written Q source hypothesis. It seems just as likely as not that the common source for Matthew and Luke was oral. Of course it was not in every case, or perhaps in many cases, but in order for so many discrepancies to be present, the careful recording and preservation of Christian documents must have begun after the writing of the Gospels. Whatever the case, there is certainly a common source for the Gospel writers--Jesus.

CONCLUSION

Hopefully, the thrust and power of these gospel passages is not lost in the miry trenches of exegesis, but rather clarified and enhanced. The Evangelists surely had different methods and concerns. The unforeseen blessing is that side-by-side they present a bigger picture than before. The need to repent and be ready for God to come in awesome judgment is real, and so the return of Christ should be ever anticipated. For there is no second chance; the door will be closed. At the same time, that hopeful anticipation can empower the believer to live in a readiness that would never be possible otherwise. There is a need for wisdom and faithfulness, for we are given a great responsibility, which is to care for all our fellow servants. The reward is greater

than any earthly treasure. We will gain an inheritance beyond expectation and the Lord himself will serve us. And finally, what he said to us he said to all: watch!

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