

Allegory and Rhetoric in Mark 12:1-12

– Parable of the Wicked Tenants –

Abstract

In the Gospel of Mark, the parable of the wicked tenants is positioned within a sequence of honour challenges to Jesus by Jewish leaders. The parable and the pericopes that surround it use allegory and rhetorical devices from both Jewish and Greek traditions in order to encourage the faith of a Roman Christian readership. The encouragement comes by way of shaming the Jewish leaders and proclaiming that God is building something afresh with Jesus as the capstone.

Introduction and motivation

The so-called “parable of the wicked tenants” appears in Mark 12:1-12, as well as in the Gospels of Matthew, Luke and Thomas. The parable, reported to have been told by Jesus, describes the actions of a land-owner who established a vineyard and rented it to tenants. When the owner attempted to collect some of the crop by sending first servants and then his son, the tenants mistreated the servants and killed the son. Jesus then suggests that, in response, the owner will “kill the tenants and give the vineyard to others” (12:9). Following the parable, Jesus quotes verses from Psalm 118 about “the stone the builders rejected”, and Mark adds a final comment about the listeners’ response to the parable.

In the early stages of research for this essay, I read that Mark was probably written to Romans in around 70 CE (e.g. Powell 2009, p. 129). That sparked the thought that the Gospel would have been written about the same time as the Roman rhetorician Quintilian wrote his major works. Although I have not read any claim that the gospel was influenced by Quintilian, the idea of writing in order to persuade would have been part of the milieu in which the Gospel of Mark arose¹. So I wondered about the extent of influence on Mark by the approach to rhetoric espoused by the Roman, Cicero, and by the earlier Greek, Aristotle.

With that in mind, this essay considers the role of the parable of the wicked tenants within the Gospel of Mark, with a focus on the rhetorical elements in the way the parable is presented.

Context within the Gospel of Mark

The Gospel of Mark was written anonymously, although early church historians² attributed authorship to Mark, a follower of Peter. Several of Mark’s major themes are evident in this passage, including the humanity of Jesus as shown by his openness to engage in dialog about the

¹ I was pleased to find that at least one scholar agreed! (Incigneri 2003, p. 36)

² Including Irenaeus (Roberts, Donaldson, and Coxe 1994, v. 1 p.414), Clement via Eusebius (Roberts, Donaldson, and Coxe 1994, v. 2 p. 579f), Papias via Eusebius (Stevenson and Kidd 1983, p. 52) and Tertullian (Roberts, Donaldson, and Coxe 1994, v. 3 p. 350).

source of his authority, and the proclamation of the kingdom of God as shown through the metaphor of the vineyard.

Within Mark, this parable is placed within a sequence of “honour challenges” (Witherington 2001, p. 318). The passage itself starts with “He then began to speak to them in parables” (12:1), indicating that the speech is a response to “the chief priests, teachers of the law and elders” (11:27) who had previously demanded to know by what authority Jesus acted.

The surrounding structure is thus:

An honour challenge by chief priests, teachers of the law and elders (11:27-33)
A story (12:1-9)
Commentary by Jesus (12:10-11)
Commentary by Mark (12:12)
Three further challenges and discussions with Pharisees and Herodians (12:13-17),
Sadducees (12:18-27), and one of the teachers of the law (12:28-34)

The use of intercalation, with the parable sandwiched between honour challenges, is a repeating technique by Mark, which encourages the reader to interpret the outer passages in the light of the inner one and vice versa (Witherington 2001, p. 318). The parable itself has a loosely chiasmic structure³. The intercalation and chiasm together draw the reader’s attention to the central stanza, which is the sending and killing of the owner’s son.

This passage has two distinct audiences. The original audience of Jesus’ spoken word is the Jewish leaders who challenged him. The intended audience of the written work, however, is generally believed to be Roman Christians (Incigneri 2003; Powell 2009, p. 129; Short 1979, p. 1223). This dual audience has important implications for understanding the rhetorical structure, as discussed later.

Pathos

In his approach to rhetoric, Aristotle distinguished between the character and authority of the speaker (*ethos*), the facts and arguments used (*logos*) and the emotions of the audience (*pathos*) (Olmsted 2006). These may be seen as describing the three components of any act of communication: the speaker, the message and the listener. But equally, they can be seen as three patterns on which an orator or writer can draw in order to craft their message for persuasive effect.

Mark is written primarily in the mode of pathos, to inspire a particular emotional response from the reader. It is a “rhetoric of faith”, seeking not to convert but to build the faith already within the Christian readership. (Incigneri 2003, pp. 40-51)

The emotional response of the two audiences is crucial to understanding this passage. In response to the Jewish leaders’ questioning of his authority, Jesus responds by undermining the questioners’ authority. Even though the issue being addressed is authority, Jesus (and Mark) tries to persuade not on the basis of ethos but pathos. The parable, in both form and content, is highly

³ Although Bailey states this confidently in relation to the Lukan version of this parable (Bailey 2008, p. 412), it is certainly not the clearest example of a chiasm. Although there is some symmetry in both Mark and Luke’s version, the sending of multiple people by the owner disrupts the pattern. Where the central rhetorical focus lies is perhaps not as clear as Bailey suggests.

emotive. It evokes shame⁴ in the Jewish leaders, and pride in the Christian readership towards their hero Jesus.

A further ingredient of this parable is the “divine pathos”⁵ displayed by the vineyard owner, whose long-suffering nature is forever hopeful that the tenants may change their attitude (Donahue 1988, p. 55).

Allegory

Parables and allegories are both stories with two levels of meaning. Whether this parable is an allegory, however, depends on the specific definition of allegory.

It is easy to read the parable of the tenants allegorically, with the vineyard representing Israel, the owner being God, the tenants being the Jewish religious leaders, and the son being Jesus. According to Joachim Jeremias, however, the idea that the parables are allegorical was laid to rest by Jülicher (1857-1938). Jeremias argues that the allegorical interpretation of this parable was added by the Gospel writers and the early church rather than the original intention of Jesus (Jeremias 1972, especially pp. 70-76). This conclusion needs to be viewed in the light of Jeremias’ stated purpose of trying “to recover the original meaning of the parables of Jesus, to hear again his authentic voice” (Jeremias 1972, p. 22). Consequently, his argument does not rule out the possibility that the author of Mark presents the story allegorically.

A contrary view is taken by Snodgrass, who proposes that the common definition of an allegory as “an extended metaphor or a series of related metaphors” is inadequate. There are clearly metaphorical elements in the telling of the parable by Mark such as the allusion to Isaiah 5 in 12:1, which associates the vineyard with Israel⁶. But the essence of an allegory is that “the meaning of the whole is metaphorical”⁷ (Snodgrass 1983). That Mark presents the story allegorically is thus confirmed by the post-script (12:12) in which he claims that the chief priests, teachers of the law and elders knew that the parable had been spoken against them – a conclusion that only makes sense if the primary meaning of the parable is metaphorical.

Mark uses allegory as a tool for pathos. The story evokes anger at the tenants, amazement towards the owner and sadness for the son, and the subsequent realisation of the allegorical meaning transfers those feelings to the Jewish leaders, God and Jesus respectively.

⁴ The response of shame probably needs to be argued in more detail, but it seems to me the most natural way to account for their subsequent actions. Their belligerence in looking for a way to arrest Jesus masks a sense of inadequacy after having heard that as custodians of the vineyard they have failed. This interpretation is supported by the use of the Greek ἐντρέπω in 12:6, translated as “respect” but more literally “shamed” (Bailey 2008, pp. 418f, confirmed by Vine 1975).

⁵ A phrase coined by Jewish rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-72).

⁶ This is a repeating metaphor in the Old Testament (e.g. Psalm 80, Jeremiah 2, Ezekiel 15, Hosea 10). The symbolism would have been readily noted by the Jesus’ Jewish audience, though perhaps not by Mark’s Roman audience.

⁷ I personally do not find that definition a great deal better, because it fails to distinguish allegory from all sorts of other metaphoric stories. For instance, Tolkien rightly denies that *The Lord of the Rings* is an allegory, although it is certainly both full of metaphor and metaphoric in overall intent. The mythopoeic, parabolic and allegorical forms all rely on metaphors but what differentiates allegory is its clear and explicit one-to-one correspondence between elements of the two levels of meaning.

Mashal and nimshalim

In Jewish literature and oral teaching, a common practice is to present a story (mashal) followed by its moral point (nimshal).

Snodgrass points out that the quotation from Psalm 118 in 12:10-11 acts as the nimshal (Snodgrass 1998), though it seems to me that this passage has *two* nimshalim directed towards different audiences. The moral of the story from Jesus' point of view is that the Lord will elevate the rejected son⁸ to the highest position (12:10-11). But the moral for Mark is that the Jewish leaders were shamed into silence (12:12).

Within the story, the allegorical referents are unclear. An unobservant or uneducated person in Jesus' audience may not understand the second layer of meaning. The nimshal by Jesus perhaps confused some listeners, but apparently prompted the Jewish leaders to understand. The nimshal by Mark deftly fills in the gap for the later readers. The *gar* clause in 12:12 ("for" in RSV, "because" in NIV) adds the interpretive key that allows the reader to reason retrospectively – if the Jewish leaders were so affronted that they wanted to arrest Jesus, then it can only mean that they knew that Jesus cast them in the role of wicked tenant, and it would then follow that the owner is God and the son is Jesus. (Fowler 2001, p. 95)

Conclusion

The parable of the wicked tenants uses the well-known image of a vineyard to create an allegorical correspondence between the owner and God, the tenants and the Jewish leaders, and the son and Jesus. By adding two levels of commentary to the parable and surrounding it with challenges to Jesus' authority, Mark simultaneously records the impact on Jesus' original hearers – a message of shame – and promulgates a message of vindication and hope to Christian readers.

This emotive passage fits within Mark's overall use of pathos to encourage the faith of the readers. A key rhetorical device is the nesting of ideas in order to draw attention to the focal idea that the vineyard owner (God) sent his son (Jesus). By highlighting that idea, Mark provides an indirect answer to the original question asked by the Jewish leaders. Who gave Jesus authority? It came from the Lord, who is building something afresh with Jesus as the capstone.

⁸ The correspondence between the stone from Psalm 118:22 and the son in the parable is implied by the conclusion that the Jewish leaders make, but it may also be suggested by the similarity in Hebrew between the words for son and stone (Snodgrass 1998). That claim seems dubious to me. Given that Mark was written in Greek and that the quote is from the LXX version of Psalm 118, it seems unlikely that the Roman readership would pick up a Hebrew word play. Nevertheless, it may have been an intentional word play in the spoken words of Jesus that fails to carry across to the written Gospel.

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