

The Parable of the Net

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The Parable of the Net Matthew 13:47-50

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind: Which, when it was full, they drew to shore, and sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but cast the bad away.

So shall it be at the end of the world: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Jesus a master in Rabbinic teaching, often used parables to teach His followers. Today if we are to understand the words of Jesus, we must take a closer look at key words or terms Jesus used in His historical setting. In the Parable of the Net, verse 47 states “*Again, the kingdom of heaven is like,*” implying that this parable is about the expansion of Gods’ Kingdom on earth.[i] When Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of Heaven, He is referring to the expansion of God’s rule or reign as it breaks forth into this world, with more and more people accepting the rule and reign of God’s Kingdom (Matthew 11:12; Micah 2:13-14).[ii]

However, it is clear that this parable is addressing end time eschatology or judgment, and not the expansion of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. It is also clear, in the Greek manuscript the phrase Kingdom of Heaven is a part of the text. Now based on the knowledge that the New Testament was first written in Hebrew and not Greek, it is important to first ask the question, “what is the meaning of this parable, and would Jesus have spoken of the end time or final judgment by beginning His words with the phrase the Kingdom of Heaven?” Many New Testament scholars such as C. H. Dodd have struggled with this concept, and have not interpreted these words of Jesus correctly. Dodd in his book The Parables of the Kingdom, writes:

Here then we have an interpretation of the parable that brings it into line with other sayings of Jesus, and relates it to the actual course of His ministry. The Kingdom of God is like the work of fishing with a drag-net, for the appeal is made to all indiscriminately.[iii]

When Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of Heaven in His other parables, such as the Parable of the Pearl, which appears just before the Parable of the Net, He is obviously referring to His Kingdom that is expanding on earth. Jesus’ kingdom is a continuance of God’s reign or rule, where His people take on the yoke of the reign or the yoke of the Kingdom of God (Ex. 15:18; Zech, 14:9).

The phrase Kingdom of Heaven, *Malchut Shamayim*, is not found in the Old Testament, but the Rabbis interpreted *malchut* as meaning “Kingdom,” or *melech*

as meaning “king,” and *malach* as meaning to “rule,” referring to the Kingdom of Heaven/God. The word Heaven is often used as a synonym for God. According to the commandment not to take the name of the Lord in vain, the Jews used synonyms for the name God such as: (*Hamakom* the place), or (*Hashamayim* Heaven), in order to avoid breaking or transgressing the law.

When we look at Matthew 13:47, the phrase Kingdom of Heaven is without a doubt being used in the Greek manuscript. However, in a personal interview with Dr. Lindsey, he stated that the usage of the phrase “Kingdom of Heaven” was a proliferation of the phrase, and that it is his personal belief that the Greek writer of Matthew added this term. He also stated the phrase was added possibly because of the presupposition scholars hold in thinking that the Kingdom of Heaven/God is futuristic. It is very likely that Jesus did not originally use these words in this parable.[iv] The use of Kingdom of Heaven in the Parable of the Net presupposes this theme of the end-time on all of Jesus’ parables. Thus, New Testament scholars like C.H. Dodd support this interpretation of all parables as referring to the Kingdom of Heaven with a futuristic view.

The second key phrase that needs to be examined in order to establish the main point of this parable is the word “net” (*mikmoreth*). Jesus using a rabbinic style of teaching called *remez*, which means hinting or alluding that paints a beautiful picture in which His hearers can put together the meaning of His message. Here, net may be referring back to the wicked mentioned in Psalms 141:10 and Psalms 140:4-5, 10. His point is that wrongdoers will not go unpunished, as He refers to the net catching both good and bad. Jesus, in speaking of the end times or final judgment, compares the people with fish, the Hebrew word *dag*. Fish were a large part of their daily life. During the second Temple Period, fishing was a highly developed industry. Many of Jesus’ disciples were fishermen who fished on the Sea of Galilee.

According to the Bible and the Oral Law, fish were divided into clean and unclean. Anything with fins and scales was eatable, while everything without fins or scales was considered as an abomination (Lev. 11: 9-11). There are some sixteen separate types of fish, which live in the Sea, of which about eight species are mouthbreeders. The perch or bream and the catfish, also know as *Clarias Machro*, are among the different type of fish found in the sea.[v] Dr. Lindsey mentions this catfish as possibly being the bad fish that Jesus said would be thrown away. The catfish is not kosher because it does not have fins and scales.

The Hebrew word Jesus probably used for bad is *tamay*, which carries the meaning of being spoiled, rather than bad. Jesus says the good fish will be collected in baskets and the bad fish will be thrown away. The word for good is often used to characterize people in the bible: *Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works* (Matthew 5:16). *But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you* (Matthew 5:44). *But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it* (Matthew 13:23).

In Genesis 1:8, the creative God brought forth all the creatures from His hand and said they were all very good. This is the same word, which Jesus uses to describe the person who will receive eternal life. Jesus uses the phrase, “and throw them into the fiery furnace,” referring to the bad or evil persons who will receive judgment. In the book of Amos, God said he would bring judgment on the nations surrounding Israel. Amos used the term “fire, to depict God’s judgment which would come upon those who sin. When Jesus spoke of a fiery furnace, He could have been referring back to a cluster of passages in the Old Testament. Psalms 21:9-11 speaks of a fiery furnace that the Lord will use to swallow up those who plot evil and devise wicked schemes on the earth. Isaiah 66 describes the Lord in His anger and fury, rebuking with flames of fire, executing judgment upon all men. Jesus is saying that at the end of the age or judgment it will be like a fiery furnace.

In Archibald Hunter’s book, Interpreting the Parables he interprets the Parable of the Sower, the Tares, and the Net as being the explanation of early Christian exposition, with the main point of the parable focusing on the last judgment. C.H. Dodd interprets the Parable of the Net as having allegoric meaning of the last judgment. Dodd acknowledges that this parable’s main point is problematic in its interpretation. He refers to this phrase as the future history, a period of development before the consummation of the Kingdom of God.[vi] This parable is not about the expansion of the future Kingdom that is in part manifested and yet to be manifested.

David Flusser in his book, Jewish Sources in Early Christianity, points to Jesus as Bar Enash (Son of Man) a figure of an almost super-human judge.[vii] This judge will sit on the throne of God and divide the righteous from the wicked. “He is to deliver the righteous to everlasting life and the wicked to everlasting punishment.” This is the main point of the Parable of the Net, Jesus (the Judge) brings judgment.

In order to understand the context in which Jesus would have used this parable, a reconstruction of the parable is offered by Dr. Robert L. Lindsey in his manuscript, Jesus: How We Have Misunderstood Him, is given:

As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. When the disciple James and John saw this, they asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?” But Jesus turned and rebuked them (Luke 9:51-55).

I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed! Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and

daughter-in-law against mother-in-law (Luke 12:49-53).

It is like a man who sowed good seed in his field but while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. The owner's servants came to him and said, Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from? An enemy did this, he replied. The servants asked him, do you want us to go and pull them up? No, he answered, because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat, with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn (Matthew 13:24,30).

Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field. He answered, the one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Again it is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 13:47-50).

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right, come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.

Then the righteous will answer him, Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you sick or, in prison and go to visit you? The King will reply, I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me. Then he will say to those on his left, depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes

and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me. They also will answer, Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or in prison, and did not help you? He will reply. I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me. Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life (Matthew 25:31-46). [viii]

The reconstructions above place the parable of the net within a historical context that brings clarity to the teachings of Jesus. However, it is important to note that many German scholars believed in a simpler chronology concerning the words of Jesus. Rudolf Bultmann was one of many scholars who believed the narratives of Jesus life were questionable and as of such, became a serious reason for skepticism about the Gospel story. According to Bultmann:

There must be some reason for this, said Bultmann, and along with two or three other German scholars of note he concluded that the units themselves were probably first just little stories which were taught by Greek Christian teachers to young adherents of the early Greek-speaking Church. Bultmann supposed that each unit had, therefore, a "history of its own." Very little of such material went back to Jesus. We no longer can hear his voice. Worse, we cannot know much with certainty about Jesus at all. So he said.[ix]

It was during the seminars held at the Hebrew University on Mount Scopus at the end of January 1979, when Robert Lindsey and David Flusser began discussing the problem they saw concerning the strange manuscript order found in the text of Matthew and Luke. Lindsey first noticed that Luke 5:31,32 was a continuation of Luke 15:4-7. Lindsey writes:

"Lindsey" said Flusser, "you are right. These two passages once stood together as a single story!" It was the beginning of a series of what both Flusser and I now think of as extremely exciting discoveries. The very next day I found that the famous story of the rich man who came to Jesus to join the Kingdom (Luke 18:18-30), must originally have preceded a parable passage in Luke 14:26-33 (I later noticed that Matthew 13:44-46, the parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven, evidently once stood also in this reconstruction between the Luke 18 and Luke 14 passages).[x]

From this seminar between Lindsey and Flusser came the theory that Jesus used *an opening incident, a discourse and finally two parables*. In the Parable of the Net there is an opening incident Luke 9:51-55, then a teaching discourse of Jesus Luke 12:49-53, and two parables Matthew 13:24-30, Matthew 13:47-50 and more to my benefit Lindsey added Matthew 25:31-46.

With the reconstruction of these passages, many theological questions scholars and others have asked are completely answered. How much more important it is to continue the work of Lindsey and Flusser.

Endnotes

[I] Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin, To Pray As A Jew, Basic Books, 1980. "The first of the middle blessings is known as Malkhuyot, (kingship). It emphasizes God's

sovereignty over the world.

[ii] David Bivin, Roy B. Blizzard, Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus, (Dayton, Ohio: Center For Judaic-Christian Studies, 19984), p. 124

[iii] C.H. Dodd, The Parables of the Kingdom, (New York, N.Y. : Charles Scribner's Son 1961), p.

[iv] Robert L. Lindsey, A Personal Interview, (Norman OK. 1989)

[v] Rachel Floersheim, Fish, Encyclopedia Judaica, (Jerusalem, Israel: Keter, 1971), vol. 6

[vi] Dodd, p. 15`

[vii] David Flusser, Jewish Sources in Early Christianity (New York, N.Y.: Adama 1987), p. 56

[viii] Robert L. Lindsey, Jessu: How we Have Misunderstood Him, (Unpublished manuscript 1989)

[ix] Robert L. Lindsey, Jesus Rabbi & Lord, (Oak Creek, Wisconsin: Cornerstone Publishing 1990) p. 86

[x] Lindsey, p. 80. "I have already mentioned a number of times in this book that by putting together a story with a teaching of Jesus and a couple of parables we have, apparently, hints of a longer and earlier story." "Gradually I began to realize that there must have been a scroll written prior to the scroll known to our writers and that it must have displayed many stories in the life of Jesus which had three kinds of materials in each: 1. An opening incident, 2. A teaching discourse of Jesus, and 3. Two parables.