

## RESISTING and IMITATING THE EMPIRE:

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### IMPERIAL PARADIGMS IN TWO MATTEHAN PARABLES

#### INTRODUCITON OF SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF THE TEXT

Most 20<sup>th</sup> Century scholarship on Matthew has approached the gospel as religious writing. For contemporary Western readers too, the gospel is concerned with distinctively religious or spiritual and personal issues.

#### **But some recent scholarship has begun to challenge this notion.**

It is from awareness that in the first-century world – the language and conceptual framework for Matthew’s telling of the gospel story- religion was not a self-contained, individualized entity. In a world dominated by Roman imperial power, religion was intricately woven into political, social, economic, and domestic structures of daily life. Therefore, to speak religiously in ancient world is to speak politically, socially, economically, and culturally.

#### **Socio-political background of Jesus’ conflict with chief priest and scribes**

We need to recognize the fact that *Rome frequently ruled in alliance with local elites such as landowners, priest, and scribes. These allied groups shaped a society to promote and protect their mutual interests at the expense of the remaining taxable 95% of society. Then it seems reasonable to understand Matthew’s presentation of Jesus’ conflicts with the Jerusalem-centered, temple-based chief priest and scribes as concerning not narrowly “religious issues” but social visions, societal structures and practices, arrangement of power, and the theological sanctions invoked to maintain or challenge society under Rome’s imperial control. In this context, Jesus collides with a socio-political system that benefits the small ruling elite at the expense of the many, and Jesus reveals the system as contrary to God’s will and purposes.*

#### **Matthew 18 : 23-35**

As is commonly recognized, the parable in Matt. 18:2-35 urges forgiveness.

To know God’s forgiveness is to forgive others.

**However, Jesus said the parable as his response to Peter’s question about forgiveness in 18 : 21-22:** Jesus told Peter to forgive seventy seven times.

Jesus exhorts repeated forgiveness among disciples in v. 21-22, in actions of both the king and the official, but the parable exemplifies the very opposite. The king forgave

initially but refuses to forgive again (v. 32-34). Worse yet, by imprisoning the slave, the king withdraws the forgiveness that he had previously extended (18:34). It is quite opposite to Jesus' statement to forgive 77 times.

**Who is the king then here?** we have been interpreted him to be God.

The noun "king" commonly denotes Rome's emperors, the most central, important, and powerful figure in the imperial world. The use of this image suggests that the key to the parable lies in contrasts and opposites, not similarities to God.

**Jesus has consistently demonstrated that God's empire is not like human empire.**

**Whereas empires like Rome's removed food from the vast (predominantly peasant) majority by taxation and tribute for the benefit of the elite,**

**Jesus provides abundant food in anticipation of the establishment of God's just reign marked by plentiful food and access to land resources (Matt. 5:5; 12:1-8, 14:13-21; 15:32-39; cf. Isa. 25:6).**

**Whereas empires like Rome's render people sick through deprivation of resources and intimidation,**

**Jesus provides healing in anticipation of the establishment of God's just reign (cf. Isa. 35:5-6).**

**Whereas an empire like Rome's guards its hierarchy closely and expresses it in meal practices that reinforces social status by order of seating, quality and quantity of food, and quality of eating utensils,**

**Jesus uses meals to break down hierarchy and include those marginalized by imperial society (Matt. 9:9-13).**

**Kings have had mixed press in the gospel**, even though Jesus (2:2) and God (5:35) have been positively identifies as kings. Scripture also identifies tragic history of he kings' mis-rule "from David to the deportation to Babylon (1:6-11).

**15 kings** are named. Only two appear in 1-2 Kings and 1-2 Chronicles as good faithful kings.

**King Herod**, Rome's vassal king, greets as a threat the magi's politically unwise inquiry about "the one born king of the Jews" (Matt. 2).

**King Solomon** appears briefly in contrast to the “lilies of the field” (6:29).

Solomon’s wealth acquired through the exploitative strategies of heavy taxation, military conscription, forced labor, requisitioned property, and slavery – do not compare with God’s gracious provision for the lilies. Solomon does not trust God for what he needs but resorts to his own greedy and oppressive acquisition of excessive wealth. Therefore, it is hard to take the king as God.

### **The king is in his counting house**

We have entered political world in which the powerful elite accumulate resources and wealth at the expense of the rest.

### **The king uses his ”slave.”**

The term “slave” would designate loyalty and service the king. Although we commonly associate slaves with poverty and physical labor, slaves frequently had highly developed economic, administrative, and legal skills. As representatives of rulers, landowners, and traders, they could exercise considerable power with financial reward for their service.

### **Attention is focused on financial matters (18: 23-24).**

Ten thousand talents, large amount, likely point to the collection of taxes and tribute, not to a personal debts. As Jesus has indicated, taxes are the primary means by which kings and the attendant elite in an imperial society sustain themselves. The point is not repayment but swift and brutal punishment. The king’s action is not unusual. **Is this a model of God’s forgiveness?**

Invoking Jesus’ action suggests contrast rather than similarity.

*Thus far in the parable, the requirement that disciples live their lives marked by forgiveness has been contrasted to the way of the world, to “imperial-politics-as-usual.” In that world, forgiveness is a calculated, self-benefiting, once-only act.*

*The King is not God. God’s empire is not like the king’s self-interested, oppressive, fickle, and harsh rule in which perceptions of power, status, and wealth determine actions.*

**But verse 35 brings a major surprise: “ so my heavenly father will do to you.”**

**The king’s final act of punishing the unforgiving slave is now said to resemble God’s action. God will behave like an imperial tyrant! God will do similar thing to disciples who do not forgive repeatedly. After contrast has been drawn between God’s ways and self-enriching king, suddenly a similarity is established. It means that here are accountability and**

**punitive consequences for ignoring God's will.**

**OTHER PARABLES, THE KING, WEDDING FEAST, AND THE BURNED CITY**  
**IN MATT. 22:1-14**

This parable completes a sequence of three – with two sons (21:28-32) and the householder and vineyard tenants (vv.33-46) – that employ extensive allegory and is address to the Jerusalem elite (vv. 15, 23-27, 45-46).

In the narrative context- with Jesus' entry to Jerusalem, his attack on the elite's power base (the temple), and rejection by the elite – the parable depict inevitable judgment. The Jerusalem elite have not done the father's (God's) will (vv. 28-32). They will kill the householder's son (vv.37-39) and have not produced the required fruit from the vineyard (i.e., Israel; vv. 41-43). The householder (God) disqualifies and replaces their leadership (without rejecting Israel).

The central authority figure of the two previous parables represents God.

God reigns over the world (Ps. 24), the nations (Ps. 47:3), God reigns over Israel (Ps. 97:1-5). “The kings of the world” resist God and God's anointed King, who represents God's just reign in Israel (Ps. 72), but God's reign will extend over them, too (Ps. 2; Isa 24:23).

**The allegory establishes Jesus as the king's (God's) son.**

**The son's wedding feast** invokes several traditions.

**The marriage metaphor** depicts God's covenant relationship; with Israel (Hos. 1-3; Jer. 3:1-10).

**Eating and feasting** expresses participation in God's purposes both in the present (Prov. 9:1-2; Isa 55:1-3) and in the future completion of God's purposes.

Throughout the gospel, **meals** have provided the context in which Jesus manifests God's justice. Contrary to imperial practice, divine justice bestows rather than removes (through taxation) adequate resources to sustain human life ( Matt. 6:11, 25-31; 14:15-21).

**Meals** demonstrates God's inclusive mercy, which, contrary to imperial social hierarchies, extends to the social margins (9:10-13). So, **the wedding feast** provides a multivalent images of the establishment of God's empire and purposes already underway, in part, in Jesus' ministry.

**Note: from the same theological understanding of meal I used to provide major meal to homeless people, not sandwiches but major holiday meal as if we have Jesus at our table. Meal breaks ice and walls between nervous**

**and anxious group of people.**

**Guests were invited.**

They did not want to come which dishonor the king. The king got angry and sends troops and burn the city and kill people. The act of attacking a city, burning it and killing its inhabitants is standard strategy in repertoires of imperial control and revenge. Countless rulers have employed it.

The parable offers Matthew's interpretation of the burning of Jerusalem by the Roman army. He views the act as God's punishment. Rome serves as God's agent in enacting punishment, just as other imperial powers have done previously: Assyria (Isa 10:1-7), Babylon (Deut 28:30; I kgs 9:1-9; Jer 25:1-11), Persia (Isa 44:28-45:3), Antichus Epiphanes (2 Macc 6:12-17), and Rome (Pss.Sol. 2.1-4). But for Matthew, the punishment is quite specific. The Jerusalem elite have rejected God's son and agent, Jesus (FN 20).

## **Conclusion**

**The gospel presents a sharp critique** of this imperial paradigm.

the gospel contrasts imperial status quo and contrasts its way with God's

The devil is presented as the one who controls over the kingdom of the world.

He offers Jesus control over them. But for Jesus to accept the offer would be "the greatest treason; to do the right deed for the wrong reason." Jesus is to enact God's purposes, not Satan's.

The opening chapters provide an immediate, harsh, uncompromising disclosure of, and verdict on, Roman imperial society and any society organized for similar ends.

**Jesus inhabits** a world peopled by the sick, the maimed, the hungry, the powerless. He demonstrates God's empire, an alternative order marked by healing, exorcisms, feedings, blessing, inclusion, mercy, justice, and service.

His bold, alternative social vision means inevitable – ultimately fatal – conflict with, and resistance from, the imperial order. The empire always strikes back.

**The narrative re-describes** the metaphor of reign or empire in applying it go to God's work. God's empire is fundamentally not like that of the great men of the Gentiles (20:25-28). It is underway in marginal places and people, in an alternative communities, mercifully effecting life-giving social and economic structures. Readers are led to

suspicious of empire and their rules. They typically bring destruction on people.