

Nine Matthean Parables

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(21 August 2016)



There are nine parable texts in Matthew without parallels in Mark or Luke that are sometimes thought to be dependent on a “Special Matthew” or “M” source.¹ It is also possible that this material is original. We here explore that question stylistically.² We follow Zimmerman (**Parables** 165) in classifying Mt 13:51-52 as a “parable,” and those nine parables we designate as P1 through P9. Two of them, P1 and P4, have an appended explanation, but the explanation of P1, here P1e, is textually separate from the parable. As a probable Matthean comment, it may usefully be compared stylistically with the parables. The resulting ten texts, with NA27 wordcounts, are:

P1	Mt 13:24-30	Weeds (137)	P5	Mt 13:51-52	Householder (32)
P1e	Mt 13:36-43	Weeds Expl (152)	P6	Mt 18:23-35	Servant (213)
P2	Mt 13:44	Treasure (31)	P7	Mt 20:1-16	Laborers (242)
P3	Mt 13:45-46	Pearl (25)	P8	Mt 21:28-32	Two Sons (106)
P4	Mt 13:47-50	Net (71)	P9	Mt 25:1-13	Two Virgins (171)

In what follows, we assume that Mark precedes Matthew, but make no assumption about the existence or extent of an earlier “Q” document.

Stylistic Results

We will look first at the larger parables, where there is less danger of false positives. The D results for the those larger parables are as follows:

<i>Mt</i>	<i>P1</i>	<i>P6</i>	<i>P7</i>	<i>P8</i>	<i>P9</i>
<i>P1</i>	~	0·71	0·40	0·32	0·48
<i>P6</i>	0·71	~	0·63	0·66	0·65
<i>P7</i>	0·40	0·63	~	0·46	0·46
<i>P8</i>	0·32	0·66	0·46	~	0·19
<i>P9</i>	0·48	0·65	0·46	0·19	~

¹See Foster **M**. The recent tendency is to see M as an oral rather than a written source. Between a fixed text held in memory and one written down there is no difference in principle.

²For the BIRD test, whose logo appears above, see Brooks **Stylistic**.

Except for P6, the similarity is striking, the more so as they are widely separated in Matthew, and cannot represent consecutive exposition on his part. A possible explanation has been given by Gundry, who suggests that P6 (the Unmerciful Servant) is Matthew’s creative expansion of Luke’s Two Debtors story (Lk 7:41-43).³

How do these parables look in their immediate Matthean context? If they are part of Matthew’s text, and not borrowed from an outside non-Matthean source, we would expect them to differ stylistically from the adjacent material. For P1, the adjoining passages (with prefixed x meaning “the pericope preceding” and suffixed y meaning “the pericope following”), together with the parable itself, are:

xP1 (Mt 13:18-23). Explanation of the Sower (Mt 13:24-30). < Mk 4:10-20
 P1 (Mt 13:24-30). The Tares. ~ Mk 4:26-29⁴
 P1y (Mt 13:31-32). The Mustard Seed. < Mk 4:30-32)

Mt	xP1	P1	P1y
xP1	~	0-48	0-46
P1	0-48	~	0-30
P1y	0-46	0-30	~

P1 does not stand out from, but on the contrary, is stylistically close to, its immediate context. If, as Gundry suggests, all three of these passages are in some way influenced by Mark, their common literary character is not surprising.

We may next take P6 and its neighbors.

xP6 (Mt 18:15-22). Forgiving your Brothers
 P6 (Mt 18:23-35). The Unmerciful Servant
 P6y (Mt 19:1-12). Question on Divorce (~ Mk 10:1-12)

Mt	xP6	P6	P6y
xP6	~	0-53	0-75
P6	0-53	~	0-42
P6y	0-75	0-42	~

Here, P6 is closer to the Mark-related Divorce passage, following, than to the Matthean passage on forgiveness, preceding, even though P6 *illustrates* that passage. Whatever may explain the pattern of these three passages, all in their way dealing with a failure of forgiveness, the point for present purposes is that the supposed “M” passage does not stand out in context, but relates closely to one adjacent passage. This argues against an outside “M” document.

³See Gundry 371, who notes that the parable “contains a full stock of Mattheanisms, in fact almost nothing else.”

⁴Both by position and by subject, this is Matthew’s remake of the difficult Markan Parable of the Seed, which is omitted altogether by Luke.

For P7:

xP7 (Mt 19:16-30). The Rich Young Man (~ Mk 10:17-31)

P7 (**Mt 20:1-16**). The Laborers

P7y (Mt 20:17-28). Request of the Zebedees (~ Mk 10:35-45)

<i>Mt</i>	<i>xP7</i>	<i>P7</i>	<i>P7y</i>
<i>xP7</i>	~	0·48	0·56
<i>P7</i>	0·48	~	0·52
<i>P7y</i>	0·56	0·52	~

Here, P7 is closer to the more thematically related preceding passage. This too would tend to imply consecutive composition, rather than intrusion from an outside text.

For P8:

xP8 (Mt 21:23-27). Question on Authority (~ Mk 27:33)

P8 (**Mt 21:28-32**). The Two Sons

P8y (Mt 21:33-43). The Vineyard (~ Mk 12:1-12)

<i>Mt</i>	<i>xP8</i>	<i>P8</i>	<i>P8y</i>
<i>xP8</i>	~	0·48	0·53
<i>P8</i>	0·48	~	0·58
<i>P8y</i>	0·53	0·58	~

And P8 also relates more closely to the preceding passage, again implying consecutive composition by Matthew.⁵

And for P9:

xP9 (Mt 24:36-51). That Day and Hour (~ Lk 17:26-27 etc)

P9 (**Mt 25:1-13**). The Ten Virgins

P9y (Mt 25:14-30). The Talents (~ Lk 19:12-27)

<i>Mt</i>	<i>xP9</i>	<i>P9</i>	<i>P9y</i>
<i>xP9</i>	~	0·66	0·49
<i>P9</i>	0·66	~	0·60
<i>P9y</i>	0·49	0·60	~

Here it is the two pieces with Lukan counterparts that are stylistically close, not the unique Matthean passage between them. Brooks concludes that the Lukan counterparts are secondary,⁶ in which case the Matthew passages are original to Matthew. What then explains the difference of P9? Gundry suggests that it was “composed with the help of Mark 13:33-37,” in which case, as an expansion of Mark, its difference from original Matthew material is not necessarily surprising.⁷

⁵Gundry finds that the Parable of the Two Sons is Matthew’s drastic remake of the Parable of the Lost Son in Luke. Then all three of these passages have outside origins in known texts, and no recourse to an “M” is required. Thematic similarity will explain the observed similarity.

⁶See Brooks **Acts-Luke** 152 (following Goulder) and the summary, Brooks **Sermon** 173f.

⁷Compare the closeness of the three Mark-derived passages xP1, P1., and P1y, above.

Last, we consider the small parables P2-5, which are below the recommended minimum size for this type of analysis. If we nevertheless apply the BIRD test to them, bearing in mind the greater risk of false positive, we get:

<i>Mt</i>	<i>P2</i>	<i>P3</i>	<i>P4</i>	<i>P5</i>
<i>P2</i>	~	0.20	0.49	0.34
<i>P3</i>	0.20	~	0.52	0.17
<i>P4</i>	0.49	0.52	~	0.55
<i>P5</i>	0.34	0.17	0.55	~

Since these parables are consecutive in Matthew, we might have expected that we would see close stylistic agreement as we move down the long diagonal. Instead, the similarity is between P2 *and the other three*, not between P3/4 or P4/5 in sequence. Stylistically, it is as though P2 was the model on which the others were composed.⁸

Narrative Considerations

Quite apart from style, there are some features of the placement of these parables in Matthew that argue strongly for Matthean composition, rather than adoption of material from an outside text. First, the four small parables are nothing more than variations on a theme (sacrifice the less to gain the greater), a theme defined by the first of them. Second, they are tiny, some only a sentence long, and it is unlikely that they, or the group of four, would be capable of circulating independently. Nor would a group with so obvious a common message be much at home outside their present Matthean context, or one very like it. It would be remarkable if Matthew, casting about for material of this sort, had found in some outside source exactly the thing he needed. Third, the defining first member of the small-parable series, P2, is an expansion of Proverbs 2:1-9. The others have no such Scriptural origin, and simply maintain the pattern set by P2. Scriptural engagement of this sort is a characteristic Matthean trait.

The series comes to an end with the Householder, who “bringeth out of his treasure things new and old.” This perfectly describes Matthew, who takes what he likes from Mark (or Luke), and makes up new what he does not find there. The two together qualify him as “a scribe who hath been made a disciple of the kingdom of Heaven.” The disciples in the story say that they have understood the parables (13:51). Is it not possible that Matthew, who may be describing his own calling as a disciple in 9:9, would number himself among them?

It has been suggested that Mark has written himself into his Gospel, as the young man who was present at the Arrest, and barely escaped arrest himself (Mk 14:51-52); Luke, as included in his enigmatic “we” passages; John, as that privileged eyewitness, the Beloved Disciple. If Matthew were to be a Householder, would he not, on the evidence of the rest of his Gospel, be a rich householder, one with many treasures, from which he might select as occasion required?

⁸For a structural parallel, see Brooks **We** 167f.

Conclusion

All together, the idea of an outside “M” source is not supported by the results of this stylistic investigation. There is too much evidence which instead favors the idea of Matthean composition, in an admittedly complex context of adaptation from both Mark and early Luke. The unique Matthean material at many points shares traits which can convincingly be associated with Matthew himself. The comments of Gundry on several of these passages recommend a more nuanced appreciation of Matthean style, and Matthean literary context, than has previously been the case. We concur.

Works Cited

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