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**Warning Passages in the Synoptic Gospels in
I. Howard Marshall’s, *Kept by the Power of God***

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Howard Marshall’s chapter on the Synoptic Gospels in his book *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* is typically judicious and wise.¹ Nearly fifty years since its first publication, it still stands the test of exegetical rigour. It is not the purpose of the present chapter to discuss it point by point, but to comment on how some of his key assertions may be made today with more sharpness or nuance. To this end I will first briefly summarize his conclusions before outlining three general trends in Gospel scholarship which enable his picture of Gospel warnings to emerge in starker relief, and then use the parables of Jesus as a specific example of how these trends can be seen converging to yield new insight.

Marshall’s Conclusions

The burden of Marshall’s chapter is that the Synoptic Gospels allow no place for Christian complacency. They urge continued

¹ I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany Fellowship, 1974; first, London: Epworth Press, 1969), 51–91.

perseverance rather than guaranteeing it as a foregone conclusion. At the same time, they offer plentiful hope and reassurance of God's protective care for his children. Thus, we might say, they provide the source and basis for a healthy, realistic Christian understanding of salvation.

Marshall asserts that according to the Synoptic Gospels, 'in theory...it is possible to be a disciple and yet to fail to attain to the kingdom when it comes.'² He qualifies this, however, in two ways. First, he makes a distinction between 'nominal' disciples and those who are ready to 'own Jesus as Lord in their hearts, depart from iniquity and do the will of God'.³ Second, he argues that there is no clear evidence from the Synoptics that any disciple in the latter category did actually 'fall away'. Judas may be placed in the 'nominal' category, while Peter's restoration following his denial is promised.⁴

Marshall goes on to make the vital point that the emphasis of the Synoptics is on encouragement to disciples to persevere, rather than self-examination as to whether they are of the elect who are destined to persevere. Rightly, he sees the question of who will persevere (or not) as something regarded by the Gospel writers as 'beyond explanation': the 'mystery of evil', he believes, 'perplexed even Jesus'.⁵ This means that the threat posed by temptations is always to be taken seriously. Also rightly, he balances this by stressing the teaching of Jesus that God will protect those who trust in him.⁶

I believe that proper attention to the witness of the Synoptic Gospels, as Marshall outlines it, will safeguard precisely those features of a Christian disposition which the Reformers and their successors wanted to safeguard when they asserted the irrevocable nature of salvation and the doctrine of the 'final perseverance of the saints'. That is, the Gospel teaching rules out self-satisfaction and urges wholehearted trust in God. Acceptance of any doctrine without thinking through its biblical roots and expression can lead to perversions which end up denying precisely what, in its best form, the doctrine was designed to affirm. In this case, historical examples are

² Marshall, p. 89.

³ Marshall, pp. 89-90.

⁴ Marshall, pp. 87-90; see Luke 22:31-34.

⁵ Marshall, p. 91.

⁶ Marshall, p. 91.

sadly plentiful of Christians either assuming that their ‘saved’ status gives them an excuse for carelessness about how they live, or being so anxious as to whether they really are ‘saved’ that all joy in God’s loving care is dissipated. The Synoptic Gospels help us guard against both dangers.

Let us now stand back from Marshall’s argument in order to highlight certain ways in which his argument might in fact be made more sharply with the benefit of a further half-century of scholarly discussion.

Sharpening Marshall’s Conclusions

1. Historical sensitivity

Marshall was a careful historical critic who put these skills to the service of an evangelical faith. In certain respects, however, we can see with hindsight that he perhaps resolved the tensions between history and faith too easily. This seems to happen in three ways.

First, it is important to say more plainly than Marshall did that first-century texts cannot be expected to give straightforward answers to sixteenth- or seventeenth-century questions. The Synoptic Gospels simply do not speak in the categories of later Reformed theology. The doctrine of the ‘perseverance of the saints’ and other Calvinist tenets are not doctrines that they could or would have formulated. This is not to say that they would necessarily have been opposed to them. It is rather that the language and concerns of post-Reformation debate arose in a different context and with different motivations from those of the Gospels. Further, any Christian movement that seeks to be continually reformed under the direction of Scripture must take with the utmost seriousness the need to heed all of Scripture, including the Gospels, and allow its own categories of thought to be shaped, challenged and where necessary modified accordingly.

The question of how serious historical research on Scripture and its background can and should be incorporated into contemporary theology and Christian practice continues to cause lively debate. For our purposes here, a key issue is how the testimony of the Synoptic Gospels should be brought into conversation with that of the rest of the

New Testament.⁷ Post-Reformation Protestant theology has been shaped more by Paul than the Gospels.⁸ Neither perpetuating this model nor simply reversing it is the answer. Rather, the distinctive witness of each of the New Testament books, and collections, needs to be heard, and careful attempts made to correlate them appropriately without muffling the voice of any.⁹

Second, the distinction between the portrayal of the disciples in the Synoptic Gospels and the reality of early Christianity, especially as shaped under the eye of Paul, needs now to be made more sharply. Here I suggest that we can actually be more openly sanguine than Marshall about the transparency of the Gospels on to the situation in the time of Jesus, but with the corollary that we must be more cautious about assuming easy continuities between that situation and that of the early Church.

Positively, one consequence of the developments in historical and theological sensibilities since the 1960s has been that one can be less concerned than Marshall was to discuss the ‘authenticity’ of certain sayings of Jesus.¹⁰ It is not that scholarship has abandoned concern with the historical Jesus (far from it!), or with applying historical considerations to the exegesis and evaluation of Gospel texts. It is rather that from both the historical and the theological side, questions about ‘authenticity’ are often now seen as the wrong questions. From the historical side, the ‘criteria of authenticity’ developed following Bultmann’s approach to the Gospels in the mid-twentieth century are seen as suspect. The more cautious language of ‘plausibility’ has now replaced ‘authenticity’, reflecting honesty about our inability to establish ‘original’ forms of sayings and stories with certainty.¹¹ The development of the New Testament from original events to oral

⁷ See Derek Tidball, *The Voices of the New Testament: A Conversational Approach to the Message of Good News* (London: IVP, 2016).

⁸ See Tom Wright, *How God became King: Getting to the Heart of the Gospels* (London: SPCK, 2012), especially pp. 6–7; N.T. Wright, ‘Whence and Whither Jesus Studies in the Life of the Church?’ in Nicholas Perrin and Richard Hays, eds, *Jesus, Paul and the People of God: A Theological Dialogue with N.T. Wright* (London: SPCK, 2011), 115–58, especially p. 140.

⁹ Marshall himself modelled such an approach in his *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove, ILL: IVP Academic; Nottingham: Apollos, 2004).

¹⁰ See for instance his discussion of Matthew 18:15-20 in *Kept by the Power of God*, p. 86.

¹¹ See Gerd Theissen and Dagmar Winter, *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus: The Question of Criteria* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox P., 2002); Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne, eds, *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity* (London: T & T Clark, 2012).

tradition to written text to collected canon is now seen as a much more subtle and complex process than previously conceived.¹² Distinctions between that which was spoken and that which was remembered and interpreted are seen as impossible to draw with any precision. From the theological side, what Brevard Childs called the ‘final form’ of the text¹³ is what is often regarded as definitive for theology, rather than any reconstruction of the actual life of the historical Jesus—important though such reconstructions continue to be, in the view of some theologians.¹⁴ To cut short a complex debate, we may say that theological appropriation of Scripture today should retain historical sensitivity while not raising secure historical ‘knowledge’ (as measured by Enlightenment standards) to the level of a requirement for faith. In the case of the Gospels, this means holding being aware that they speak both with the voice of Jesus and with the voice of the early Christians who felt its impact.¹⁵ We cannot easily distinguish these and should hold them in fertile tension.

The corollary, however, is that we must be the more cautious about overlaying a Pauline understanding of Christian existence on the Gospels. Marshall is well aware of the dangers of too close a harmonization of the Gospels and Paul, pointing out that the standard New Testament concept of a Christian as ‘a person who has been baptized into Christ and accepted him as Lord, who has received forgiveness from God through Him, who has been united with Christ by faith in Him, and who has received the gift of the Spirit... would be radically anachronistic of the Gospels.’¹⁶ But the tendency of his chapter is to stress the close continuities between discipleship as portrayed in the Gospels, and the early Church. He can call Luke in support here, since Luke-Acts is clearly meant to be two parts of the same story, and the early Christians are regularly called ‘disciples’ in Acts (as they never are in the Epistles and Revelation).¹⁷ The danger,

¹² See Jens Schröter, *From Jesus to the New Testament: Early Christian Theology and the Origin of the New Testament Canon*, tr. by Wayne Coppins (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013; first published in German, Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2007).

¹³ See Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM P., 1979), 72–77.

¹⁴ See Wright, ‘Whence and Whither?’

¹⁵ The language of ‘impact’ is that of James D.G. Dunn: see especially his *Christianity in the Making, vol. 1: Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

¹⁶ Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, p. 59.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

nonetheless, is that we lose a sense of the historical particularity of Jesus' own time and thereby soften or smooth out the realities of discipleship as the Gospels present them. For instance, does Marshall's comment 'The group of disciples contained those whose profession was not matched by a true conversion' retroject a concept of 'conversion' usually associated with Paul to the pre-resurrection disciples? Is his definition of true disciples of Jesus as those 'who own Jesus as Lord in their hearts' somewhat anachronistic for the time of Jesus himself?¹⁸ It is interesting that Luke himself preserves the sense of difference between the periods before and after the resurrection, as well as continuity between them: he never uses the word 'church' (*ekklēsia*) in his Gospel, but using it twenty-three times in Acts.

The whole argument of the chapter is built on the sound foundation of a discussion of the kingdom of God.¹⁹ As Marshall rightly stresses, the announcement of God's kingly rule is the main burden of Jesus' teaching, and the framework within which the Synoptic Gospels invite us to understand the good news. He is also correct that Jesus' sayings about the kingdom, when taken together, imply that it is both present and future.²⁰ The kingdom of God has not, however, been the framework within which Protestant Christians have generally formulated the gospel announcement, and today this discrepancy needs to be exposed more than it has been.²¹ Thus Marshall's correct assertion that 'the blessings associated with the kingdom are to be regarded as essentially future'²² needs today to be guarded by the observation that these future blessings are not to be equated with a purely spiritual 'heaven' to which Christians can look forward as an escape from the travails of earth.²³ Rather, the Beatitudes, for instance, not only promise future blessing (even blessing 'that may be experienced in part here and now'²⁴) but invite hearers to a fundamental reorientation of their thinking about the present order of the world. Moreover, even in their Matthaean version, but most obviously in the Lukan one, they refer not so much to moral qualities or inward experiences but to social realities:

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 89.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 51-55.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 52-53.

²¹ See T. Wright, *How God became King*.

²² Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, p. 52.

²³ See Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2011).

²⁴ Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, p. 52.

it is not simply the inwardly humble but those whose human lot puts them at a disadvantaged to whom blessing is promised.

The implication of taking seriously the announcement of God's kingdom as the central theme of Jesus' teaching in the Synoptic Gospels is not so much that the grounds of assurance sought by post-Reformation theologians are lacking in these Gospels, but rather that the focus on how to be sure of one's own eternal destination has over-controlled interpretation of the Gospel texts. Although from time to time people ask Jesus 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' (Luke 10:25; 18:18), this is not the starting-point of Jesus' own preaching, which is rather the proclamation of the reign of God as an objective, external reality which is breaking in upon the world. He does of course answer those questions—but here too we note that his answers are notoriously uncomfortable for Protestants who hold fast to the Pauline teaching of salvation by grace through faith.²⁵ Jesus is unambiguous that the way to eternal life is to keep the commandments. This should not be regarded as a counsel of despair, exposing the impossibility of keeping the law,²⁶ but nor should such verses should not be taken as a denial of the divine grace which Marshall rightly sees behind Jesus' message of the kingdom.²⁷ Rather they are an invitation to a more subtle and far-reaching recalibration of the relationship between God's grace and human response in both Judaism and the New Testament.²⁸ 'Grace' and 'effort', 'faith' and 'works' have been too crudely polarized in Protestant thought beyond what the evidence of the New Testament allows, and proper attention to the Synoptic Gospels can help to redress this. This insight only underlines the validity of comments in Marshall's conclusion: 'the only proof offered that faith is real is that it proves itself by endurance to the end'; 'Our perseverance will be seen in the fact that we persevere.'²⁹

Here we have already started to touch on the third way in which Marshall perhaps resolves the tension between history and faith too easily. If Marshall is inclined to underplay the distinction between the

²⁵ Interestingly, these texts do not appear in Marshall's index.

²⁶ Pace Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 38–39.

²⁷ Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, p. 52.

²⁸ Such a recalibration has recently been carried out extensively with reference to Paul: see John M.G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015).

²⁹ Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, pp. 90, 91.

Synoptic witness and that of the rest of the New Testament, he probably also underplays the similarity between Jesus' outlook and that of his Jewish contemporaries. In the wake of the work of E.P. Sanders,³⁰ James Dunn³¹ and others, it now seems too simplistic to say that 'for the Jews, especially for the Rabbis [in contrast to Jesus] the kingdom was to be conceived in terms of human responsibility rather than divine grace'.³² Rather, it seems to be the case that—natural variations in emphasis within Judaism notwithstanding—both Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries shared a strong sense both of the grace of God in initiating the covenant with his people and fulfilling his promises, and of human responsibility to work out the precepts of the covenant in the world.

Jesus inherited a strongly material hope for the kingdom that God was to establish, and we should not neglect the evidence that in essence he shared this. The physical and social dimension of salvation as the Gospel writers conceived it is demonstrated in the characteristic words of Jesus to one he has healed, 'Your faith has saved you' (Mark 5:34; 10:52; Luke 17:19). This is not to deny the ultimate, transcendent and spiritual dimensions of salvation clearly present in the Synoptic Gospels (e.g. Mark 13:13; Luke 7:50; 19:10), as they also were in Judaism, but to insist that the material/spiritual dichotomy which characterizes the modern worldview was not the worldview of Jesus and his Jewish background.

We may also question whether the strong language attributed to Jesus about future judgement is more deeply rooted in Jewish apocalyptic visions than Marshall allows. This is not to argue for its 'inauthenticity', i.e. that in these texts the early Christians fell back into traditional Jewish ways of thinking and/or misunderstood that Jesus was speaking symbolically. Rather it is to point to the evidence that Jesus was steeped in the traditions of his people and should not too readily be assimilated to the Church as if his beliefs and teaching corresponded simply to those of the early Christians. In fact, of course, Paul also speaks plainly of judgement according to works (Romans

³⁰ E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (London: SCM P., 1977).

³¹ James D.G. Dunn, Dunn, James D.G., *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (London: SPCK, 1990).

³² *Ibid.*, p. 52.

2:6–16; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 2 Thessalonians 1:6–10), though modern Christianity tends to de-emphasise this. Nor does the Jewishness of Jesus’ judgement-language mean we should soft-pedal it, or ‘demythologize’ it as Bultmann recommended.³³ On the contrary, it is integral to the texture of our canonical Gospels. Though the imagery must be taken as metaphorical (see further below), the reality must be taken seriously. It can be argued that the lack of frank teaching about God’s judgement and human accountability as given by Jesus has contributed to complacency in those who are confident that they are ‘saved’. As Marshall points out, passages such as Matthew 18 give clear warnings to disciples about the consequences of leading a brother or sister astray, or failing to forgive;³⁴ these cannot easily be evaded by suggesting that those who might fall foul of them ‘were not real disciples in the first place’. This does not mean, however, falling into the opposite extreme of living in constant fear about the future. Jesus would not have that: ‘Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom’ (Luke 12:32). The Gospels, in other words, testify to the fact that Jesus inherited from his Jewish identity, and continued to promote, a lively sense of human accountability to God along with the gracious availability of God and his gifts to all.

The vision of the last judgement in Matthew 25:31–46 is the starkest example of a passage that may seem on the surface to conflict with Pauline teaching but whose emphasis, rooted in Judaism, must not be ignored. Here, far from the ‘righteous’ being able to display a passport named ‘belief’ as an entry ticket to eternal life, the scene reveals that neither they nor the ‘unrighteous’ will know the true significance of actions they have done, or not done, until the last day. Like all the Bible’s pointers to judgement, this is not meant to paralyze us with fear, but on the contrary, fill us with a hopeful sense of the pregnant meaningfulness of all that we do. Who knows under what surprising stranger Christ the King may be hidden?

2. Social sensitivity

The last half-century has seen a huge increase in attention to the social settings of Jesus and the Gospels. To some extent this has filled

³³ See Rudolf Bultmann, ‘New Testament and Mythology’ in Hans-Werner Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma and Myth: Theological Debate*, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (London: SPCK, 1972), 1–44.

³⁴ Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, pp. 82–87.

the gap caused by disillusion with the ‘criteria of authenticity’ or at least with the prospect of anything like certain knowledge concerning the ministry of Jesus or the production of the Gospels. In place of seeking to identify the tradition history behind different sayings and pericopae, many scholars have turned to a more holistic analysis of the Gospels, investigating how they make sense against the social backgrounds which can plausibly be assumed for their subject (Jesus), their writers or both.

The relevance of this for our topic is that it alerts us to the possibility that Jesus’ teaching about God’s kingdom had more immediate social implications than has often been assumed when the reality of the kingdom is too easily assimilated to the reality of salvation understood primarily or exclusively in a ‘spiritual’ and future sense. For example, when Jesus teaches his disciples to pray ‘Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors’ (Matthew 6:12), he may not intend ‘debtors’ purely in the metaphorical sense of ‘those who have offended us’, but be thinking specifically of monetary debt. All the evidence concerning ancient agrarian societies generally, and first-century Palestine specifically, shows that there was generally huge disparity between the wealth of the powerful élites and the majority of the population who lived a subsistence life. Rents and taxes were punitive in their effect, and indebtedness was common. Many scholars see a Jubilee theme in Jesus’ teaching, such that the proclamation of ‘good news to the poor’ and ‘release to the captives’ (Luke 4:18) was not merely an announcement of hope for a (perhaps distant) future, or a message of spiritual comfort for the present, but a call for a radical re-ordering of his society.

Of course, social sensitivity can (in the words I used above) only ‘alert us to the possibility’ of social resonances in particular sayings; it cannot positively identify that they are there, nor what they might be. There is no failsafe way of knowing whether, for instance, Jesus was using ‘debtors’ purely metaphorically, or had a more literal sense in mind. But there is little doubt not only that awareness of social setting sheds great beams of light on many passages, but also that it yields for many scholars a convincing picture of Jesus as a ‘social’ or ‘leadership’ prophet whose prime concern was not individuals’ assurance of ultimate salvation, but the reformation of Israelite society according to

the will of God.³⁵ Similarly, whether or not we find particular social categorizations such as that of the band of close disciples as ‘wandering charismatics’ persuasive,³⁶ reconceiving the disciples as Jews caught up in Jesus’ kingdom-programme, rather than as prototype Christians, can bring a powerful sense of reality into our appropriation of the Gospels.

Such portrayals recognize real continuity between Jesus and those who followed him in his lifetime on the one hand, and the early Church on the other. But their implicit invitation is to take the Gospels’ account of Jesus’ ministry among his contemporaries as being of equal importance to the letters of Paul in the task of deploying the New Testament in the service of theology. As we do so, we underline further the distance between post-Reformation doctrinal concerns and the concerns of the Gospels. In particular, we are challenged to think about God’s kingdom as the this-worldly reality that many Jews expected and that, it seems, Jesus aimed to bring about: not, of course, through violent revolution, and not without a sense of the eschatological and spiritual dimensions, but as a new order in the midst of the old. In that light, the disciples’ task was not to be anxious about their future destiny but to fall in with what God, through Jesus, was doing in the present.

3. Literary sensitivity

A third kind of sensitivity which has developed in new directions since Marshall’s work is literary. Scholars have, of course, always paid attention to notable features of the language and structure of the Gospels. But by the mid twentieth century much of that work was devoted to the ‘archaeological’ analysis of different literary layers in the text, representing different phases of its transmission. There has recently been a helpful refocusing towards the patterns and texture of narrative and rhetoric evident in the text as we have it.

A particular aspect of this literary interest which pertains to our topic is the identification of metaphor and other types of figurative language. We have already mentioned the colourful judgement-language used in the Gospels and inherited from Judaism. The force of

³⁵ See, for instance, N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 2 (London: SPCK, 1996); William R. Herzog II, *Prophet and Teacher: An Introduction to the Historical Jesus* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox P., 2005); Richard Horsley, *The Prophet Jesus and the Renewal of Israel: Moving Beyond a Diversionary Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

³⁶ See Gerd Theissen, *The First Followers of Jesus: A Sociological Analysis of the Earliest Christianity*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM P., 1978).

this should not be missed. ‘Gehenna’ (translated as ‘hell’ in NRSV—e.g. Matthew 5:22; Mark 9:43, 45, 47) refers to the rubbish tip that continually smouldered in the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem. Historically it was the place where child sacrifices, abominable to Yahweh, had been offered; so Jeremiah prophesied that it would be the (appropriate) burial place for those slaughtered in the coming disaster God was threatening to bring upon them (Jeremiah 7:31–34). This is no more the kind of literal ‘hell’ graphically pictured in mediaeval art than Jesus’ words about cutting off one’s hand, foot or eye to avoid sin (and therefore Gehenna) were meant to be taken literally. Whereas these texts, like much of this chapter thus far, heighten Marshall’s points about the Gospels’ challenge to perseverance, they also heighten a converse point, that classic doctrines of hell tend to overplay the biblical witness. Causes of sin and all evildoers will indeed be rooted out of God’s kingdom (Matthew 13:41); judgement is real; but no one need live in fear of a cruel and vengeful God. The very concreteness of the image of ‘Gehenna’, deriving from a particular physical location and historical allusion, should prevent us conceiving of hell in crudely literalistic terms. At the same time it is a reminder of that God’s judgement as it is seen in much of the Old Testament is the outworking of human disobedience and its consequences within history, not beyond it. For Jesus himself, the vision of ultimate judgement was seen through the more immediate lens of Jerusalem’s destruction (Mark 13:1–27).

In this connection we should also mention the ‘eternal punishment’ into which, Jesus says, those who neglect to serve the needy brothers and sisters of Jesus will go (Matthew 25:46). The word ‘eternal’ translates *aiōnion*, which may denote ‘of the age to come’ rather than simply ‘everlasting’. In Judaism the ‘age to come’ was the goal of history; it was ‘eternal’ in that there was no further age to follow; it was the culmination of everything. So ‘eternal punishment’ does not imply continual doses of torture. Rather it means that the judgement of God that ushers in the age to come is final and decisive. Again, imagining ‘everlasting conscious torment’ is arguably to miss the linguistic and literary force of the term. We may also note the admittedly difficult verse Matthew 18:35: ‘So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart’. The ‘so’ relates back to the torturing of the unforgiving slave by the king who had released him from his debt. The very vivid realistic

depictions of contemporary social scenes in Jesus' parables, to which we shall come shortly, should restrain the impulse to transfer their imagery to the sphere of divine action; such might be tantamount to idolatry. Jesus and Matthew do not wish to imply that God acts just like a volatile human tyrant. But they do suggest that the processes of action and consequence that we observe in this world—processes we might, on one level, think of as 'natural'—are reflected, replicated and confirmed in the sphere of God's kingdom. There is a close connection here with 18:18: 'whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' Jesus is speaking of the ultimate significance of our present actions. He removes all cause for complacency, but only a literalistic mind transfers the trappings of human conceptions of sovereignty to the God who is beyond all representation.

Example: The Parables

Study of the parables provides a very good example of how the enhanced historical, social and literary sensitivities that have been applied to the New Testament in the last half-century serve to confirm and clarify Marshall's conclusions about how the warnings of the Synoptic Gospels relate to the idea of the irrevocable nature of salvation.

We may begin with the parable which, along with its interpretation, seems to touch most closely on this theme, the story of the Sower (Mark 4:3–9, 14–20 and parallels). With its portrayal of different responses to God's word, including 'falling away' (v. 17), it appears to suggest the possibility that genuine Christians may indeed 'lose their salvation' under pressure of temptation or persecution. However, awareness of Jesus' historical situation leads us to see any reference to 'Christians' here (genuine or otherwise) as anachronistic. Jesus' hearers were Jews with that mixture of beliefs, practices and hopes that scholars have identified as characterizing their nation and culture in this period under Roman rule. The scholarly debate about the 'authenticity' of the interpretation of the parable is not relevant here. Whether or not Jesus explained the story in just this way immediately after telling it, as implied in the Gospels, the interpretation does not refer to 'Christians' any more than the original parable does: it is concerned with response, by anyone, to the word of God.

The parable's interpretation points to the observable fact that response to God's word lasts for different lengths of time in different individuals. In some, it ceases almost 'immediately' (v. 15); in others, after 'a while' (v. 17); in others, by implication, a while longer (v. 18); in others still, it goes on bearing fruit permanently (v. 20). Jesus is commenting on the levels of visible response to God's teaching. In principle (as far as the parable and its interpretation go) this could come via any means – the Scriptures, the prophets, John the Baptist – but it is natural to see here a primary reference to the word as it comes through Jesus himself. For Jesus, the sure way to tell if the word was bearing fruit in a person was whether that person was, or was not, catching on to his way of life. This did not necessarily imply that a person should literally be in his company all the time.³⁷ It did, however, imply that they were taking his side. The one who was not against him was for him (Mark 9:39) and *vice versa* (Matthew 12:30). Mark's account of different people's concrete response to Jesus as his narrative proceeds gives us examples of the various kinds of response to the word. The people in the Nazareth synagogue seem to have the word snatched away from them before it has had a chance to take root (6:1-6). The rich man seems to be a devoted servant of the word, but his comparable devotion to his money chokes his fruitfulness (10:17-22). Peter denies Jesus under temptation (14:66-72).³⁸

All this further emphasises the strength of Marshall's argument that Mark, and the other Synoptic Evangelists, and Jesus as they represent him, are not interested in the issue of a predetermined destiny from which a person may, or may not fall away. They are interested simply in the observable reality of different degrees of long-term response to God's word.

This is further underlined by observations arising from social and literary sensitivity. For the crowds who heard the story without the benefit of the interpretation, one can readily envisage that it would have evoked primarily the social reality: that peasant farmers would cast their seed around wherever on limited plots of land they might have a chance of raising a crop, and see its varied fortunes. This in turn might suggest to the attentive listener the motif from the Hebrew Scriptures

³⁷ As rightly stated by Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, pp. 57–58.

³⁸ Cf. John Drury, *The Parables in the Gospels* (London: SPCK, 1985), pp. 51-52.

of the fruitfulness of the land as a sign of the blessing of God linked to his people's obedience.³⁹ The parable on its own, therefore (arguably like most of Jesus' parables) is located still further away from doctrinal debates about the saints' perseverance, because it pictures a scene from contemporary life which by itself makes no doctrinal point at all; rather it works by resonance and evocation of the imagination, inviting response at different possible levels—communicating perhaps hope to some, challenge to others. This is also a literary point, for it results in part from the willingness to treat the parable itself as a unit, enter imaginatively into the original moments of communication, and ask how it may have been heard as an oral event.

Two further clarifications arise from careful literary study of the parable and its interpretation. First, the interpretation does not lend the support to a predestinarian view that it might seem to lend at first glance. Preachers have often taken the different soils as representative of different groups of people, with the implied corollary that one cannot help or change one's type of soil. In fact, all the Gospels recount the interpretation in a way which makes the allegory a little less neat than we might like, and highlights human responsibility rather than determinism. Although the seed is identified as 'the word' which falls on different soil (Mark 4:14), the way Mark describes its fate suggests that the people who respond differently are in fact identified as the seed/word that attains a lesser or greater extent of fullness of life and fruitfulness. Note the phrasing: 'these are the ones sown on rocky ground' (v. 16), 'others are those sown among the thorns' (v. 18), 'these are the ones sown on the good soil' (v. 20). This echoes the usage of Scripture, in which God's people are sometimes said to be 'sown' (Jeremiah 31:27–28; Hosea 2:23).⁴⁰ The net effect is to portray hearers of the word not as passive soil which can do little or nothing about its nature to affect the word's growth, but as the growing seed itself, falling in varied territory to be sure, but without that sense of an inevitable fate.

Second, Jesus' words to the disciples about why he speaks in parables (Mark 4:11–12) might also be taken to support a strong predestinarian view. Careful study of these words and of the OT

³⁹ See Stephen I. Wright, *Jesus the Storyteller* (London: SPCK, 2014), pp. 90–94, and literature cited there.

⁴⁰ See *ibid.*, pp. 92–93..

passage they cite, Isaiah 6:9, suggests otherwise. Jesus is not saying that he deliberately uses a certain form of figurative speech in order to puzzle people, so that they may neither understand nor repent. He says that for those ‘outside’ (another simple observational comment about those who in fact do not respond to the message) ‘everything comes in parables’ (v. 11). The phrase ‘everything comes in parables’ (which could possibly be paraphrased ‘everything turns into a riddle’) refers not to Jesus’ kind of rhetoric but to the lack of understanding gained by those who are not willing to hear the word of God. Jesus is remarking on the lack of understanding seen even in his close followers (v. 13). The possibility that they (and thus, in principle, anyone) can, in fact, change and receive understanding is seen in his willingness to give an explanation (vv. 14-20).

The quotation from Isaiah in v. 12, with its introductory ‘in order that’ (*hina*) which has so troubled commentators, must be read as a whole, within quotation marks, so that it functions to underline the prophetic nature of Jesus’ ministry. Just as Isaiah was sent to the people of Israel (Isaiah 6:8), yet warned that the more he spoke to them, the more they would resist his message (Isaiah 6:9-13), so Jesus perceives that the outcome of his ministry for many would, sadly, be a hardening of the heart against God. To read God’s command to Isaiah to ‘Make the mind of this people dull...’ (Isaiah 6:9) as if God’s desire was that they should *not* repent is to miss entirely the force of the Hebrew figure of speech in which the result of Isaiah’s preaching is made to stand for its purpose. It is also to miss the entire thrust of the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophets especially, which call on human beings to take responsibility for their lives and the world rather than sink back in complacency, despair or blame.⁴¹ Jesus did not overturn this thrust but rather pointed to the fact that just the same dynamic was at work when God was speaking to his people through him as had been at work when he was speaking through the prophets.

The parable of the sower, then, along with its interpretation, cannot be used either in support of or in opposition to the doctrine of the final perseverance of the saints. It was told to Jewish people as a reflection on the mixed response to the proclamation of God’s word by his messengers and especially by the teller himself, the first-century Jewish

⁴¹ For a clear expression of this see Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God’s Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2015), *passim* but epitomized well on p. 248.

prophet Jesus. It deals with observable responses, not eternal destinies. It is a part of Jesus' call to his hearers to allow God's word to bear fruit in their lives so that their nation would be transformed, not a strategy for confirming people in either self-assurance or gloomy fatalism.

Some of the same points, essentially, may be made with reference to other parables. Historically, they are set in the time of Jesus, and addressed to various audiences among his contemporaries. These may or may not be labelled 'disciples', but as we have seen, discipleship was a broad category which did not straightforwardly equate with post-Reformation or even Pauline understandings of being a Christian. The burden of proof must lie with those who would argue that their primary reference lies in a sphere detached from the Judaism of the time, which Jesus longed to see re-oriented towards its Lord. For Jesus, judgement meant primarily the acts of God in history through which he displayed his just displeasure with those—including members of the covenant people—who neglected God's ways and elevated themselves and their own standards in his place. Like Isaiah, Jeremiah and the other great prophets, he warned his people of the consequences of their behaviour, and sought reformation. To be sure, he used cosmic language which both invested the coming historical disasters for Judaism with ultimate meaning⁴² and enabled subsequent generations to envisage the universal scope of God's judgement (Mark 13:24-27). But as Marshall makes plain, the practical result of this is the call to endurance 'to the end' (Mark 13:13) and to keep perpetual watch (Mark 13:32-37). There is no blanket assurance that can be obtained without persevering vigilance.

Socially, the parables have been shown to reflect closely situations and relationships that would have been familiar in Jesus' time.⁴³ This only sharpens the awareness that had grown in parable scholarship from the work of Adolf Jülicher⁴⁴ in the late nineteenth century onwards that the detailed allegorical interpretations of parables popular in early times were not on the whole convincing as accounts of Jesus' own historical intention, whatever their literary merit or Christological

⁴² See G.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, new edn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 243–71; N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, pp. 360–5.

⁴³ See, e.g., William B. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994); S.I. Wright, *Jesus the Storyteller*.

⁴⁴ Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesus*, 2 vols, 2nd edn (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1910 [1886, 1898, 1899]).

suggestiveness. The more one can see that events such as unfold in (for instance) the story of the father and two sons in Luke 15:11–32, or that of the manager, his master and his master’s debtors in Luke 16:1-9, form a narrative that can be located credibly in Jesus’ social world, the less simple moralistic or theological readings seem to satisfy.

These points come together when the parables are taken seriously as a literary genre—particularly, as I have argued elsewhere, when we give due attention to the narrative form which many possess.⁴⁵ They are indeed woven into contexts in the Gospels which help us to make sense of them. But they are distinct literary gems within those contexts, surely reflecting an oral original designed to provoke their hearers to deep thought and transformation, not reveal secret or authoritative knowledge. They aim for emotional involvement and volitional change. Their language reflects social reality and has all kinds of resonances within that reality, with implications for the mental re-ordering of hearers’ worlds, and action that follows.

Thus, for example, the story of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:23–35) is a realistic tale of the peremptory justice from a ruler which may face a person who refuses to make the connection between forgiveness received and forgiveness given, even on the this-worldly level. The situations of indebtedness pictured here, though the contrast is no doubt dramatized for effect, reflect the economic facts of the first century. The story ends with a universal application in v. 35 (on which see above), and Matthew places it in his chapter concerning relationships within Jesus’ new community. But it is a category mistake to see in the story’s conclusion something that should keep followers of Jesus living in terror lest they, having experienced forgiveness, should then lose it altogether in a moment of madness. Jesus was not talking about ‘Christians’ ‘falling away’ from ‘ultimate salvation’. He was talking about the kind of disaster in this world that follows neglect of the fundamental principle ‘whatever you wish that people would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets’ (Matthew 7:12).

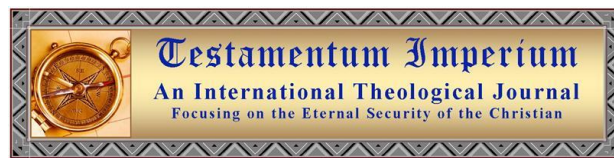
Something similar may be said of other judgement-scenes in parables, such as the story of the man without a wedding garment (Matthew 22:11-14), appended to that of the prince’s wedding banquet (Matthew 22:1-10), or those of the wise and foolish virgins (Matthew

⁴⁵ S.I. Wright, *Jesus the Storyteller*, *passim*.

25:1–13) or the talents (Matthew 25:14–30). Rather than a reading which remains closely allegorical and is thus faced with the awkwardness of pictures which seem to show ‘Christians’ being condemned because they are improperly prepared or have failed to use the gifts entrusted to them, it is better to see these as exposés of the tyrannical power of the rulers, entailing a warning to any and all or Jesus’ hearers not to be respond to the admittedly oppressive regime with rebellion. This will lead to physical, historical disaster (as indeed it did), even if Matthew records the stories with the eschatologically significant terminology of darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth (24:13; 25:30)⁴⁶ and in the eschatologically charged context of Jesus’ final teaching before his death.

Conclusion

Much more could be said about the warning passages in the Synoptic Gospels. I trust that enough has been said here to support Marshall’s key conclusions that they justify neither the complacency nor the anxiety which twisted doctrines of assurance may inculcate, but rather encourage a healthy, trusting watchfulness. The developments in historical, sociological and literary scholarship on the New Testament since Marshall’s book appeared yield fresh and sharper perspectives on some of the issues he raises, but do not undermine his key thesis. It is a testimony to his own stature as a scholar and the lasting value of his work.



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⁴⁶ For fuller explanations of these readings, and analogous readings of other parables, see Wright, *Jesus the Storyteller*, pp. 61–172.