

SYMBOLISM IN THE PARABLE OF THE WILLING AND UNWILLING TWO SONS IN MATTHEW 21

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Deeply valuable symbolism is thoroughly embedded in two of Jesus' parables, both of which begin, "A certain man had two sons." The more famous of these two is commonly called parable of the prodigal son, found in Luke 15. The less often mentioned can be called the parable of the willing and unwilling two sons, found in Matthew 21. Even people who have written much and taught profoundly about the parables of Jesus have rarely had much to say about this brief text, which is nevertheless freighted with significantly authoritative cargo. In explicating this lesser-known of the two-sons parables, I hope to honor and recognize Robert L. Millet for his consummate willingness to do the will of the Father and to go down this day to work in his vineyard, wherever the needs may be found.

READING THE PARABLES OF JESUS

In approaching this or any other parable of Jesus, as Bob has elegantly and cogently written, one needs to be alert to the fact that every communication may contain several symbols that convey, intentionally or unintentionally, multiple levels of meaning: "Some of the messages are crystal clear, while

others are intentionally veiled,” depending on “the openness and spiritual receptivity of the listeners.” Furthermore, “a parable can have many applications.”¹ Each element in the parables of Jesus works as an analog, as one thing representing, or “re-presenting,” something else. Indeed, all art (whether visual or verbal) can be seen as analog, for without analogy, one has artifacts or artifice but not art.

With numerous possible applications to choose from, readers must selectively decide how to interpret what they see in a parable.² But at the same time, some readings will always be stronger than others. A strong reading is grounded in close attention to details. The more one can see the interlacing and reinforcing textures of symbolism at work in a parable, a painting, or any other work of meaningful communication, the stronger the reading. Moreover, strong readings make use of all the elements, not just a few selected elements, in the text or work being interpreted. Furthermore, strong readings explain or ameliorate elements that otherwise appear as if they do not fit with the rest of the parable. In addition, strong readings must not stretch the symbolism in a text so far as to thin out its texture.

As I have discussed elsewhere in connection with the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10,³ Jesus’ parables have long been profitably read as comprising bundles of extended symbolic messages.⁴ Thus, for example, second-century Christian readers and exegetes linked “the man going down” and his “falling among robbers” with Adam and the Fall in Genesis; the robbers were seen as symbolizing the minions of Satan; and the Samaritan was interpreted as a reference by Jesus Christ to himself as the one who rescues. Many things help make this early Christian understanding of the parable of the good Samaritan plausible, elegant, and instructive. Indeed, this two-level reading allows that Jesus marvelously answered both of the questions raised by his interlocutory lawyer—not only the more definitional question, “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29), but also the lawyer’s more seminal initial inquiry, “Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25).

To my mind, all of Jesus’ parables are to be read at multiple levels. Indeed, Jesus was remembered as having purposefully intended his parables to be seen at least at two levels. One level was for ordinary listeners, who might be edified by the publicly accessible, straightforward narrative value of the story; the other was only for those with eyes to see and ears to hear

(Matthew 13:11, 16),⁵ and to them Jesus may frequently have unfolded or discussed his deeper meanings in private conversations (as he did in Matthew 13:19–23, 36–43; 19:10–11). Indeed, Joseph Smith taught that the hidden meanings of all the parables were “plainly elucidated” by Jesus to his disciples.⁶ These symbolical readings do not diminish or supplant ordinary, plain, practical readings of the parables. Indeed, multiple readings enrich and magnify these extraordinary texts.

Amplifying and extending these two levels of reading, Christian interpreters, especially in the Middle Ages, saw in all biblical texts four levels of meaning:

1. The literal, factual, historical, or cultural. This approach focuses on explaining what happened in the story, either actually or fictively. The domain of this objective approach is the “is,” and it limits itself to a close reading of the text itself.

2. The moral or ethical. Often, the telling of a story or the projection of a symbol is intentionally laden with moral overtones. In response to favorable portrayals, readers or viewers should go and do likewise, whereas unfavorable conduct embedded in negative depictions is to be eschewed. The domain of this social approach is the “ought,” and it adds to the discussion the implications of cultural mores and expectations.

3. The allegorical. Here, figures and scenarios are laid for purposes of comparison beside other figures, groups, or developments. Sometimes these paralleling referents are transparent and obvious; other times, and for various reasons, the allegorical counterparts are more obscure and esoterically coded. Although some have discounted the allegorical nature of the parables of Jesus,⁷ the roots of the allegorical mode of interpretation reach deeply into the earliest Hebrew and Christian literature; it was commonly used at least from the times of Jesus (who often spoke of such things as the brazen serpent⁸ or the sign of Jonah⁹ as analogies of himself) and Philo (20 BC–AD 50),¹⁰ as well as in the writings of Irenaeus (c. AD 140–c. 202), Clement of Alexandria (death c. AD 215), and onwards. Although some allegories can be drawn between events in heaven and events on earth, more often allegories are located between two characters or characteristics found in this world, such as the allegorical juxtaposition of a seed to faith or a fisherman to a missionary. The domain of this comparative

approach is typically the “horizontal,” and it thrives on comparative and analogical reasoning.

4. The anagogical. When an allegory or parable leads the mind and the soul upward, projecting worldly events, human relations, and natural purposes onto a higher metaphysical or celestial level, the linkage is anagogical. Sometimes called mystical, spiritual, or doctrinal, the anagogical reading highlights heavenly things and especially draws connections between patterns in this life and truths pertaining to the life beyond this mortal realm. The domain of this elevating approach is the “vertical.” It is open to impressions that transcend the strict or obvious meaning of the text. These subtle meanings or double entendres are invited by the elevated spiritual vantage point from which Jesus spoke.

These four modes of reading may be seen as basic elements of the world of traditional scriptural interpretation.¹¹ In these four, one might see a reflection of a four-square approach to the gospel: the physical, social, intellectual, and spiritual (see Luke 2:52). Indeed, it always helps to read the parables of Jesus not only historically and practically but also symbolically and sublimely.

In addition, one further tool was given to the Church by the Prophet Joseph Smith. Speaking about the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son in Luke 15, on Sunday, January 23, 1843, Joseph taught: “I have a Key by which I understand the scriptures—I enquire what was the question which drew out the answer?”¹² As will be seen, these four modes of reading and especially Joseph’s key unlock the meaning of the parable of the certain man who had two sons in Matthew 21:28–31.

THE SETTING OF THE PARABLE OF THE WILLING AND UNWILLING TWO SONS

With these general thoughts as guiding principles, consider first the setting of this short parable, which comes at a crucial moment in Matthew’s Gospel narrative. Immediately after Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, he went straight to the temple, knocked over the tables of the overreaching merchants and money changers, miraculously healed the blind and the lame, and was heralded by children (21:12–16). At the end of that momentous

day, after spending the night with friends in the nearby village of Bethany, he returned the next morning to the temple (21:17, 23). There he was accosted by the chief priests and the elders of the people, who challenged him, demanding to know, “By what authority doest thou these things?” and “Who gave thee this authority?” (21:23).

As he usually did, Jesus answered their affront with a question of his own: “The baptism of John [the Baptist], whence was it?” he asked. Was it “from heaven, or of men?” (21:25). When they were unwilling to respond, Jesus used this as an opportunity to address the fundamental issue of authority. Although he declined to say directly by what authority he did these things (see 21:27), he immediately¹³ went on to answer their question indirectly by giving this trenchant parable about two sons—one of whom ultimately was willing and the other not.

This was Jesus’ first teaching in the temple after his triumphal entry, and this short parable effectively took this crucial question of authority all the way back to fundamental principles, not only to the current unwillingness (or inability) of the chief priests to answer the question about the source of John’s authority but also beyond that to things pertaining to the foundation of the world relevant to the source of Jesus’ and all true authority. At a deep level, this parable calls to mind a particular dichotomy of enduring eternal character and consequence.

According to the King James Version, Jesus said: “But what think ye? A *certain* man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to day in my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went. And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I *go*, sir: and went not. Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, The first” (Matthew 21:28–31).

OBJECTIVE ELEMENTS IN THE PARABLE

Several significant factual or cultural points are embedded in this instructive story. At the literal, factual level, this is a story of a man. The first word in this parable is *anthrōpos* (21:28), a man. This also is the first word in the parables of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30) and the prodigal son (Luke 15:11). From the words of this story, all one knows is that this man

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was a father of two sons, that he had a vineyard or orchard (*ampelôn*, the word may mean either), and that he needed someone to go down to work immediately in that vineyard.

The work was needed *sēmeron*, “today, this day.” Perhaps it was harvest time or planting time; either way, the need was rather urgent.

The two sons are referred to as the father’s *tekna*, his own immediate offspring (not slaves or servants); although referred to with this term of endearment, which is often used in speaking of young children, these sons¹⁴ must be old enough and mature enough to do this work. For some unstated reason, the father was either unable to hire other workers or did not want to entrust this work to slaves or dayworkers. He needed one of his own sons to go down and do this work.

From these straightforward facts, the message speaks in everyday terms: In such a case, Galilean society would have expected sons to drop whatever they were planning to do that day and go and help their dear, perhaps somewhat elderly, father in his time of need. This story “expects that listeners should pronounce judgment upon the son who did not obey,” for children in this world were “expected to honour [their] parents.”¹⁵ One son eventually does this; the other does not.

All this is well and good, but it is clear from the context that Jesus was not giving the chief priests and the venerable men of the city a cultural commentary about family relations. As he was being challenged there in the temple by the highest authorities in Jerusalem about his own authority, this was not the time for him to deliver a homely description of family behaviors.

MORAL PRINCIPLES IN THE PARABLE

At the broader ethical level, this parable gives helpful domestic guidance to all sons and daughters on how they ought to behave. In happy families everywhere, it is ethically good for children to decide, in the end, to go and do what their parents have reasonably asked them to do; and it is always a problem for children to promise that they will do something they have been asked to do but then, for whatever reason, leave their parents disappointed. But again, this is hardly the time for Jesus to offer an object lesson

about filial duties. I disagree that “this is little more than an expanded proverb” employed as a “parable of judgment.”¹⁶

In addition, at the moral level, the parable might also be understood as simply teaching the general point that “it is never too late to make a decision and to act upon it.”¹⁷ And indeed, this parable may well have been originally used by Jesus in this context, or it was eventually placed in this setting in Matthew 21, for the purpose of suggesting that Jesus wanted to persuade the chief priests and the Pharisees that it was still not too late for them to change their opinions and behavior toward him. This view has been embraced by several commentators¹⁸ because at the end of verse 31 Jesus indicted his challengers, saying that the publicans and harlots would enter the kingdom of God before they would because the publicans and harlots believed John the Baptist but the chief priests and elders did not. And at the level of moral persuasion, this parable serves very well in this regard. But it seems to me that more must be involved here. If that was all that was intended by Jesus, a simpler story involving only one son who at first disregarded his father’s wishes but then changed his mind might have been sufficient and more appropriate in showing that those sinners had ultimately done the right thing by repenting and following John. And without a further point of reference in connection with the dual story, the chief priests and elders would well have been left puzzling when they had not done what they had specifically said they would do? When had they said they would follow John but then did not do so?

ALLEGORICAL READINGS OF THIS PARABLE

Thinking allegorically, this parable offers other interpretive outcomes. The vineyard (*ampelōn*) is a favorite and common symbol for how God sees humankind: either representing the people of Israel (as in Isaiah’s parable of the vineyard in Isaiah 5)¹⁹ or the whole world (as in Zenos’s parable of that olive tree that stood in a large vineyard or orchard in Jacob 5). Because of this symbolic element, it is often suggested that this parable should be read nationally, as a statement about God’s two ethnic sons, so to speak, the Israelites and the Gentiles: one of the sons (Israel) said (and covenanted) that he would do what God wanted but then did not, while the other (the Gentiles, or the

publicans and the harlots) said he would not go, but reconsidered and did go. Consistent with this allegorical reading, it is clear that Jesus intended the chief priests and elders to see themselves and their own failure to do the will of the Father in this little parable, as Jesus concluded this part of his conversation with them by saying, “Verily I say unto you, that the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you” (Matthew 21:31), and by extension this point of judgment would fall upon anyone else who had rejected John.

But, while this allegorical reading emphasizes the way in which this little parable silenced Jesus’ critics, it does not really answer either of the two questions they had asked him about his authority, and so this collective or national allegorical reading—useful though it certainly is in Matthew’s rhetorical agenda—still leaves us wanting more. In fact, logically, the comparative failure of the Jewish leaders to do the will of God has nothing to do with Jesus’ authoritative empowerment to do or to say all the things he was teaching and doing. Indeed, when the chief priests and elders refused to answer Jesus’ question about the origins of John the Baptist’s admittedly lesser authority than Jesus’ asserted Melchizedek authority (Psalm 110:1–4), Jesus at first said to them, “Neither tell I you *by what authority* I do these things” (21:27; emphasis added), thereby setting aside the first of the chief priests’ two questions. But when he went on to tell the ensuing parable of the two sons, he answered in effect their second question: “*Who gave thee* this authority?” As mentioned above, Joseph Smith taught that readers should pay close attention to “the question which drew out the answer.”²⁰ In this case, that question was the source of Jesus’ authority, and ultimately that is the question the parable particularly answers.²¹

READING THE PARABLE ANAGOGICALLY

With the foregoing in mind, I suggest that readers might most meaningfully look at this parable through a spiritual or anagogical lens. Here one finds a strong reading of this text, conceptually engaging all of its elements. Indeed, most potently, this parable takes the question of authority into divine realms. Anagogically involved here is no ordinary father, no ordinary vineyard, and no ordinary pair of sons. An attentive reader can see in Jesus’ answer a number of elevated doctrinal points about the nature

of authority received from God in general and about Jesus' authority in specific. Consider the following:

The two sons were asked by their father. In the end it becomes clear that this father is not just their father, but God the Father.²² The King James Version chose to supplement the text by inserting the word *his* in italics, when Jesus asks, "Whether of them twain did the will of *his* father?" (21:31). Nevertheless, the Greek reads, "Which of the two did the will of *the* father (*epoiēsen to thelēma tou patros*)?" (emphasis added). While it is possible that the definite article here (*to*) can simply be understood as taking "the place of an unemphatic possessive pronoun when there is no doubt as to the possessor,"²³ which would allow the KJV rendition "*his* father" as a legitimate translation, Jesus' wording here echoes the Greek wording found in Matthew 7:21 regarding the one who enters the kingdom of heaven, namely he "who does the will of the Father of mine who is in heaven" (*ho poiōn to thelēma tou patros mou tou en tois ouranois*). Thus the use of the definite article in the question, "which did the will of *the* father" at least invites an analogical reflection, seeing the father and willing son in this parable as representing Jesus and his Father in Heaven.²⁴ The sons were thus called to serve by and with authority directly from the divine principal whom they would serve. Those with authority do not take that authority upon themselves but are "called of God, as was Aaron" (Hebrews 5:4).

These two sons were both offered their commission to "go" by way of commandment from the Father. This invitation came, not as a polite request, but as an imperative, literally, "go [*age*] down [*hyp-*]" (*hypage*, Matthew 21:28; the father said the same to the second son in 21:30). While the word *hypage* can have a number of meanings, including to "go away," "withdraw," "depart," "go forward," or simply to "go,"²⁵ its sense always depends on the context in which it is used. Here, if the setting is in the father's house, the sons are being asked to leave the comforts of home and go work in the fields; if the setting is in the father's mansion on a hill, or in heaven, then the sons will be going down from there. In any case, the prefix *hyp-* (from the preposition *hypo*, under) in composition conveys some sense of being "under, as well of rest as of motion," or, interestingly, "of the agency or influence under which a thing is done, to express subjection or subordination."²⁶ Moreover, in being asked to go, the two sons were

told when and where they were to serve—today, and in the vineyard—so their authority was specific. Those with specific authority do not have the option of selecting another time or place. They can either respond with a yes or a no, but they cannot modify the father’s request.

To carry out their assignment with authority they need to be in tune with the will of the one who has sent them. Those having divine authority may need to repent or change their attitude in order to accommodate themselves to do what God wants, not what they might want.

Beyond these important points about the nature of authority and legal agency, this parable draws its listeners back to the heavenly realms where Jesus and all the holy apostles and prophets—including John the Baptist—were called and foreordained to hold the priesthood of God. In so doing, this story calls to mind events in the Council in Heaven, where a Father indeed had two very different sons and where Jesus received his commission and authority from the Father. In fact, the Father’s command to his first son, “go *down*” (*hypage*), which says more than just “go,” as in the KJV, and thus invites the listener to understand this dialogue as having transpired somewhere above.

These heavenly, primeval overtones are a bit more evident in the Greek text of Matthew than in the Latin Vulgate or in the English of the King James Version or other translations. The most widely supported Greek texts literally read as follows: “A man had two sons, and going to the first he said, ‘Go down this day to work in the vineyard.’ He answered, ‘Not as I will,’ but then reconciling himself to the task he went. Going to the other, he [the Father] said the same. And he answering said, ‘I, Lord!’ And he did not go.”²⁷ The differences between this rendition of the Greek and the usual English translations of this text—which is clearly much more than a fable—may be explicated as follows:

In the Greek, it is more evident that Jesus is casting himself as the first of these two sons. In most manuscripts, at the end of the story in verse 31, he is called “the first” (*ho prōtos*).²⁸ Just as he was the Firstborn, this son was the first son that the Father approached. In some other early manuscripts, he is called “the last” (*ho eschatos*), apparently because in the narrator’s mind that son is the farthest back in the story. Being called “the first” and “the last” evokes Isaiah 44:6; 48:12; Revelation 1:17; and 22:13: “I am the first,

and I am the last.” Either way, this submissive, obedient son is the one who does the will of his Father. I will simply call him “the first.”

Indeed, the first son initially answered the Father’s request by saying, “*Ou thelō*,” which the KJV translates as “I *will* not” (emphasis added). But *thelō* is not a future-tense verb. It does not mean “I *will* not, or *shall* not.” *Ou thelō* is a present-tense verb, meaning “I don’t want to,” or “I don’t wish to,” or “I’d rather not,” or, idiomatically, “Not (*ou*) [what or as] I will (*thelō*).” In Elizabethan English, “I will not” could mean “I do not will it,” as does the Latin *nolo*, but this is not how modern readers hear this crucial word.²⁹ Doing the Father’s will (*thelēma*—which is the noun cognate to the verb *thelō*) is a central theme in the Gospel of Matthew leading up to Christ’s teaching in this parable and immediately beyond (see Matthew 6:10; 7:21; 12:50; 18:14; 26:42). In Gethsemane, as the Savior reconciled and submitted himself to the will of the Father, he said, “not my will [*mē to thelēma mou*] but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42).³⁰ These words in Matthew 21:29 take on an elevated meaning when the “first son” is taken as referring to Jesus himself.

The two sons were commanded by the Father to go down “this day” to do what the Father wanted to have done at the time when that work was needed below. Timing was important for the coming of Christ. Many things had been put in place for the Son of God to appear in the flesh at the promised and prophesied time, and people in Jerusalem were counting down the days and years for the fulfillment of the prophecy given in the book of Daniel, to say nothing of the prophecies given in the Book of Mormon. As mentioned above, to Jesus and his listeners, the vineyard was a potent symbol of the house of Israel (see Isaiah 5:1–7).

The first son “goes *away*” or “departs *from*” (*apēlthen*) the Father’s presence. This verb is translated simply as “went” in the KJV in Matthew 21:29, 30. This word, along with the Father’s command, “go *down*” (*hypage*),³¹ may call to mind the condescension or incarnation of Jesus leaving his Father’s presence. These words were used by Jesus himself in referring to his own going away or departure, as a euphemism for his impending death and descent into the spirit prison: “Then said the Jews, Will he kill himself? because he saith, Whither I go (*hypagō*), ye cannot come” (John 8:22); “It is expedient for you that I go away (*apelthō*)” (John 16:7). Indeed, speaking

prophetically of his death in the longer and immediately following parable of the vineyard and the wicked tenants at the end of Matthew 21, Jesus clearly referred to himself as the son of a landowner in a faraway country who planted a vineyard and sent his servants, whom the tenants beat and killed; and when he sent his own son, they cast him out and killed him too (see Matthew 21:33–41). In hearing that parable, the chief priests and the Pharisees “perceived that [Jesus] spake of them” and their desire to kill him (21:45). With a little further reflection, they may also have perceived that Jesus had spoken of himself as the first son in the immediately preceding parable of the willing and unwilling two sons.

The onerous burden of the work asked by the Father seems to have given even the ultimately submissive first son ample reason for pause. Perhaps this son knew when he was asked to go down that there were or would be wicked tenants in the vineyard who had or would have already killed the two sets of servants sent by the landowner-father, and now in desperation the father needed a son to send. No wonder even that first son might need to think things over a bit. At this point in Matthew 21:29, the KJV reads, “but afterward he *repented*” (emphasis added), which might seem unbecoming of the Savior. But the idea that the first son repented of some sin (an idea which is implicit in *paenitentia*, the Latin word used at this point in the Vulgate) is actually not necessarily implied in the little parable. The Greek word used here is not the ordinary verb used to mean “repent” (*metanoō*),³² but rather *metamelomai*, which does not primarily mean “to repent.” In the Septuagint and in Koine Greek, with rare exception, it always means to feel sad about something or to change one’s mind;³³ in Classical Greek it means to regret, or to change one’s purpose or line of conduct; or, as one might say, to reconcile oneself to the task of serving a difficult part in a larger plan. Viewed objectively or ethically, a son might need to change his mind and decide to obey his father’s command. And seen allegorically, the Jewish leaders, unlike the first son, had not felt any need to adjust their preferences or change their minds (*oude metamelēthēte*), let alone repent, as even the publicans and harlots had done when they saw John the Baptist “in the way of righteousness” (21:32). But ultimately and anagogically, the willingness of the first son to submit to the Father’s will is an understandable and appropriate reaction—just as the First Son

contemplated shouldering his daunting assignment and aligned his own will with that of the Father.

At the same time, there was another son. Most manuscripts call him “the other” (*ho heteros*),³⁴ while some call him “the second (*ho deuterios*).”³⁵ This son stood in utter contrast to the first, as in the expression “on the one hand, or on the other hand.” He is more than numerically second; he also stands in contradistinction, being the “other,” being of another mind or having some other purpose. He was eager at first, but in the end he would not serve his father.

Significantly, when this other son answered, he did not actually say, “I go, Lord,” as the KJV reads, following the Vulgate, which uses the words “*eō* [I go], *domine*.” The word “go,” however, is italicized in the KJV because it is actually not present in the strongest Greek manuscripts. Except in a few NT manuscripts,³⁶ the other son simply says *egō, kurie*, “I, Lord.” In ordinary parlance, this might sound something like “Yes, sir.” But in an analogical mode, the pronoun *egō* adds connected significance. For this second son, it seems that it was all about ego. This is the first word he says. He seems caught up with the fact that *he* had been called. In this context, what does this word *egō* entail? “I *what?* Lord.” “I *will gladly go?*” “OK, I *will [grudgingly] go?*” or “I *get to go?*” “I *have been chosen!?*” “I will do it;” “I *want the glory!* Lord.”³⁷ All of these are possibilities. Moreover, the second and only other word (*kurie*) in his reply to his father a bit stiffly calls his own father “Lord,” which may well convey an underlying sentiment that for that son this matter was not primarily about close personal love or filial devotion.³⁸ For whatever reason, that son did not go. He was called but not chosen.

If the first son is identifiable as Jesus, the second son in this parable can be understood as Lucifer, his brother. For Latter-day Saints, this calls to mind the familiar scene in the Council in Heaven in which Jesus was given his commission and authority from the Father.³⁹ While not exactly the same as in this parable, certain similarities are unmistakable. On that occasion the Father asked, “Whom shall I send?” (Abraham 3:27). In the texts we have, Lucifer then responded with a barrage of six first-person pronouns, “Here am *I*, send *me*” (Abraham 3:27; Moses 4:1; emphasis added), adding, “*I* will be thy son, . . . *I* will redeem all mankind . . . ; surely *I* will do it; wherefore give *me* thine honor” (Moses 4:1; emphasis added). Jesus,

however, simply “answered like unto the Son of Man: Here am I, send me” (Abraham 3:27), adding, “Father, *thy* will be done” (Moses 4:2; emphasis added). These two responses typify the contrast between the course of self-interested unrighteousness and the way of submissive righteousness in answering a call from God. Because Lucifer sought to usurp God’s own honor, glory, power, and authority, he was cast down (Moses 4:3) and, as in Jesus’ parable to the Jewish leaders, Lucifer did not go. Whether he was not allowed to go or took himself out of the running, the outcome was the same. In either case, it is interesting to note that the Father was apparently open to sending either (or perhaps, in some way, both), if they would be willing to be his agents and to do his will within the scope of the authority and assignment given to them.

Whether or not the chief priests and elders had any knowledge from traditional sources about the heavenly council in which the eternal plan was established from the foundation of the world,⁴⁰ that primal event would have been well known to the Savior and perhaps to his disciples and others of his contemporaries. Indeed, the Apostle John knew and testified that the power and authority of Jesus came from the premortal world, where Jesus obtained his right to rule on this earth, not to do his own will, but to do the will of the Father. The authority of Jesus was traceable back to “the beginning” (John 1:1); his judgment was just because he sought “the will of the Father” who had sent him (John 5:30). Jesus taught openly, “For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me” (John 6:38), and at the Last Supper, only a few days after his triumphal entry in to Jerusalem and his confrontation with the chief priests and elders in the temple, Jesus affirmed to his disciples, “I am in the Father, and the Father [is] in me. . . . the words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but [of] the Father” (John 14:10). “I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me” (John 17:8). So, it would not have been out of character or out of season if Jesus had taken his disciples aside as they returned to Bethany after that day in the temple, at the beginning of the Holy Week, to remind them of the source of his authority and explain this meaning of this parable of the willing and unwilling two sons. But, in any event, this parable clearly answered the question, “Who gave thee this authority?” (namely, God the Father); and it even hints at when

and where that happened (namely, in the divine council, where two sons were involved).

In the end, whatever the chief priests and elders knew about the traditional teachings of God's heavenly council, or whether they could have surmised the implications of the dichotomous two-sons typology that permeates much of scripture,⁴¹ they did not have ears to hear on this occasion. Unlike the meek and obedient Son of Man and too much like the second son in the parable, they refused to accept God's emissaries and do the will of the Father. Thinking too much of their own self-interests, they failed to learn this eternal lesson—that when people seek unrighteous dominion, the heavens withdraw, and “amen to the . . . authority of that man” (D&C 121:37). Having challenged Jesus' authority, the chief priests and elders found their own authority challenged. As always, true authority can only be maintained by virtue of humility, long-suffering, kindness, and love unfeigned, exercised for the glory and honor of the Father, as exemplified by his First and eternally willing Son.

NOTES

1. Robert L. Millet and James C. Christensen, *Parables and Other Teaching Stories* (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, 1999), 7. Concurring, Arland J. Hultgren, “Interpreting the Parables of Jesus: Giving Voice to Their Theological Significance,” in *Hermeneutic der Gleichnisse Jesu: Methodische Neuansätze zum Verstehen urchristlicher Parabeltexte*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 639–40.
2. See, generally, Ruben Zimmermann and Gabi Kern, eds., *Hermeneutik der Gleichnisse Jesu* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008); Stefan Nordgaard Svendsen, *Allegory Transformed: The Appropriation of Philonic Hermeneutics in the Letter of the Hebrews* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009).
3. John W. Welch, “The Good Samaritan: A Type and Shadow of the Plan of Salvation,” *BYU Studies* 38, no. 2 (1999): 50–115, and also “Parable of the Good Samaritan,” *Ensign*, February 2007, 40–47, and *Liabona*, February 2007, 26–33.
4. Kurt Erlemann, “Allegorie, Allegorese, Allegorisierung,” in Zimmermann and Kern, *Hermeneutik der Gleichnisse Jesu*, 482–93.

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5. Jesus may have had several reasons for veiling his meanings, all of which could have been operating on the occasion of Matthew 21. Those reasons include avoiding controversy, protecting himself from accusation, protecting the sacredness of certain revelations, softening the impact of his teachings, and allowing his listeners to discover the meaning of his messages as they might be ready to internalize and accept their implications and applications.
6. Joseph Smith, "To the Elders of the Church of the Latter Day Saints," *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, December 1835, 225–30.
7. Notably C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), 4–5.
8. As in John 3:14.
9. As in Matthew 12:39–41.
10. See, for example, the discussion of the role of allegory in Stoic literature as well as the use of allegory by Philo and his Alexandrian predecessors in Svendsen, *Allegory Transformed*, 9–52.
11. This type of thinking has a parallel in the four progressively better types of seeds in the parable of the sower, or the four types of learners who go to study Torah. See *Abot* 5:15, discussed in Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 265 (quick to learn, quick to forget; slow to learn, slow to forget; slow to learn, quick to forget; quick to learn, slow to forget).
12. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1980), 161.
13. Commentators often assert that this parable has been taken out of its original context in some Galilean village setting and inserted here, where it does not really belong. However, this parable is introduced by the question, "But what think ye?" (*ti de hymin dokei*, "but how then would it seem to you?") which is a common introductory question used in various forms (such as *ti oun*, "what then?" or *ti de*, "but what about?") in the dialogues of Plato, where Socrates uses this expression to continue a line of questioning or to press forward with a discussion, as for example, *ti soi dokei*, "how does it seem to you?" in *Phaedo* 96e5, John Burnet, ed., *Platonis Opera* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).
14. The male gender of these children becomes clear in the male adjectives, "the first" and "the other."
15. See Peter Balla, *The Child-Parent Relationship in the New Testament and Its Environment* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 126.

16. Charles H. Talbert, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010), 251.
17. Young, *The Parables*, 137.
18. For example, Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 80–81.
19. “The vineyard is here, as elsewhere (Isaiah 5:1–7; Matthew 21:33–43), a metaphor for Israel.” Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 221.
20. See note 6 above.
21. On the importance of the two questions in Matthew 21:23 and 25 for the interpretation of this parable, see Wesley G. Olmstead, *Matthew's Trilogy of Parables: The Nation, the Nations and the Reader in Matthew 21:28–22:14* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 99, 108.
22. Hultgren, “Interpreting the Parables of Jesus,” in *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*, 637: “It should go without saying that a father can represent God, and so it is.”
23. Herbert Weir Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), section 1121.
24. There is no grammatical doubt as to the referent of the possessive *tou*: it obviously refers to the father of the son, and if the willing son represents Jesus in this parable, then his father is, by extension, “the Father,” his Father in Heaven.
25. Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 1850.
26. Liddell, Scott, Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1875.
27. I first suggested this reading in “Thy Mind, O Man, Must Stretch,” *BYU Studies* 50, no. 3 (2011): 71.
28. Most manuscripts say that the father went first to the son who eventually goes and is referred to as “the first.” This reading is most widely supported in the early New Testament manuscripts, and I follow it here. For discussions of the textual variants, see Olmstead, *Matthew's Trilogy of Parables*, 167–76, and the editorial comments reported by Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971), 55–56; see also Hultgren, *Parables of Jesus*, 218–19. Metzger calls this reading “probably the original,” 56.

In a small minority of manuscripts, another version of this parable likewise has the father approach the ultimately willing son first, but in the end he is called not “the first” but “the last” or “the least” (*ho eschatos*). One possible explanation for this textual oddity is that the ultimately willing son is the furthest back in the

story in the audience's mind. Or it may be that the willing son could be seen as both the first and the last, or as having reduced himself to the least in the kingdom of heaven. Or this reading may simply be "nonsensical." Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 55.

A few other manuscripts reverse the order of the appearance of the two sons, so that the father first asks the son who eventually does *not* go, even though he initially says yes, and in these texts the answer to Jesus' final question about which of the two did the father's will is accordingly either "the latter" (*ho hysteros*) or "the last" (*ho eschatos*). It might mean that the Jewish leaders, who were chronologically asked first, but did not do the will of the father, were seen as coming first in the parable, whereas the tax collectors and harlots were asked second, and then went, were transposed into second position. But this form of the parable is "inferior" to the first. Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 56. Moreover, it is unclear which group was actually asked by John the Baptist first.

29. H.W. Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), 729. The phrase "I shall not" would have been the correct translation of expression of future intent in the first person, whereas "I will not" expressed desire "as far as one has the power" (Fowler).
30. On the importance in this parable of doing the will of the father, see Olmstead, *Matthew's Trilogy of Parables*, 100–105, 108.
31. See discussion above accompanying notes 23–26.
32. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), domain 41.52 (p. 510).
33. Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, domains 25.270 (p. 318); 31.59 (p. 373). In the Septuagint, God does not bring Israel through the land of Canaan so that they will not *change their minds* (*metamelēsēi*, Exodus 13:17; but here the KJV reads "repent"). Likewise, it is not that the Lord "repented that he had made Saul king over Israel" (1 Samuel 15:35), but rather that he felt *sorrowful or regretful* (*metemelēthē*). See also Psalm 106:45; Jeremiah 20:16; Ezekiel 14:22. In Zechariah 11:5, "repent" (*metemelonto*) parallels "sorrow" (*epaschon*). Regarding his oath and covenant of the Melchizedek priesthood in Psalm 110:4, the Lord promises that he "will never change his mind" (*ou metamelēthsetai*). Much less frequently, this word refers to repentance (Proverbs 5:11).
34. Including κ* C D K W X Δ Π.
35. Including κ² B C L Z Θ f¹.

36. In D, the second son says *egō kurie hypagō* (“I, Lord, I go down”) and occasionally others, including Θ 0233 F³, will likewise supply the verb in “I go down,” which seems to be implied but which then renders the pronoun *egō* superfluous, except for added emphasis—which is still consistent with my point.
37. Compare Moses 4:1, “and surely I will do it; where give me thine honor.” It would not appear here that Satan approached God first, for the first son, the Father’s “Beloved Son,” who had been “Chosen from the beginning,” said, “Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever” (Moses 4:2).
38. Recalling to mind that not everyone who simply says, “Lord, Lord [*kurie, kurie*] shall enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 7:21).
39. See generally Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and Ronan James Head, “Mormonism’s Satan and the Tree of Life,” *Element: The Journal of the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology* 4, no. 2 (2008): 5–7 (Satan in the heavenly council), and 18–19 (the issue of proper authority).
40. They may have known of the pattern of authoritative callings and the heavenly council from several passages, including 1 Kings 22:19–23; Psalms 82:1; 110:3; Isaiah 9:5 LXX; Jeremiah 23:18; Daniel 7:9–14; Amos 3:7; 1 Enoch 12:3–4. See John W. Welch, “The Calling of a Prophet,” in *The Book of Mormon: First Nephi, the Doctrinal Foundation*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1988), 41, 46; Hugh W. Nibley, “Treasures in the Heavens: Some Early Christian Insights into the Organizing of Worlds,” *Dialogue* 8, no. 3–4 (1973), 76–98, reprinted in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, 1:171–214 (see p. 174); see generally E. Theodore Mullen Jr., *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1980). In Acts 2:23, Peter’s text assumes that his audience on the day of Pentecost was familiar with the idea of God’s primordial council (*boulēi*) and foreknowledge (*prognōsei*) that sent Jesus to his fate.
41. For example, Cain began as “a man from the Lord” (Genesis 4:1), but killed Abel (Genesis 4:10) and was cast out. Eber also had two sons, Peleg and Joktan, and in their days the earth was “divided” (Genesis 10:25). Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac (see Genesis 16 and 21), one the son of a slave born after the flesh, the other born of the freewoman by everlasting promise, which Paul saw as an allegory (see Galatians 4:22–26). Isaac had two sons, Jacob and Esau; the one wrestled with God and received an eternal blessing, and the other sold his birthright. Joseph had two contrasting sons, Manasseh and Ephraim (see Genesis 41:50). Moses has two sons (Exodus 18:3), one negatively named Gershom (from

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ger, alien), the other favorably named Eliezer (from *Eli*, my God, and *ezer*, help). For Lehi, the dichotomy gave people the choice between liberty and eternal life through the great Mediator, or captivity and eternal death under the power of the devil (see 2 Nephi 2:27).