

## JESUS' IMPLICIT CLAIM TO DEITY IN HIS PARABLES

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Joachim Jeremias concluded his study of the parables as follows:

In attempting to recover the original significance of the parables, one thing above all becomes evident: it is that all the parables of Jesus compel his hearers to come to a decision about his person and mission. . . . The parables imply a christological self-attestation. . . . God's acceptable year has come. For he has been manifested whose veiled glory shines through every word and through every parable—the Saviour.<sup>1</sup>

Although Jesus' self-understanding is not explicitly defined in the parables, it is implied in many of them, reinforcing and undergirding their central message. A case can be made—as Jeremias does—that certain of them functioned at least in part as a christological claim. Many portray the coming of the kingdom, the hour either of joy or of judgment. The cruciality of how one responds to Jesus and the urgency of decision are stressed repeatedly. One's response will determine one's destiny.

It has long been noticed that Jesus depicts himself and his ministry through the parables. But two aspects of Jesus' self-depiction in the parables have generally been overlooked.

1) Such self-portrayal is unique to Jesus. In the vast corpus of rabbinic parables there seems to be none in which a rabbi depicts himself. This is strong evidence that the parables recorded in the gospels are authentic to Jesus.

2) In the majority of these parables, Jesus depicts himself through images which in the OT and later Jewish literature are used to depict God. As with most imagery, these terms could also be used to depict things other than God; but overall their use in connection with God is dominant. Just such a connection with God seems to be implied in many of the parables considered below.

In order to assess whether a parable may have conveyed an implicit claim by Jesus to deity, two key factors need to be considered:

1) Is the image in question a common or significant figure used to depict God in the OT or in later Jewish writings near the time of Jesus?

2) Do the actions or qualities of the figure in the parable reflect the actions or qualities of Jesus?

If the answer to both of these questions is "Yes" in any given parable, the possibility must be considered that Jesus was making an implicit claim to deity. This possibility in the individual case becomes more probable insofar as a pattern emerges of Jesus frequently depicting himself in the parables through

<sup>1</sup>*The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1972) 230; cf. P. B. Payne, *Metaphor as a Model for Interpreting the Parables of Jesus* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Cambridge, 1975) 32-35.

images which in the OT depict God. Our findings are summarized in the Table at the end of this article. The Table lists ten images, selected OT passages in which these images depict God, and twenty parables in which Jesus seems to have applied such images to himself. These images and the parables in which they seem to portray Jesus are considered below one by one.

**1. Sower** God is spoken of metaphorically as a sower or planter to describe his activity in the messianic age, not only in the MT, LXX and Targums (cf. Table), but also frequently in later Jewish literature.<sup>2</sup> He is depicted as sowing his law in people (4 Ezra 9:31) and planting his word in the hearts of his people (4QDibre 2:13). Other references to God as sower or planter could also be noted.<sup>3</sup> The dominant metaphorical use of the term “sower” around the time of Jesus was as a symbol for God and most often of God’s activity in the messianic age. When the sower image was used in a setting about human destiny, it seems to have been used almost invariably to depict God.

The thrust of the parable of the sower has been seen to be a challenge to respond properly to Jesus’ message of the kingdom. The structure of the parable and its content develop this theme of response to the word of the kingdom. The parable pictures the destiny of Jesus’ hearers depending on their response to his message. Central to the parable is the importance and authority which Jesus attaches to his own proclamation. This shows that Jesus considers himself to have a crucial position. He proclaims God’s kingdom and calls men to live under the present reign of God so that they might become participants in the future realm of God.<sup>4</sup>

Since the message of the kingdom is depicted as the seed and people are associated with the soils which receive seed, Jesus as the proclaimer of the message of the kingdom stands in a position analogous to the sower in the parable. Matthew makes it evident that he recognizes Jesus as the sower by the parallel between Matt 13:1 ἐξελθὼν ὁ Ἰησοῦς and 13:3 ἐξῆλθεν ὁ σπείρων. Again, in Jesus’ comment on the parable of the tares, “He who sows the good seed is the Son of man” (Matt 13:37). ὁ σπείρων is highlighted in each of the synoptic gospels by its definite article and its position immediately after the start of the parable.<sup>5</sup> Jesus identifies himself with ὁ οικοδοεσπότης in the parable of the closed door (Luke 13:24-30), which gives a similar warning about exclusion from the kingdom.

Such an allusion by Jesus to himself in the parable of the sower—picking up

<sup>2</sup>God is spoken of metaphorically as a sower in 4 Ezra 4:28-32; 8:6 (?); 1 Enoch 62:8. On the messianic interpretation of Ezek 36:8-9 see *b.Sanh.* 98a, and on Hos 2:21-23 see *Ex.R.* 15:21. *Ruth R.* 5:6 associates Hos 2:16 with the suffering of the future Messiah of Isaiah 53; God is spoken of metaphorically as a planter in Job 1:16; 7:34; 16:26; 21:24; 36:6; 1 Enoch 10:16; 84:6; 1QS 8:5; 11:8, 1QH 6:15-17; 8:5-24; *Midr. Ps* 1:3; *b.Sanh.* 37b; *Midrash Vayosha*<sup>c</sup>, cf. D. Flusser, “Two Notes on the Midrash on 2 Sam. vii,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 9 (1959) 103-104.

<sup>3</sup>As sower, 4 Ezra 8:41-44; as planter: Ps Sol 14:3; *Odes Sol.* 38:16-21; CD 1:7; Matt 15:13; 21:33; Mark 12:1, Luke 13:6; 20:9.

<sup>4</sup>This is evident in most of the parables of contrast: cf. Payne, *Parables* 189 and Table II. On the Kingdom as both present reign and future realm, cf. W. G. Kümmel, *Promise and Fulfilment* (London: SCM, 1957) *passim*, and G. E. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 122-48, 262-77.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Payne, *Parables* 166-67.

the dominant metaphorical use of “the sower” in his day, namely as a symbol for God in his work in the messianic age—is in keeping with the suggestiveness of much of the imagery of the parable. Furthermore, it is consistent with the message of the parable, reinforcing and undergirding the parable’s claim that one’s response to Jesus’ message will determine one’s destiny. Given the OT and later Jewish use of the sower image to depict God in passages dealing with human destiny, Jesus’ self-depiction as “the sower” in this parable could be understood naturally as a claim to deity, Jesus taking the role of God as “the sower.”

In favor of associating Jesus with ὁ σπείρων is that the sower mentioned in the parables of the seed growing secretly and of the tares, and implied by σπαρῆ in the parable of the mustard seed, performs a role in each case which seems to be analogous to Jesus’ inauguration of the kingdom.

The parable of the mustard seed (Mark 4:30-32; Matt 13:31-32; Luke 13:18-19), in describing the contrast between the tiny size of a mustard seed and the comparative greatness of the fully grown bush, was depicting the contrast between the seeming insignificance of the kingdom of God as it was announced in the teaching of Jesus and what it would eventually become in greatness. That this parable refers to the kingdom of God is evident not only in its introduction in each gospel, “With what can we compare the kingdom?”, but also in its concluding quotation from Ezek 17:23 (cf. Ezek 31:6; Dan 4:12, 14, 21-22). As in each of its OT parallels, the statement that “the birds of the air can make nests in its shade” depicts the inclusion of the nations under a great kingdom. Jesus was indicating that although the kingdom of God may seem insignificant and come in an unexpected form—a mustard bush, not as the cedar tree which in the OT symbolized a political power such as many of his contemporaries hoped for—ultimately it would include the nations.

In Ezek 17:23, the passage quoted in the parable, it is *the Lord God* who plants the noble cedar on the mountain height of Israel, representing the future kingdom he would raise up. But Jesus proclaimed that *he* was bringing in the kingdom, and it was his kingdom proclamation which was being viewed as seemingly insignificant like the tiny mustard seed. So Jesus stands in a position analogous to the man in the parable sowing the mustard seed; for he is sowing the kingdom of God, which would eventually include the nations. Thus, the parable implicitly claims that Jesus is carrying out the work of God in sowing the kingdom.

The parable of the seed growing secretly (Mark 4:26-29) reads, “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground . . .” (v 26). Through the natural and yet mysterious<sup>6</sup> process of growth, the seed gradually grows until it is ripe for harvest. This parable deals with the inception, growth, and climax of the kingdom of God.

As in the parables of the sower and the mustard seed, so here: Jesus, the one bringing in the kingdom, plays a role analogous to that of the man sowing the seed, i.e. sowing or inaugurating the kingdom. Thus the parable implicitly claims that Jesus is doing God’s deed, bringing in the kingdom.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. “he knows not how” in Mark 4:27. For further discussion of this point and the message of the parable, cf. Payne, *Parables* 144-45, 239-40.

Jesus introduced the parable of the tares (Matt 13:24-30),<sup>7</sup> kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field . . ." (Matt 13:24). The parable then describes the growth of the plants: "the plants came up and bore grain" (v 26) and "Let both grow together until the harvest" (v 30). The climax comes with the separation of the weeds and the wheat at the harvest, the weeds burned and the wheat gathered into the barn (v 30). Like the parable of the seed growing secretly, the tares parable depicts the inception, growth, and climax of the kingdom.

The sower is specifically identified in Matt 13:37 as "the Son of man." Jesus' inauguration of the kingdom is analogous to the work of the sower in this parable. Jesus pictures himself as the sower of the kingdom, and as such applied to himself the OT symbol for God as the sower and pictures himself as doing what the OT says God will do, i.e. bring in the kingdom.

The function of the sower in each of Jesus' four "sower parables" parallels the function of Jesus as the proclaimer and inaugurator of the kingdom of God. We conclude that Jesus repeatedly depicts himself as the sower of the kingdom, applying to himself imagery whose usual referent was God in his work in the messianic age. Thus, both in the function that they depict Jesus fulfilling (inaugurating the kingdom) and in the imagery that they apply to him ("sower"), these parables make the implicit claim that Jesus is doing God's work of sowing, inaugurating the messianic age.

**2. Director of the Harvest** God is depicted frequently in the OT in a metaphorical sense as the director of the harvest, bringing either blessing or judgment.<sup>8</sup>

The man who sows, in the parable of the seed growing secretly (Mark 4:26-29), is also depicted as the one who directs the harvest (Mark 4:26, 27, 29). We have already seen that the figure of the sower here reflects Jesus and implies that he is fulfilling God's role as the sower in the messianic age. The parable of the seed growing secretly concludes in Mark 4:29 by quoting the famous passage in Joel 3:13 about the great judgment: "at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come." In this vivid passage Joel describes *God* as the director of the harvest. Hence, in this parable Jesus seems to have depicted himself not only as fulfilling God's role of "sowing" the kingdom, but also God's future role of directing the harvest of final judgment.

The message of the parable of the seed growing secretly is that the mysterious growth of the kingdom will climax in the great judgment of God. It is a warning not to be lulled into thinking that life will always continue the same. In fact, all the cycles of life, sowing and harvest (vv 26, 29), sleeping and rising (v 27), night and day (v 27), and the cycle of growth (vv 27-29), will be interrupted *at once* (v 29) when the time for the great judgment has come. Just as sowing will lead to reaping when the time is ripe, so the kingdom which Jesus is sowing will lead to its harvest, the climax of the great judgment. Even though the people of Jesus' day did not understand all Jesus was doing, this

<sup>7</sup>Accepted as authentic by C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet, 1935) 183-86; Jeremias, *Parables*; Kümmel, *Promise and Fulfilment* 136; M. Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967) 59, 106; D. Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (London: Oliphants, 1972) 230-31.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Payne, *Parables* 313.

parable called them to wake up to the seriousness of what was taking place. The implication that Jesus who stands now as sower will eventually stand as director of the harvest of judgment undergirds the seriousness of this message.

An almost identical dual role of sowing and directing the harvest is played in the parable of the tares (Matt 13:24-30) by the "man who sowed good seed in his field" (v 24) and who "at harvest time . . . will tell the reapers, 'Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn'" (v 30).<sup>9</sup> In the parable of the tares, as in the parable of the seed growing secretly, the concluding reference to the great judgment is unmistakable. The interpretation of Jesus recorded in Matt 13:40-43 underscores this:

Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. The Son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.

This interpretation by Jesus specifically identifies the Son of man both with the sower (Matt 13:37) and with the director of the harvest (Matt 13:41). Since Jesus' own role was that of inaugurator or sower of the kingdom, the implication is that he is also the Son of man who will direct the harvest.

In both the parable of the seed growing secretly and in the parable of the tares Jesus seems to depict himself as fulfilling God's function not only as the sower or inaugurator of the kingdom but also as the director of the harvest of the great judgment. This latter function of God as director of the harvest of the great judgment is associated with the times of the Messiah in Mal 4:1-2, which uses terminology parallel to that in the parable of the tares (Matt 13:30, 40-42) about evildoers being burned up like stubble.

We will consider under "lord" (below) six other parables which seem similarly to imply a future role for Jesus as judge. Each of these describes the return of a lord as the crisis which will determine the destiny of his servants.

Many critics, however, reject the view that Jesus envisaged for himself a future exalted role as judge. In particular it is argued by many followers of R. Bultmann that the historical Jesus never referred to himself as the "Son of man." They argue that the early church applied to Jesus this title which is generally regarded as reflecting a Jewish conception of a transcendent redeemer figure who would come to the earth as judge in the last days (Dan 7:13-14; 4 Ezra 13, 1 Enoch 37-71).

Dan 7:13-14 does seem to provide the background for understanding Jesus' sayings about the Son of man who comes in the future as judge. Not only does Jesus frequently refer to the coming Son of man using terminology from Dan 7:13-14,<sup>10</sup> but he does so in the context of his explicit reference in Matt 24:15 and Mark 13:14 to Daniel's "abomination of desolation" (Dan 9:27; 11:31; 12:11).

Is it, however, correct that Jesus never used this title in referring to himself?

<sup>9</sup>The identity of the sower and the director of the harvest is stated in Matt 13:24, 27, 28, 29, 30.

<sup>10</sup>Matt 10:23; 13:41; 16:27-28; 19:28-30, 24:27, 30, 37, 39, 44; 25-31-46; 26:64; Mark 8:38; 13:26-27; 14:62; Luke 9:26; 12:8, 9, 40; 18:8; 21:36.

In many of its occurrences as they stand in the gospels “the Son of man” undoubtedly refers to Jesus.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, this title occurs in all the strata of the gospel tradition and is found sixty-nine times in the synoptic gospels, always as a statement of Jesus. The Bultmannians’ claim that “the Son of man” was not used as a self-designation by Jesus, but was representative of the church’s christology, belies the evidence since this title is never recorded as given to Jesus by others and is never used by the evangelists in an explanatory manner.<sup>12</sup>

In any event there are several passages besides those referring to the Son of man in which Jesus is recorded to have spoken of a future role that he would play. For instance:

So every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men, I will deny before my Father who is in heaven (Matt 10:32-33).

... to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father (Matt 20:23).

You will not see me until you say, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” (Luke 13:35).

Watch therefore, for you do not know what day your Lord is coming (Matt 24:42).

There are, furthermore, at least nine parables which depict the coming judge as the same person who is now at work calling men into responsible participation in the kingdom: the seed growing secretly (Mark 4:26-29), the doorkeeper (Mark 13:33-37), the tares (Matt 13:24-30), the servant entrusted with supervision (Matt 24:45-51; Luke 12:41-48), the ten virgins (Matt 25:1-13), the talents (Matt 25:14-30), the men awaiting their master’s homecoming (Luke 12:35-38), the closed door (Luke 13:24-30), and the pounds (Luke 19:12-27).

We conclude that there is sufficient evidence that Jesus did envisage a future role for himself as judge to warrant a careful investigation of the parables to see whether such a role is expressed in them. We have already shown, in favor of this view, that in the parables of the seed growing secretly and of the tares, the sower, who reflects Jesus, is portrayed as the same person who is the director of the harvest performing the work of God in judgment.

**3. Rock** One of the most common pictures of God in the OT is the “rock,” the secure foundation. The parable of the two houses (Matt 7:24-27; Luke 6:47-49) compares “everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them” (Luke 6:47) with a man who builds his house on the rock so that when the flood breaks against that house it stands firm. Opposite to this, those who hear but do not obey Jesus’ words are like a man who builds his house without a foundation. When the flood breaks against that house, immediately it falls to great ruin. The analogy is explicit: To come to the rock is to come to Jesus,

<sup>11</sup>E.g. Matt 8:20, 9:6, 12:8, 32, 40; 16:13; 17:9, 12, 22-23; 26:2, 24; Mark 8:31; 9:12, 31; Luke 9:22, 44; John 1:51; 3:13-14; 5:27; 6:27; and compare the statement about Jesus in Matt 10:32-33 with the identical statement about the Son of man in Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26; 12:8-9.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. R. N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 82-93.

and to build on that rock is to obey Jesus' words. Jesus is depicted as the rock. To reject his words is to reject the foundation without which one's house will perish in the coming storm. In light of the authority this parable claims for Jesus' message, and because of the fact that in the OT the vast majority of the occurrences of the term "rock" used in a metaphorical sense refer to God, we conclude that the parable implies that response to Jesus and his words is tantamount to response to God. Another possibility is that Jesus intends this parable to evoke in his hearers' minds the strikingly parallel passage in Isa 28:16-17:

[Therefore] thus says the Lord God, "Behold, I am laying in Zion for a *foundation* a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a *sure foundation*: 'He who believes will not be in haste.' And I will make justice the line, and righteousness the plummet; and hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, and waters will overwhelm the shelter."

If Jesus intends this passage, applied in messianic fashion, as the background to the parable of the two houses, then the parable would be properly understood as a specifically christological claim.

Isa 28:16-17 may also have provided part of the background for the messianic understanding of Ps 118:22, "The stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner." Jesus quotes Ps 118:22, applying it to himself as a christological claim, after the parable of the wicked tenants in Matt 21:42; Mark 12:10-11; Luke 20:17. Following this quotation, in Matt 21:44<sup>13</sup> and Luke 20:18 there is an allusion to Isa 8:14, "[The Lord of hosts] will become a stone of offense, and a rock of stumbling." It is fascinating that sayings about the Messiah (Ps 118:22 and Isa 28:16) are juxtaposed so freely with this saying about the Lord of hosts (Isa 8:14). These same passages are again quoted together in Rom 9:32f and 1 Pet 2:4-8. In these passages the "rejected stone" of Ps 118:22, which refers to the Messiah, is equated with the "stone of offense" of Isa 8:14, which refers to the Lord of hosts. The NT description of God and of the Messiah overlap. There seems to have been a degree of fluidity or even interchangeability of description for God and the Christ. In applying these "stone" passages to himself, Jesus seems to have claimed implicitly to be, at least in some sense, deity and also the Messiah, perhaps as the divine Messiah or as God at work in the messianic age.

**4. Shepherd** The parable of the lost sheep (Matt 18:12-14; Luke 15:4-7) argues in a way similar to the typical father of the prodigal son or the typical housewife of the lost coin: "Rejoice with me, for I have found what was lost" (Luke 15:6-7, 9-10, 23-24, 32). Just as any man who was a shepherd would be expected to leave the herd to save a single lost one, so Jesus seeks out lost sinners to bring them into God's kingdom. The rhetorical question "which man of you . . ." introducing the parable requires the assumption that what follows would be taken for granted. Thus, interpreters who suggest that the shepherd lacked concern for the ninety-nine left in the wilderness wrongly assume that the remaining sheep would be left without any supervision by dogs or assistants. Parables typically omit details that would be taken for granted. )

The parable of the lost sheep in the context of Luke 15 defends Jesus'

<sup>13</sup>Omitted in D 33 it<sup>b,d,e,ff</sup>1,2,1<sup>syr</sup>Diatessaron<sup>v</sup> Irenaeus<sup>gr,lat</sup>Origen Eusebius.

reception of repentant sinners and in Matthew 18 his reception of children. The parable in both passages argues from a shepherd's natural joy in finding his lost sheep and by implication God's joy at the entrance of sinners and children into his kingdom. The common depiction of God as "the shepherd" in the OT reinforces this implication. In both instances the parable urges, "Rejoice with me," arguing that to do otherwise is not only unnatural but is an affront to the joy of God over the recovery of his precious children (Matt 18:14; Luke 15:7).

The OT background to this parable is Ezek 34:10-22 (cf. Jer 23:3):

I will rescue my sheep. . . . For thus says the Lord God: Behold I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when some of his sheep have been scattered abroad, so will I seek out my sheep. . . . I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep. . . . I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed. . . ."

It is striking that the action of God seeking out the lost sheep is applied by Jesus to himself seeking out the lost sheep (quoting Ezek 34:16). Jesus again applies this passage to himself in Luke 19:10: "For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost." Jesus in effect claims that God's action was his action. Therefore, not to obey the command "Rejoice with me" in the parable would be to disobey God.

In Ezekiel the "shepherd" image is used both for God and for the Messiah. Following this passage describing God as the shepherd (Ezek 34:10-22) the Messiah is described as the shepherd (34:23-24):

And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the Lord have spoken.

This is also taken up in Ezek 37:24-27, where it is unclear whether the "shepherd" refers to the Messiah or to God:

My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes . . . and David my servant shall be their prince for ever. My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

The function of God and the function of the Messiah in the age to come as well as their title "shepherd" overlap in the description of Ezekiel. Accordingly it may be that Jesus is claiming to be God in this and other parables in the sense in which the Messiah is equated with God in certain OT passages.<sup>14</sup>

Jesus also depicts himself as the shepherd in the parables of the good shepherd (John 10:1-5) and the hireling (John 10:11b-13),<sup>15</sup> contrasting his ministry to the thievery of other religious leaders (cf. John 9:40-41). A similar contrast is found in Ezek 34:2-22 and Zechariah 11, where Israel's thieving shepherds (Ezek 34:2-10; Zech 11:5-6, 8, 16-17) stand in sharp opposition to God, the good shepherd of Israel (Ezek 34:11-22; Zech 11:7-10). In this parable Jesus not only condemns the unfaithful shepherds of Israel, but claims himself to be the good shepherd, doing the work of God in the messianic age.

Jesus seems to have referred to himself frequently as the shepherd: "You

<sup>14</sup>Cf. Payne, *Parables* 268-69, for examples.

<sup>15</sup>Concerning the authenticity of these parables, cf. R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (2 vols.; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966)1.390-91, 395-96.

will all fall away because of me this night; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the flock will be scattered'" (Mark 14:27; Matt 26:31, quoted from Zech 13:7). Likewise, Jesus gives the following extended simile (sometimes inappropriately called the parable of the sheep and the goats):

when the Son of man comes in his glory . . . he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left (Matt 25:31-33).

This extended simile suggests Ezek 34:17, "As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord God: Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep, rams and he-goats." Evidence that Jesus was aware of this Ezekiel passage and that he was referring to himself as the Son of man in Matt 25:31-35 is seen in the close affinity of the parables of the lost sheep, the good shepherd, and the hireling to Ezek 34:11-22 and in the fact that in each of these parables Jesus applies this image of the shepherd to himself.

Thus, on several occasions Jesus seems to have alluded to Ezek 34:10-22, which describes God as the good shepherd; yet on the lips of Jesus the shepherd performing the same functions is clearly Jesus himself: searching for his scattered sheep until he rescues them and brings them back (Ezek 34:11-13, 16, 22; the lost sheep); bringing them out into their own good pasture land, leading them, being their true shepherd, not one from whom they flee (Ezek 34:13-15, 21; the good shepherd); caring for them, protecting them from prey (Ezek 34:15, 22; the hireling); and judging the sheep and goats (Ezek 34:17-22; Matt 25:31-33). Jesus depicts himself in these parables as the shepherd of Ezek 34:11-22, and in so doing implicitly claims to be God.

**5. Bridegroom** Just as the OT portrays Yahweh as the bridegroom or husband of his covenant people, so too the Rabbis speak of God as the bridegroom of Israel his bride.<sup>16</sup>

The short parable of the bridegroom<sup>17</sup> (Mark 2:219-20; Matt 9:15; Luke 5:34-35), like Jesus' parables which begin with the phrase, "Which one of you . . ." is a rhetorical question. Its use of *μή* (Mark 2:19; Matt 9:15; Luke 5:34) calls for a negative answer: "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?" "Of course not!" Like so many parables of Jesus, this one defends his actions, in particular that he and his disciples eat and drink while the disciples of John fast. The position of Jesus is analogous to that of the bridegroom. While he is present with his disciples, fasting would be as inappropriate as at a wedding. The implication of the saying is that the marriage feast of the kingdom is already present; it is incompatible with the joyous presence of the bridegroom for the wedding guests to mourn. The presence of Jesus the bridegroom is all-important; even religious customs, if they detract from the joy of his presence, must not be observed. The striking thing to note is that Jesus here depicts *himself* as the bridegroom in the marriage feast of the kingdom. But in such passages as Hos 2:16-23 it is *God*

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Payne, *Parables* 314; and E. Stauffer, "γάμέω, γάμος" *TWNT* 1.652.

<sup>17</sup>On the authenticity of this saying cf. Dodd, *Parables* 115-16; and on its possible implications as a claim to deity cf. E. C. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge: University Press, 1959) 109-110; I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978) 225-26.

who is the bridegroom in the age to come.<sup>18</sup> The parable implicitly claims that Jesus stands in the position of God as bridegroom in the new age.

The parable of the ten virgins (Matt 25:1-13) speaks of readiness for the wedding feast of the kingdom.

The message of this parable and even its details are practically identical with the parable of the closed door (Luke 13:24-30) which indicates a future role for Jesus as judge. Here in the parable of the ten virgins, as in the parable of the bridegroom, Jesus depicts himself as the bridegroom of the wedding feast of the kingdom. Only those who are ready for his coming will enter the feast of the kingdom. This parable implicitly applies to Jesus both the title and function of God as “bridegroom” in the new age, having authority to exclude people from the feast of the kingdom (“I do not know you,” v 13).

**6. Father** The parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) is generally accepted to be a response by Jesus to the criticisms of the Pharisees and scribes because he received and had table fellowship with sinners (Luke 15:1-2). The argument implicit in the parable runs like this: if it is appropriate for a human father to welcome his repentant son into table fellowship; and, if by analogy it is appropriate for God the Father to welcome back repentant sinners, then why are you angry at me (the way the elder brother was angry at the father) for welcoming and having fellowship with repentant sinners? Indeed, if you were sons after the Father’s heart, you would recognize these repentant sinners as your brothers.

In this parable Jesus depicts himself not as a third son, but as the father. His deeds are analogous to the deeds of God the Father, welcoming repentant sinners into fellowship. For the religious leaders to reject *Jesus’* welcome of sinners is to reject *God’s* welcome of sinners, and to disobey *Jesus’* call is to disobey *God’s* call.

Matt 21:28-32 records Jesus’ parable of the two sons, the one who told his father he would not go and work in the vineyard, but did—and the other who said he would go, but did not. In this parable Jesus emphasizes the cruciality of *doing* the will of the Father. Tax collectors and harlots, who did not claim to be righteous had turned in obedience to Jesus’ call,<sup>19</sup> whereas the chief priests and elders of the people, though claiming allegiance to the Father, were in fact not obedient to Jesus’ call. The function of Jesus in calling people to enter the kingdom is analogous to that of the father in the parable, i.e. calling his sons to go into the vineyard. The message of the parable is clear: to reject Jesus’ call to enter the kingdom is to reject the call of God. To disobey Jesus is to disobey God.

The actions of and responses to the father in both these parables obviously reflect the actions of and responses to Jesus in his ministry. And yet part of the power of both parables is seen in their future implication that the human father of the parable also reflects God the Father. This implication is rein-

<sup>18</sup>Note that God as the bridegroom is associated with the time of the Messiah in Hos 3:5, “David their king.”

<sup>19</sup>And to John the Baptist as pointing to the Christ. Here, obedience to *Jesus’* word is central, as is evident in the context of Matthew, viz. the questioning of Jesus’ authority. Obedience to Jesus’ call is also central in the immediately following parables in Matthew: parables of wicked tenants and of the wedding feast.

forced since the image “father” occurs frequently within the OT and Jewish literature to portray God.<sup>20</sup> We see, then, that Jesus in portraying himself as the father in these two parables chose an image which was typically used in the OT to represent God. That Jesus would have been aware of this is evidenced by his repeated references to God as “Father.” Furthermore, this image (“father”) is used in these parables in such a way that unless the hearer perceives the equation of the actions of Jesus with the actions of God the father, he would miss their powerful message.

**7. *The Giver of Forgiveness*** Throughout the OT it is God and God alone who has authority to forgive sin, but in two parables Jesus depicts the giver of forgiveness in such a way that his own actions in offering forgiveness of sin are reflected in the parable.

We have already seen how the forgiving father in the parable of the prodigal son reflects Jesus and defends his ministry, equating his actions with God’s. The parable of the two debtors<sup>21</sup> (Luke 7:41-43) has a similar function, the defense of Jesus who has allowed a sinful woman to anoint his feet with ointment and tears and to wipe them with her hair in the house of Simon the Pharisee (vv 36-39). The details of the setting and its appropriateness to this parable support its authenticity. The parable argues along these lines: it is just as right and natural for this sinful woman to express her love to me, seeing that I accept her repentance and forgive her great debt of sin, as it is right and natural for someone to express deep gratitude to a person who forgives him a large financial debt. The more that has been forgiven, the deeper will be the love. Jesus here depicts himself as the giver of forgiveness. This passage implies that Jesus is equating his forgiveness with God’s forgiveness, as is evident in vv 47-50:

“Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little.” And he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this, who even forgives sins?” And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”<sup>22</sup>

This parable argues that the woman’s actions were justified since Jesus forgave her great debt of sin, which could only be possible if Jesus had assumed the prerogative of God in forgiving sin. Thus, the parable functions as an implicit claim to Jesus’ deity.

**8. *The Vineyard Owner*** The image of the vineyard owner is a major figure for God not only in the OT but also in the parables of the Rabbis, where the vineyard is typically representative of Israel. Jesus used this image to depict God quoting Isa 5:1, 2, 5 in the parable of the wicked tenants (Mark 12:1-9; Matt 21:33-41; Luke 20:9-16). The vineyard owner in the parable of the good employer treats alike all who accept his invitation to work in the vineyard,

<sup>20</sup>Cf. Payne, *Parables* 315. Note that the Messiah is referred to as “the everlasting father” in Isa 9:6.

<sup>21</sup>On its authenticity, cf. I. H. Marshall, *Luke* 310-11; M. Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts* 181-83.

<sup>22</sup>Cf. Luke 5:20-24 and I. H. Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Exeter: Pater-noster, 1970) 138-41.

giving each the full day's wage even if he had only worked a small part of the day. His generosity provokes grumbling on the part of those who expect to receive more. This parable probably serves as a defense of Jesus' welcoming repentant sinners into fellowship in the kingdom. The religious leaders who felt they had served God faithfully from the start expected their special position and privilege to be recognized. They, like the all-day workers in the parable, grumble at Jesus because of his full acceptance of sinners, and say, in essence, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat" (v 12). The vineyard owner's answer, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?" (v 15) is Jesus' defense of his generous welcome of sinners into the kingdom. This statement implicitly claims that Jesus had authority to give the blessings of the kingdom to anyone who would receive them. But since only God has the authority graciously to give entrance into the kingdom, Jesus is here claiming to have God's authority. This claim is reinforced by Jesus' application to himself of the OT symbol for God, "the vineyard owner." Unless the hearer perceives the equation between the acts of Jesus (analogous to the vineyard owner's acts in the parable) and the acts of God (the archetypal vineyard owner with authority over his own), he would miss the parable's powerful defense of Jesus' acceptance of sinners.

As we saw above under "father," the vineyard owner in the parable of the two sons (Matt 21:28-31) also seems to reflect Jesus' calling people into the kingdom. Jesus in depicting himself as the father and vineyard owner (both common images for God) implies through this parable that to reject his call is to reject God's call, and to disobey him is to disobey God.

**9. Lord (κύριος)** One of the most common names for God in the Scriptures is "Lord,"<sup>23</sup> a term which Jesus uses in nine different parables in such a way that the role of the lord in the parable seems to reflect his own role.

The parable of the good employer (Matt 20:1-16), as we saw above under "vineyard owner," depicts Jesus' activity in calling people into the kingdom as the activity of the lord (ὁ κύριος) of the vineyard in calling men to work in his vineyard. The parable claims that Jesus has the authority graciously to give entry into the kingdom. The concluding comment of the parable, "So the last will be first, and the first last" (v 16), and the immediately preceding comments in Matt 19:28-30 ("in the new world, when the Son of man shall sit on his glorious throne . . . many that are first will be last, and the last first"), indicate that Jesus' generosity is of eternal consequence. Accordingly, the rebuke scene of the parable, when the vineyard owner vindicates himself and sends the grumblers away, may suggest Jesus' ultimate vindication in his future role as judge in the great judgment.

As we saw in considering the images "sower" and "director of the harvest," the figure of the lord in the parable of the tares (Matt 13:24-30) aptly fits Jesus both in his ministry of calling people into the kingdom of God and as "the director of the harvest" (v 30) at the future judgment. This understanding of a future role for Jesus as judge is supported by the explanation of the tares given in Matt 13:37-43.

<sup>23</sup>Cf. Payne, *Parables* 316.

In the parable of the closed door (Luke 13:24-30) people call out, “Lord, open to us. . . . We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.” This is an identification of Jesus in his earthly ministry with the “lord” who shuts the door to the feast of the kingdom of God and who has authority to give or refuse entry to it. He who at that time was calling to people, “Repent and come to me,” will then say to those who would not come, “Depart from me, all you workers of iniquity” (Luke 13:27). As in the parable of the tares, so in the parable of the closed door: the “lord” image depicts Jesus both in his present ministry (sowing/teaching in our streets) and in his future role as judge (sending out reapers/closing the door to the feast of the kingdom). And as in the parable of the tares, this future role of Jesus coincides with what in the OT depicts as the role of God (directing the harvest/determining who enters the kingdom). Thus, both in the image he applies to himself (“lord”) and in the function he applies to himself (judgment) Jesus in the parable of the tares and the closed door is implicitly claiming, at least in some sense, to be God.

Practically identical to the parable of the closed door both in its message and in its details is the parable of the ten virgins (Matt 25:1-13). The foolish virgins give the identical call, “Lord, open to us” (*κύριε, ἀνοιξὸν ἡμῖν*, Matt 25:11 = Luke 13:25), and the lord in both parables replied, “Truly, I say to you, I do not know you” (*ὁὐκ οἶδα ὑμᾶς*, Matt 25:12 = Luke 13:27). And only “those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast” (Matt 25:10; Luke 13:28-29). Since the situation of the door to the marriage feast being shut (Matt 25:10; Luke 13:25), is identical to that of the parable of the closed door, the “lord” naturally reflects the same person, who is specified in the closed door parable to be Jesus. The challenge of both parables is, “Be ready for my future coming. Your entrance into the kingdom of God will depend on your readiness in that day.” This challenge is immediately repeated in the parable of the talents (Matt 25:14-30) and in the description of the great judgment (Matt 25:31-46). Each of the five parables we will consider next gives a similar message by depicting a time of crisis for the servant at his lord’s return. His readiness when his lord comes will determine his destiny.

The parable of the men awaiting their master’s homecoming (Luke 12:35-38) reads, “Blessed are those servants whom the master find awake when he comes” (v 37). “He will gird himself and have them sit at table, and he will come and serve them” reflects Jesus’ own ministry of serving, especially John 13:3-17, and suggests the feast of the kingdom of God. The picture of the lord “coming home” (vv 36, 37, 38) implies his previous presence with them and fits well as a reference by Jesus to his future role. The following comment shows that Luke understands this to be a reference to the coming of Jesus in the future as judge: “You also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an unexpected hour” (Luke 12:40).

The parable of the servant entrusted with supervision (Matt 24:45-51; Luke 12:41-48) likewise has as its crisis the return of the lord: “Blessed is that servant whom his master when he comes will find so doing” (v 43). Being put “with the unfaithful” (Luke 12:46) or “with the hypocrites; there men will weep and and gnash their teeth” (Matt 24:51) refers to exclusion from the kingdom of God. The parable’s description of the crisis at the return of the lord is similar to the narrative description of the coming of the Son of man in

judgment which follows in Matt 25:31-46. Each of these factors and the similarities of the parable with other parables which refer to a future role of Jesus in judgment support the view that Jesus is depicting himself as the returning lord.

The parable of the doorkeeper (Mark 13:33-37) also depicts the lord leaving home, putting his servants in charge, and commanding the doorkeeper to watch. Again the crisis is at the coming back of the lord and the call is to "watch" for his return (vv 34, 35, 37), the same call that is given in the parables of the ten virgins (Matt 25:13) and of the men awaiting their master's homecoming (Luke 12:37). The inclusion of this parable at the conclusion of the Olivet Discourse and its message, "Watch," indicate that it refers to Jesus, who was soon to leave his servants, giving them responsibility and calling them to watch for his return (Mark 13:6, 13, 20-23, 26, 31, 32).

The parable of the talents (Matt 25:14-30) likewise tells of the crisis at the return of the lord, depicting the coming division between those who enter the kingdom of God ("enter into the joy of your lord," vv 21, 23) and those who do not ("cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth," v 30). This is identical to the description of rejection from the kingdom that is given in the parables of the tares (Matt 13:42), the closed door (Luke 13:28), and the servant entrusted with supervision (Matt 24:51). This crisis refers to the coming of the Son of man in judgment, as is clear from the parable's content specifying responsibility and ultimate judgment, and also from its context, immediately preceding the analogous narrative description of the great judgment.

The parable of the pounds (Luke 19:12-27) reflects the historical situation when Archelaus journeyed to Rome in 4 B.C. to confirm his kingship over Judea:<sup>24</sup> "A nobleman went into a far country to receive a kingdom and then return" (v 12). But a Jewish embassy also went to Rome objecting to his appointment: "But his citizens hated him and sent an embassy after him, saying, 'We do not want this man to reign over us'" (v 14). When he returned, he executed many people in revenge: "When he returned, having received the kingdom. . . . But as for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them before me" (vv 15, 27). The memory of Archelaus' revenge would reinforce the seriousness of the message of the parable: those who have been faithful with what Jesus their lord has entrusted to them will be entrusted with proportionately more when he returns as king in the coming kingdom, but those who have been unfaithful will lose everything they have.

The figure of the returning lord in each of the six parables discussed above suggests a future return of Jesus in judgment. Such a self-reference is supported by:

- 1) Each parable's description of the lord returning in judgment fits Jesus' description of the future coming of the Son of man and the rest of his recorded teaching concerning his own future role in judgment.
- 2) Figures appearing in other parables whose actions are clearly analogous to Jesus' are depicted as having a future role in judgment: note especially the parables of the seed growing secretly, the tares, the closed door, and possibly

<sup>24</sup>Josephus, *Bell. Jud.* ii.80; *Ant.* xvii. 299-300; cf. *Jeremias, Parables* 59.

the generous employer.

3) The lord in each of these six parables is depicted as *returning*, a description appropriate to Jesus, but odd if referring to some new and distinct Son of man figure.

**We conclude, therefore, that Jesus refers to himself in these parables as the returning lord.** By depicting himself as the judge in the great judgment, determining who will enter the kingdom of God, Jesus is implicitly claiming to have God's authority. In the light of this, by applying the "lord" figure to himself in each of the nine "lord" parables he is implicitly claiming to be the "*Lord*" who alone has the authority to judge and determine ultimate human destiny.

**10. King** "King" is one of the most common symbols for God in the OT and is probably the major figure for God in rabbinic parables.<sup>25</sup> It is also a common symbol for the Messiah.<sup>26</sup>

The parable of the pounds (Luke 19:12-27), as mentioned above under "lord," depicts the coming crisis of judgment and promises that those who have been faithful with what their lord has entrusted to them will be rewarded with proportionately more when he returns as king in the coming kingdom, warning that he will cut off those who have been unfaithful. Like the lord who entrusts his servants with the pounds, Jesus entrusts his followers with the resources of the kingdom, and calls them to responsible stewardship. Just as the returning king is the same person who entrusted his servants with money, so this parable suggests that there will be a future role for Jesus also as king standing in judgment. The picture given by this parable is remarkably similar to Jesus' description of the Son of man as "the king" standing in judgment in Matt 25:31, 34, 40. The parable of the pounds shows how serious it is for Jesus' followers to be responsible stewards, diligent in the development of the resources he leaves them and obedient in the performance of the tasks He assigns them.

The parable of the pounds implicitly claims that Jesus, who is at that time entrusting the message of the kingdom to his followers, will return some day as king to execute judgment on those who do not want him to reign over them (v 27), and reward his servants in proportion to their faithfulness in using what he has entrusted to them. Yet since this role of king, and particularly the king executing judgment, typically refers either to God or to the Messiah, this parable probably includes as an implicit claim by Jesus that he would return in God's or the Messiah's role as king and would perform God's work of executing judgment and rewarding his faithful servants.

### **Conclusion**

**Out of Jesus' fifty-two recorded narrative parables, twenty depict him in imagery which in the OT typically refers to God. The frequency with which this occurs indicates that Jesus regularly depicted himself in images which were particularly appropriate for depicting God.**

**There is little doubt that the parables are authentic to Jesus. They form the**

<sup>25</sup>Cf. Payne, *Parables* 317; and I. Ziegler, *Die Königsgleichnisse des Midrasch, beleuchtet durch die römische Kaiserzeit* (Breslau: Schottbender, 1903).

<sup>26</sup>Cf. Gen 49:10; Num 24:17; Pss 2:6; 45:6; 78:8-11; 110:1; Isa 32:1; Hos 2:5; Zech 9:9.

bedrock of tradition about him. The imagery which Jesus uses to depict himself is an integral and often necessary part of the parables in which they occur. For instance, take the “father” out of the parable of the prodigal son, the “bridegroom” out of the parable of the bridegroom, the “shepherd” out of the parable of the lost sheep, or the “rock” out of the parable of the two houses, and the parable disintegrates in each case. Furthermore, these symbols for God applied by Jesus to himself in the parables are not interpreted in the gospels as divine claims. In the light of these factors, we can be confident that they were not later theologically-motivated insertions.

It is natural that the images to which Jesus gravitated in referring to himself would reflect his self-understanding. Thus, if Jesus believed that he was in some sense God and that in himself God’s reign had entered the world, then it would be perfectly natural that his parables, which describe the kingdom and vindicate his role in it, would express his self-understanding as God. It cannot be mere chance that he so consistently chooses to depict himself using symbols for God. Even if one were to argue convincingly that some or even many of the examples cited above were not intended by Jesus as a reference to himself, the case would still stand that in a remarkably high percentage of Jesus’ parables he depicts himself by means of an image that is commonly used in the OT to depict God. Whether Jesus deliberately chose these symbols for God to describe himself or whether he subconsciously gravitated to them because they so aptly fit his self-understanding, the fact is that Jesus depicts himself as the sower, the director of the harvest, the rock, the shepherd, the bridegroom, the father, the giver of forgiveness, the vineyard owner, the lord, and the king.

As we have seen, the argument implicit in many of these parables depends on the hearer making an association that equates Jesus’ act with God’s act. Jesus implicitly claimed to be performing the work of God: as the sower, sowing the kingdom and implanting his word in people; as the director of the harvest, assuming God’s role as judge in the end time; as the rock, providing the only secure foundation; as the shepherd, seeking out his lost sheep and leading his own; as the bridegroom in the wedding feast of the kingdom, where fasting is unthinkable; as the father, welcoming repentant sinners into the kingdom and calling his children into his service; as the giver of forgiveness, even to grievous sinners; as the vineyard owner, graciously giving undeserved favor; as the lord, who has final authority over his servants, who calls them into responsible participation in the kingdom, and who will ultimately determine the destiny of each of them, depending on their response to his lordship; and as the king, who has authority to allow or refuse entry into the kingdom, and to increase the responsibility of persons who develop his resources, or to take away those resources from persons who fail to develop them.

Not only do these parables depict Jesus as performing the work of God, they implicitly apply various titles of God to Jesus: the Sower, the Rock, the Shepherd, the Bridegroom, the Father, the Lord, and the King. Our conclusion is that through these parables Jesus implicitly claims to be God.

In what sense is this so? It must not be that Jesus alone is God Almighty, since his prayers consistently refer to another as *αββα*, Father, God; and his whole ministry through his death is performed as the servant of God. Yet perhaps it was because Jesus had such a firm conviction that God was his Father that he repeatedly assumed for himself the functions of God. Each of the

parables cited above adds its own contribution to the wider picture, and the overall impression is that Jesus understood himself to be doing the acts of God in an extensive variety of ways.

In particular, Jesus is depicted as *God at work in the messianic age*: as the bridegroom; as the giver of forgiveness; as the sower, sowing the kingdom and sowing his word in men's hearts; as the shepherd, seeking out the lost, bringing his flock together, and leading them; and as the director of the harvest, lord, and king, who will judge in the great judgment, separating those who will enter the kingdom from those who will not enter, and rewarding the righteous.<sup>27</sup>

In a few instances it is possible that the implicit claim being made by Jesus in a parable is christological in the more specific sense of applying an OT figure for the Messiah to himself. As we have seen, the shepherd seeking out his sheep, although having closer parallels with the OT picture of God, also overlaps with the OT picture of the Messiah. Likewise, the "king" image in the parable of the pounds could have evoked the hoped for messianic king out of the line of David.<sup>28</sup> The parable of the two houses, as well, may allude to Isa 28:16f., a messianically applied passage.

Most parable studies, if they deal at all with the sort of implicit claim Jesus makes through the parables, assume that the focus is messianic, even when there is no parallel OT description of the Messiah and when the allusion to God is more natural. **We have observed, however, that usually Jesus' self-depiction in the parables identifies himself directly with God and his work, often that work which is specifically associated with the messianic age. His implicit claim to be the Christ is less frequent in the parables.** This may be due in part to the misunderstanding which the "Christ" imagery, with its political focus on national Israel, might have evoked in his hearers. But for whatever the reason, the parables' picture of Jesus fits the OT imagery for God more closely than the OT imagery for the Messiah. It would be more precise to speak of Jesus' implicit claim to deity than implicit christology in the parables.

The question will naturally arise: "Could Jesus' use of these symbols for God mean simply that he saw himself, as all of the prophets did, as doing the work of God and speaking the word of God? Is he really presenting himself as God?" A few of these parables, like the two houses and the two sons, with their particular focus on obedience to Jesus' word, could be interpreted in this way. **But three points should be remembered which support the view that Jesus was in fact presenting himself as God:**

- 1) None of the prophets applies symbols for God to himself in the way that Jesus so consistently does in the parables.
- 2) None of the prophets themselves claimed that he was doing or would do what the Scriptures specifically say that God will do. Yet it is precisely these things that Jesus so often depicts himself as doing in the parables: forgiving sin, sowing the kingdom, sowing his word in men's hearts, graciously welcoming undeserving sinners into the kingdom, seeking out and rescuing his lost sheep, directing the harvest of the great judgment, and dividing those who will and

<sup>27</sup>Note the following OT passages where these acts of God are associated with the time of the Messiah: bridegroom in Hos 3:1-5; giver of forgiveness in Isa 53:4-6, 10-12, and Zech 3:8-9; sower in Isa 61:11; Jer 31:2f.; Ezek 36:8f.; Hos 2:21-23; Zech 10:9; shepherd in Ezek 34:10-27; Zech 11:7-13; and lord in Mal 3:1.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. Payne, *Parables* 262 n.2.

those who will not enter the kingdom.

3) Many of the images through which Jesus refers to himself indicate not simply what Jesus is *doing*, but focus on who he *is*: the bridegroom of the kingdom, the good shepherd, the one who will return as king, the one with authority as vineyard owner and lord to do what he wishes with what is his, the one with authority to forgive sins, and the lord with authority to give or refuse entry into the kingdom and to reward the faithful. The very fact that Jesus so consistently applies to himself images and symbols for God reinforces the case that he sees himself, in some sense at least, as God.

It is fascinating that in the OT, too, the Messiah is equated with God in several passages. Isa 9:6 reads:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

The closeness of this equation with God is evident in the use of "Mighty God" in Isa 10:21 as a title for "the Lord, the Holy One of Israel" (Isa 10:20). Similarly, in Jer 23:5-6 and 33:15-16 the Messiah is given the title, "the Lord (*y<sup>e</sup>hōwāh*) our righteousness." Likewise, Ps 45:6-7 (NASB) says of the Messiah, "Thy throne, O God (*ʿelōhīm*), is for ever and ever; . . . Therefore God, Thy God (*ʿelōhīm ʿelōheykā*), has anointed Thee . . ." Mal 3:1, also, refers to the Messiah as "the Lord (*hāʾādōn*) whom you seek . . . the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts." There is the passage, too, in Zech 13:7 (NASB), "'Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd, and against the man, My Associate,' (*geber ʿamūti*) declares the Lord of hosts." A study of the use of *ʿamūti* shows that it involves not only similarity in vocation, but community of physical or spiritual descent, according to which he whom God calls His neighbor cannot be a mere man, but can only be one who participates in the divine nature, or is essentially divine.<sup>29</sup>

Again, there is the striking shift from the first to the third person in Zech 12:10:

I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me (*ʿalay*) whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him (*ʿelāw*), as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him (*ʿalāw*), like the bitter weeping over a first-born.

Even in the OT the Messiah is given several of the titles of God, and his function is described as overlapping that of God. It should not be surprising, then, that Jesus, the Messiah, should similarly depict himself as fulfilling some of the functions of God, and do so through imagery and symbols which in the OT typically depict God.

Our conclusion is of vital relevance to the current debate on the deity of Jesus. Did he really understand himself to be deity? Here in the parables, the most assuredly authentic of all the traditions about Jesus, is a clear, implicit affirmation of Jesus' self-understanding as deity. His sense of identification with God was so deep that to depict himself he consistently gravitated to imagery and symbols which in the OT typically depict God.

<sup>29</sup>C. F. Keil, *The Twelve Minor Prophets* 2.397; cf. H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Zechariah* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, repr. 1965) 254.

TABLE: OT Imagery Depicting God Which Jesus Applied to Himself in Parables		
Image	OT passages in which this image depicts God (not exhaustive)	Parables in which Jesus applied this image to himself
Sower	<p>Of God's messianic activity            Isa 61:11; Jer 31:27f.;            Ezek 36.8f. (&amp; <i>Tg. Yer. D</i>);            Hos 2:21-23; Zech 10:9            "planter" used of God's            messianic activity:            Exod 15:17 (&amp; <i>Tg. Yer. I; Frg. Tg.</i>);            2 Sam 7:10; Isa 60:21 (&amp; <i>Tg. Yer. I</i>;            LXX?); Isa 61:3; Jer 24:6f.; 31:27f.;            Jer 32:41; Ezek 17:22f.;            Amos 9:15            "planter" used of God, not            specifically Messianic:            Num 24:6; Pss 80:8, 15; 94:9;            104.16; Isa 5:2, 7;            Jer 2:21; 11:17; 12:2; 17:8?;            18:9; 24:6; 42:10; 45:4</p>	<p>The sower            Mark 4:3-8            Matt 13:3-8            Luke 8:5-8            The seed growing            secretly            Mark 4:26-29            The mustard seed            Mark 4:30-32            Matt 13:31f.            Luke 13:18f.            The tares            Matt 13:24-30</p>
Director of the Harvest	<p>Isa 27:(3), 6, 12; 41:14-16;            Jer 5.24; 51:33, (55);            Hos 2:21-23; 6:11; Joel 3:13            Implied in: Gen 8:22; Isa 4:2;            32:15; Ezek 36:30; 47:12;            Zech 8:12; Mal 4:1-3?</p>	<p>The seed growing            secretly            Mark 4:26-29            The tares            Matt 13:24-30</p>
Rock	<p>Gen 49:24; Deut 32:4, 15, 18, 30f.;            1 Sam 2:2; 2 Sam 22:2, 3, 32, 47;            23:3; Pss 18:2, 31, 46; 19:14; 28:1;            31.2f.; 42:9; 61:2; 62:2, 7; 71:3;            78:35; 89.26; 92:15; 94:22; 95:1;            Isa 8.13f.; 17:10; 26:4</p>	<p>The two houses            Matt 7:24-27            Luke 6:47-49</p>
Shepherd	<p>Gen 49.24; 2 Chr 18:16?;            Pss 23:1-6; 28:9; 80:1;            Isa 40:11; Jer 23:3; 31:10;            Ezek 34.10-22, 31; Zech 9:16;            11:7-10</p>	<p>The lost sheep            Matt 18:12-14            Luke 15:4-7            The good shepherd            John 10:1-5            The hireling            John 10:11b-13</p>

Image	OT passages in which this image depicts God (not exhaustive)	Parables in which Jesus applied this image himself
Bridegroom	Isa 49:18 (14-26); 54:4-8; 62:4f.; Jer 2:2; 3:1-14; 31:32; Ezek 16:8-14, 59-63; 23:4-5, 18, 35; Hos 2:1-3:1; Zeph 3:17?; and Ps 45:8-17 and Canticles throughout as interpreted in the Targums; implied in Isa 1:21; 50.1; Jer 2:20; 4.1; 5:7; Ezek 16.6-63; 23:2-49; Hos 4:15; Mal 2:11	The bridegroom Mark 2:19f. Matt 9:15 Luke 5:34f. The ten virgins Matt 25:1-13
Father	Deut 32.6; 2 Sam 7:14; 1 Chr 17:13; 22.10; 28:6; Pss 68.5; 89:26, 103:13; Prov 3.12; Isa 63:16; 64:8; Jer 3:19f.; 31.9; Mal 1:6; 2:10 <sup>30</sup>	The two sons Matt 21:28-32 The prodigal son Luke 15:11-32
Giver of	Exod 32:32; 34:7; Lev 4:20, 26; 4:31, 35; 5:10, 13, 16, 18; 6:7; 19.22; Num 14.18-20; 15:25-28; 30:5, 8, 12; Deut 21:8; Josh 24:19; 1 Kgs 8:30-40, 50; 2 Chr 6:21-30, 39; 7:14; Pss 25:18; 32:1-5; 78:38; 85:2; 86.5; 99:8; 103.3; 130:3f.; Isa 33:24; Jer 18:23; 31:34; 36.3; Dan 9:9, 19; Amos 7:2	The two debtors Luke 7:41-43 The prodigal son Luke 15:11-32
Vineyard Owner	Deut 8.8 (10); Ps 80:8-16; Isa 5:1-7; 27.2-6; 65:(17), 21, (25); Jer 2:21; 8:13; 12:10; Ezek 28:25f.; Hos 2:15; 10:1; Joel 1:7; Amos 9:13-15; Zech 8.12; and by implication in: Ps 107:37f.; Isa 3:14; 5:10; 37:30-32; Jer 31:(1), 5; Ezek 17:1-10; 19:10-14; Hos 14:7; Joel 2.22; Mal 3.11f.; and in <i>Tg. Cant.</i> 8:11f.	The good employer Matt 20:1-16 The two sons Matt 21:28-32

<sup>30</sup>Cf. also the many references to "my people" (e.g. Isa 1:3) and passages such as Isa 1:2, "sons have I reared up."

Image	OT passages in which this image depicts God (not exhaustive)	Parables in which Jesus applied this image to himself
<p>Lord (κύριος)</p>	<p>one of the most common names for God in the Scriptures, either for <i>ʾadōnāy</i>, for example: Gen 15:2; Ps 35:23; Isa 6:1, Mal 1:14; or for <i>ʾādōn</i>, for example: Exod 23:17; Ps 8:1, 9; Isa 3:1; Mal 3:1. Occasionally God is spoken of metaphorically as a “lord,” as in 2 Chr 18:16 and Mal 1:6. The LXX usually translates <i>ʾehōwāh</i> as κύριος.</p>	<p>The doorkeeper Mark 13:33-37 The tares Matt 13:24-30 The servant entrusted with supervision Matt 24:45-51 Luke 12:41-48 The ten virgins Matt 25:1-13 The talents Matt 25:14-30 Men awaiting their master’s homecoming Luke 12:35-38 The closed door Luke 13:24-30 The pounds Luke 19:12-27</p>
<p>King</p>	<p>1 Sam 12:12; Pss 5:2; 9:4, 7f.; 10:16 11:4; 22:28; 24:7-10; 29:10; 44:4; 47.2-9; 48.2; 68:24; 74:12; 84.3; 89:14; 93:1f.; 95:3; 97:1f.; 98:6; 99:4; 103:19; 145:1, 11-13; 149:2; Is 6:1, 5; 33:17, 22, 37:16; 41:21; 43:15; 44:6; 66:1; Jer 3:17; 8:19; 10:7, 10; 14:21; 17:12; 46:18; 48:15; 49.38; 51:57; Lam 5:19; Ezek 43:7; Dan 2:44; 4:3, 17, 25, 26, 32, 34; 5:21; 6:26; Obad 21; Micah 2:13; 4:7f.; Zeph 3:15; Zech 14:9, 16f.; Mal 1:14</p>	<p>The pounds Luke 19:12-27</p>