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Suing for Peace at Any Cost? Reading the Parable of the Two Kings (Luke 14.31–2) in Times of War

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Abstract

The paper re-examines the parable of the king pondering about engaging in war with a more powerful enemy (Luke 14.31–2), focusing on questions commonly asked in antiquity and still relevant today with respect to war and suing for peace. These regard the cause of the war and the reasons for fighting, the tension between bravery and wisdom, the circumstances that may contribute to the defeat of a superior army and the costs of peace making. I explore this parable in the context of other Lukan passages touching on the topic of war and peace. I challenge the assumption that Luke was a pacifist, and I argue that the parable cannot provide answers to contemporary questions about the ethics of peace and war.

Keywords: Luke 14.31–2; Parable of the Two Kings; war; peace making; pacifism; divine violence

1 Introduction

This paper emerged from a personal struggle with the war against Ukraine, the awe inspired by the heroic resistance of Ukrainians, and their fight for what we take for granted, the simple right to live a normal life in a free country. In September 2022, while analysts were debating whether President Zelensky should sue for peace at any cost, the Gospel of the Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time about the king pondering over the chances of going to war against a much more powerful enemy struck me as particularly timely and worth exploring.¹

It is a rather common view that Jesus was a pacifist, and his position is spelt out plainly in the Gospels, therefore, Christians should be peacemakers and pacifists.² Given the

¹ After presenting this paper at the 77th General Meeting of the SNTS in Vienna, I have received significant input from many colleagues. I am thankful to Katell Berthelot, Simon Gathercole, Shelly Matthews, Harry Mayer, Davis Moessner, Angela Standhartinger, Ruben Zimmermann and others for their comments.

² According to a common view, the original pacifist Jesus movement departed from this ideal during the Constantinian turn. C. J. Cadoux, *The Early Christian Attitude to War. A Contribution to the History of Christian Ethics* (London: Headley, 1919) 19–47 (on Jesus' non-violent teaching; dismissing Luke 14.31–2 as purely metaphorical [38]); D. A. Dombrowski, 'Christian Pacifism', *The Routledge Handbook of Pacifism and Nonviolence* (ed. A. Fiala; New York: Routledge, 2018) 43–53. For a more nuanced picture, already A. von Harnack, *Militia Christi: Die christliche Religion und der Soldatenstand in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten* (Tübingen, 1905, repr. Darmstadt: WBG, 1963) 12–46 (noting, however, that military metaphors do not mean the approval of military service), 19, 47–51 (soldiers were among Christ-believers from the beginning, although Christians did not join

pacifism of the Jesus movement, one could plead at best for non-violent resistance.³ This would also mean that any kind of war is intrinsically wrong, and peace should be acquired at any cost. This was more or less the position of major ecclesial personalities and bodies.⁴ The war has also revived the debate on whether the ethics of just war should be replaced by one of just peace.⁵

Yet is such a blanket understanding of war and peace obvious? Is there an unequivocal message of peace and non-violence in the Gospels? Can we go beyond the Gospels to learn what Jesus himself thought? Can we argue that peace at any cost is always better, regardless of one's reasons for participating in war and despite the costs of an imposed peace? Obviously, this is not the place to discuss these questions extensively. In this contribution, I can only propose to look at one of the few texts, if not the only one, speaking explicitly about war and peace making, the Parable of the Two Kings.

The parable has been usually interpreted in its literary context as an instruction to the disciples and (since early Christian readings⁶), allegorically, as referring to spiritual warfare. But it has also been used to argue that Jesus promoted non-violence and non-resistance, censuring the Zealots' fight against Roman rule. Thus, Josephine Massyngbaerde Ford has seen in the parable Jesus' response to Jewish revolutionaries'

the army voluntarily); L. J. Swift, 'Early Christian Views on Violence, War, and Peace', *War and Peace in the Ancient World* (ed. K. A. Raaflaub, Malden/Oxford: Blackwell, 2007) 279–96. Nonetheless, the representation of the military in the earliest sources is mostly ambivalent, on occasion clearly positive, notably in Luke-Acts. See N. Huttunen, *Early Christians Adapting to the Roman Empire. Mutual Recognition* (NovTSup 179; Leiden: Brill, 2020) 138–228 (for Luke-Acts, 167–76, 183); R. Runesson, 'Centurions in the Jesus Movement? Rethinking Luke 7:1–10 in Light of the Gaius Inscription at Kefar "Othnay"', *JBL* 142 (2023) 129–49; L. Brink, *Soldiers in Luke-Acts: Engaging, Contradicting and Transcending the Stereotypes* (WUNT 362; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014) 98–164; T. R. Hobbs, 'Soldiers in the Gospels: A Neglected Agent', *Social Scientific Models for Interpreting the Bible: Essays by the Context Group in Honor of Bruce J. Malina* (ed. J. J. Pilch, Leiden: Brill, 2001) 328–48; H. Hegemann, 'Krieg III (NT)', *TRE* 20 (1990) 25–8 (no absolute ban on violence that would hinder military service); H.-H. Schrey, 'Krieg IV (Historisch/Ethisch)', *TRE* 20 (1990) 28–55, at 29.

³ W. Wink, 'Beyond Just War and Pacifism', *Review and Expositor* 89 (1992) 197–214; id., *Jesus and Nonviolence. A Third Way* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003). The case he makes, high-minded as it is, has little practical applicability in case of overpowering wars of aggression intending to wipe out a nation. For a critique of naive pacifism on shaky biblical grounds: N. Biggar, *In Defence of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), esp. 16–60; R. H. Gundry, 'An Exegetical and Biblical Theological Evaluation of N.T. Wright's *How God Became King*', *BBR* 24 (2014) 57–73; on the case of the war against Ukraine: P. Skruibis, 'Why I Hate War and Oppose Pacifism', *Existential Analysis* 34 (2023) 83–8.

⁴ Pope Francis, Audience with participants in the International Congress promoted by the Pontifical Foundation *Gravissimum Educationis*, Summary of Bulletin (18.03.2022); Der Aggression widerstehen, den Frieden gewinnen, die Opfer unterstützen. Erklärung der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz zum Krieg in der Ukraine, Pressemitteilungen der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (10.03.2022). On the position of Pope Francis: P. Smytsnyuk, 'The War in Ukraine as a Challenge for Religious Communities: Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Prospects for Peacemaking', *Studia Theologia Catholica Latina* 1 (2023) 26–70; T. M. Németh, 'Pope Francis and Russia's War Against Ukraine', in the same issue, 92–109; on the ambiguous position of the EKD and the WCC: K. Kunter, 'Still Sticking to the Big Brother. History, German Protestantism and the Ukrainian War', in the same issue, 71–91; C. Hovorun, 'How to not Build a "Potemkin Village" of Ecumenism and Peacemaking', *NÖK* (15.06.2023). A rare exception is Patriarch Bartholomew; see C. Karakolis, 'The Stance of Orthodox Greek-Speaking Churches Regarding the War Against Ukraine: A Critical Perspective with Reference to Romans 13:1–7 and John's Revelation', *Наукoвi записки УКУ: Богослов'я* 9 (2022) 75–93, at 84–7.

⁵ W. Palaver, 'Wie widerstehen? Christliche Friedensethik und der Ukraine-Krieg', *Herder Korrespondenz* 4 (2022). Much more realistic: M. Spieker, 'Christliche Friedensethik und der Krieg in der Ukraine. Warum die Lehre vom gerechten Krieg nicht überholt ist', *Communio* 5 (2022) 557–69; id., 'Gerechte Verteidigung', *Herder Korrespondenz* 6 (2022), G. Scherle and P. Scherle, 'Zum Streit um die christliche Friedensethik angesichts des russischen Angriffskrieges auf die Ukraine', *Junge Kirche* 4 (2022) 14–17.

⁶ Thomas Aquinas' *Catena Aurea* has a selection of texts (III/2, tr. J. H. Newman; Oxford, 1843, 518–20). On the inconsistency of the allegorical interpretation, already A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Luke* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960⁷) 365, n. 2.

‘overconfidence in the providence of God vis-à-vis the power of Rome’, confronting them with the analogy of the king lacking sufficient resources who ‘should make peace with the enemy while that enemy is still a great way off’. She suggested that

Jesus’ analogies here are not offered purely for moral and spiritual counsel, but rather in the light of the political situation before and after the great war. If this is correct, it brings out an interesting feature of Jesus’ political stance vis-à-vis the Roman war: he recommended nonresistance, to make peace with the enemy, the superior power, while it is far off. Did Jesus warn his people to make peace with Rome before it would be too late?⁷

In what follows, I will re-examine this parable, focusing on questions usually asked in antiquity and still relevant today with respect to war and suing for peace: about the causes of the war and the reasons for fighting, about bravery and wisdom, and the costs of peace making. I will show that our story is surprisingly silent about issues commonly raised in ancient texts dealing with war and argue that it cannot provide answers to contemporary questions about the ethics of peace and war. I will explore this parable in the context of other Lukan passages touching on the topic of war and peace, challenging the assumption that Luke was a pacifist.⁸

2 Rereading the Parable of the Two Kings

2.1 Context and Meaning

Luke 14 deals with a number of loosely associated topics, grouped around the theme of the banquet and that of discipleship as renunciation. Disciples are expected to relinquish status, family and possessions and welcome suffering and persecution. It is in this context that we find the twin parables of the tower-builder (vv. 28–30) and of the king going to war (vv. 31–2).⁹ The parables seem to address a comparable situation and behaviour from the perspective of two different characters – a man of relatively lower status planning a peaceful endeavour (building)¹⁰ and a king contemplating whether to engage in warfare.

⁷ J. Massyngbaerde Ford, *My Enemy Is My Guest: Jesus and Violence in Luke* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2010) 106. A pacifist reading seems to be implicit in B. E. Reid, S. Matthews, *Luke 10–24* (Wisdom Commentary 43B; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2021) 435, apparently suggesting that our king is the aggressor (‘He calculates whether he has enough men to overpower another king’), rightly emphasising the human costs of war, notably for the civilian population, for women and children, but also challenging war as a solution for conflicts. Also A. Trocmé, *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution* (ed. C. E. Moore; Rifton: The Plough, 2004) 82: an echo of the Judean insurrection following the death of Herod the Great, cf. Jos., *Ant.* 17.10; *Bell.* 2.3–5. The parable would have expressed Jesus’ conviction that armed insurrection against Rome was futile. The original French edition renders *Ant.* 17.10 to make the point, without referring to Luke 14.31–2. *Jésus-Christ et la révolution non-violente* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1961) 130.

⁸ Ford discovered ‘a number of “quietist” features in the Lukan Jesus’ (*Enemy*, 107).

⁹ On Luke’s predilection for twin stories: M. Wolter, *The Gospel According to Luke II* (Luke 9:51–24) (tr. W. Coppins and C. Heilig; Waco: Baylor University Press/Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017) 229; F. Bovon, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas* (Lk 9:51–14:35) (EKK III/2; Zürich: Benziger/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1996) 529–30; H. Klein, *Das Lukasevangelium* (KEK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006) 514.

¹⁰ This may be a watch tower, an auxiliary building in a vineyard (A. Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu II. Auslegung der Gleichnisreden der drei ersten Evangelien* (Freiburg/Leipzig/Tübingen: Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1899) 202); Bovon, *Lukas*, II, 538; I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Exeter: Pater Noster, 1978) 593. For a military background of both parables: J. D. M. Derrett, ‘Nisi Dominus Aedificaverit Domum: Towers and Wars (Lk XIV 28–32)’, *NovT* 19 (1977) 241–61 (251–4). For various uses of the tower, including military purposes, see also M. P. Knowles, ‘“Everyone Who Hears These Words of Mine”: Parables on Discipleship (Matt 7:24–27/Luke 6:47–49; Luke 14:28–33; Luke 17:7–10; Matt 20:1–16)’, *Challenge of Jesus’ Parables* (ed. R. N. Longenecker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 286–305, at 292–3.

The two parables are out of place as they break the line of thought between vv. 26–7 and 33.¹¹ By advising caution, they are at odds with the zeal involved in abandoning everything to follow Jesus.¹² Attempts to establish connections are rather strained, but obviously, once the parables are integrated into the context, they are applied to the following of Jesus.¹³ It is difficult to say whether the parables come indeed from Jesus (as most commentators assume),¹⁴ and, if so, whether they originally had a different meaning, but this is not my main concern.¹⁵

The two parables start with a rhetorical question (τίς ἐξ ὑμῶν/ ἢ τίς)¹⁶ that seems to imply a negative response. The stories share the motif of careful consideration: both characters sit down first to do their maths and consider the consequences of their potential incapacity to complete the task (εἰ ἔχει, 14.28 vs. εἰ δυνάτος, 14.31, μὴ ἰσχύοντος, 14.29 vs. μὴ [δυνατός], 14.32).¹⁷ However, the parables are silent on the result of the deliberation, and we are not told whether the main characters will act on their intention.¹⁸ Thus, theoretically, both engaging the enemy and requesting a peace deal and surrendering are possible.¹⁹ Nonetheless, the emphasis on the greater power of the enemy seems to tip the decision in favour of surrender.

The issue in the twin parables seems to be prudence: one should engage in a venture only after carefully considering the odds of success to avoid a negative outcome.²⁰ The consequences of the potential failure are different. The tower-builder could face mockery. The costs for the king of (not) going to war are left to the imagination of the reader: defeat in battle would lead to the subjugation and spoliation of the country, the obligation to pay

¹¹ Jülicher, *Gleichnisreden* II, 209; A. Loisy, *L'Évangile selon Luc* (Paris: Émile Nourry, 1924) 388, 391; R. Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* (FRLANT 29; Göttingen 1995¹⁰) 184; J. Jeremias, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998¹¹) 105; C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Glasgow: Collins, 1961, repr. 1988) 86; M. Gourgues, *Les paraboles de Luc: d'amont en aval* (Montreal: Médiaspaul, 1997) 129; Wolter, *Luke II*, 227; K. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018²) 298–9; Klein, *Lukas*, 45.

¹² M. Poorthuis, 'The Invasion of the King. The Virtual Mashal as Foundation of Storytelling', *Parables in Changing Contexts. Essays on the Study of Parables in Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism* (ed. M. Poorthuis and E. Ottenheijm; Jewish and Christian Perspectives 35; Leiden: Brill, 2019) 205–25, at 216; G. Sellin, 'Die Kosten der Nachfolge (Das Doppelgleichnis vom Turmbau und vom Krieg) – Lk 14,28–32', *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu* (ed. R. Zimmermann; Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 2007) 604–9, at 608.

¹³ Awareness of the costs of discipleship before committing to it: Loisy, *Luc*, 391; Bovon, *Lukas II*, 543 (spiritual warfare); L. T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (SP 3; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991) 230; Knowles, 'Everyone', 293–4; C. M. Hays, 'Hating Wealth and Wives? An Examination of Discipleship Ethics in the Third Gospel', *TynB* 60 (2009) 47–68 (56–7); Wolter, *Luke*, II, 230; Marshall, *Luke*, 591, 593; L. Thurén, *Parables Unplugged: Reading the Lukan Parables in Their Rhetorical Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014) 319, 349; C. L. Quarles, 'The Authenticity of the Parable of the Warring King: A Response to the Jesus Seminar', *Authenticating the Words of Jesus* (ed. B. D. Chilton and C. A. Evans, Leiden: Brill, 1999) 409–29, at 414; Snodgrass, *Stories*, 299; Poorthuis, 'Invasion', 217.

¹⁴ The fact that the twin parables belong to the Lukan Sondergut and appear in the frame of logia found in Q may raise some scepticism about their originality. Against their authenticity: R. W. Funk, J. R. Butts, B. B. Scott, *The Parables of Jesus: A Report of the Jesus Seminar* (Sonoma: Polebridge, 1988) 68–9, 75, 79–80, 99; in their defence: Quarles, 'Authenticity', 409–29.

¹⁵ Bovon thought that they circulated separately (*Lukas*, II, 529–30). Knowles argues that they always belonged together ('Everyone', 291).

¹⁶ Wolter, *Luke II*, 229. On this type of parable: H. Greeven, 'Wer unter euch ...?', *Gleichnisse Jesu. Positionen der Auslegung von Adolf Jülicher bis zur Formgeschichte* (ed. W. Harnisch; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1982) 238–55; Thurén, *Parables*, 224–5.

¹⁷ Derrett, 'Nisi Dominus', 243; Bovon, *Lukas II*, 543; Klein, *Lukas*, 513–14, 516.

¹⁸ Pace Wolter, *Luke II*, 229, Quarles, 'Authenticity', 414. The open end is a reader-oriented literary device: R. Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables of Jesus. Methods and Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015) 192–3.

¹⁹ Bovon, *Lukas II*, 530; Klein, *Lukas*, 516.

²⁰ Bovon, *Lukas II*, 543; Klein, *Lukas*, 516.

tribute, the shaming of the defeated king and military, the loss of human lives – of soldiers, civilians and possibly the king.²¹

2.2 Possible Parallels?

The parable has been paralleled with a number of biblical and parabiblical texts and moral-philosophical reflections.

2.2.1 Deuteronomy 20

The parable could evoke Deut 20.10–12 establishing the rules for making peace with a city willing to surrender.²² However, except for the sending of an embassy to discuss (the terms of) peace, the parable has little to do with Deut 20, which envisages a war of aggression devised as holy war. To be sure, Philo and Josephus will take pains to tone down the belligerence of the chapter, arguing that the Israelites' fight is legitimate and fair.²³ (I will return later to the importance of affirming the legitimacy of war.)

2.2.2 Kings (Not) Going to War in Jewish Scripture

In the Hebrew Bible/the LXX, kings are seldom characters of *mashals*,²⁴ but in a number of stories, kings are advised against going to war. Against the warning of Micah, Achab goes to war against the king of Aram and is killed (1 Kgs 22). Amaziah of Judah sends to Joash of Israel, challenging him to meet in combat (2 Chron 25.17); the latter warns him to give up his plan, as engaging in evil would cause his fall. Amaziah fails to heed the advice and will be defeated (25.20–4). King Ben-Hadad dispatches Hazael to Elisha, who foretells the terrible destruction Hazael, once king, will bring upon Israel (2 Kgs 8.9–23).²⁵ In some further stories, kings demand peace and/or pay tribute to more powerful kings. I shall return to these on the margin of Luke 14.32.

2.2.3 A Non-combatant King and an Assassin?

The parable is also paralleled in that of the assassin in the Gospel of Thomas.²⁶ This would plead for the removal of any obstacle standing in the way of entering the Kingdom, whether the world or bodily desires.²⁷ (Spiritual interpretations lessen the scandalous nature of the logion.) The two stories are connected by the theme of violence, the

²¹ Hays, 'Hating', 56–7; Marshall, *Luke*, 594; Reid, Shelly, *Luke*, 435; Klein, *Lukas*, 516.

²² Massyngbaerde Ford, *My Enemy*, 106; Derrett, 'Nisi Dominus', 255–6. However, see G. W. Forbes, *The God of Old. The Role of the Lukan Parables in the Purpose of Luke's Gospel* (JSNTSup 198; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) 99–100.

²³ Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 4.219–22 (tr. F. H. Colson, LCL 341) But if the adversaries fail to comply, their city has to be burnt down to avoid later sedition (4.223). Jos., *Ant.* 4.296–8 (tr. H. St. J. Thackeray, LCL 242).

²⁴ Qoh 9.14–15 is the most significant. Qohelet expresses resignation: the battle is not won by the strong, but time and chance (and the inscrutable will of God) determine the outcome of human ventures. Further: Qoh 4.14–16; 5.8; 8.4; 10.16–17; Job 29.25; Sir 10.3.

²⁵ However, the story is not a direct precedent of our parable. Pace H. St. J. Thackeray, 'A Study in the Parable of the Two Kings. "He Sendeth an Embassy and Asketh Conditions of Peace"', *JThS* 14.55 (1913) 389–99, at 395.

²⁶ GThom 98. S. J. Gathercole, *The Gospel of Thomas. Introduction and Commentary* (TENTS 11; Leiden: Brill, 2014) 555. Cf. C.-H. Hunzinger, 'Unbekannte Gleichnisse Jesu aus dem Thomas-Evangelium', *Judentum, Urchristentum, Kirche. Festschrift für Joachim Jeremias* (ed. Walther Eltester; BZAW; Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1960) 209–20, at 215–17; Snodgrass, *Stories*, 297; Bovon, *Lukas II*, 530; Gathercole, *Gospel*, 555–7; critically: K. Schwartz, *Gleichnisse und Parabeln Jesu im Thomasevangelium. Untersuchungen zu ihrer Form, Funktion und Bedeutung / The Parables of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas: A Study of their Form, Function and Interpretation* (BZNW 236; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020) 230.

²⁷ J. Pavelčík, 'The Parable about a Man Who Killed $\eta\epsilon\rho\iota\varsigma\tau\alpha\nu\omicron\varsigma$ (Gos. Thom. 98)', *Coptica, Gnostica und Mandaica. Sprache, Literatur und Kunst als Medien interreligiöser Begegnung(en) / Language, Literature, and Art as Media for*

prior analysis of the capacity to carry out a violent act and the application to the condition of discipleship. However, there are several significant differences. The Lukan parable is not about the confrontation of two individuals, but of their armies. Our king, as we shall see, is not the aggressor. The outcome is still open, whereas in Thomas the decision to kill the *megistanos* is carried out.

2.2.4 *The Topos of the King Going to War*

Comparing the New Testament and rabbinic parables, Marcel Poorthuis argues that Luke 14.31–2 is a *nimshal* of the virtual *mashal* of the king going to war.²⁸ The rabbinic, exegetical parables which use this virtual *mashal*²⁹, throw little light on our text. In all of them, the king stands for God. Many speak of a king planning to destroy a city. Unlike our similitude, none is meant to set an example for human behaviour.³⁰ Thus, if Luke 14.31–2 is to be included in this collection, it also differs significantly from all the other parables. It is the only one in which the king stands for the potential disciple; further, the king does not intend to wage war against another city.³¹

2.2.5 *Wisdom in Building and War*

The twin parables seem to echo Prov 24.3–6, which argues that wisdom is needed to build a house and to wage war.³² Yet a literary dependence on Proverbs is unlikely. There are a few verbal correspondences (*οικοδομέω, πόλεμος, βουλευ-*), but Luke speaks of building a tower, not a house. The sayings are stock proverbial material, closer to the common contrast between peaceful enterprises (building) and destructive ones (war) (cf. Eccl 3.1–8; Jer 1.10). Luke, conversely, tells short stories with a different message. Wisdom is implicit and is not a certain key to success: prudence is needed to prevent failure.

Comparing peaceful ventures, like building, with making war is a literary motif. Onasander's general 'should know that not only is a *firm foundation necessary for houses and walls [...]*, but that *in war also it is only after one has prepared a firm beginning, and has laid a safe foundation, that he should take the field*. For those whose cause is weak, when they take up the heavy burden of war, are quickly crushed by it and fail'.³³

2.2.6 *A Historical Background?*

Some have supposed that the parable echoed the war between Herod Antipas and Aretas IV, ending with the defeat of Herod, without addressing, however, the message the

Interreligious Encounters (ed. W. B. Oerter and Z. Vitkova; TU 185; Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2020) 59–74; Gathercole, *Gospel*, 555–8.

²⁸ The virtual *mashal* is a basic pattern belonging to the common stock of storytelling, occurring only in connection with its *nimshal*(s). Poorthuis, 'Invasion', 207–8, 222–4.

²⁹ Poorthuis, 'Invasion', 211–21. See also I. Ziegler, *Die Königsgleichnisse des Midrasch, beleuchtet durch die römische Kaiserzeit* (Breslau: Schlesische Verlags-Anstalt / Schottlaender, 1903) 61–100.

³⁰ Few argue that the parables set divine behaviour as example for human conduct: Hunzinger, 'Unbekannte Gleichnisse', 215–17; Derrett, 'Nisi Dominus', 244, 258; C. H. T. Fletcher-Louis, 'Jesus Inspects His Priestly War Party (Luke 14.25–35)', *The Old Testament in the New Testament: Essays in Honour of J.L. North* (ed. S. Moyise; JSNTSup 189; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) 126–43, at 130. This is unconvincing. Rightly, A. J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 144; Snodgrass, *Stories*, 298; Poorthuis, 'Invasion', 216.

³¹ Rightly, Poorthuis, 'Invasion', 222.

³² Bovon, *Lukas*, II, 529. Cf. Prov. 24.6, war requires advice and deliverance comes from a multitude of counsellors. M. V. Fox translates *החבילות* with strategy: *Proverbs 10-31* (AB 18B; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 744. The LXX reads *κυβέρνησις*. Translations of v. 5 asserting that a wise man is stronger than a mighty one rely on the LXX (the MT makes no comparison).

³³ Onas., *Strat.* 4.3–4 (LCL 156, 393, emphases added). On the need to carefully consider the strengths and weaknesses of the parties before going to war, also Xen., *Mem.* 3.6.8, 11 (tr. E. C. Marchant, O. J. Todd, LCL 168).

parable would have conveyed under such circumstances.³⁴ The parallel is not obvious.³⁵ The question of whether Jesus knew of Antipas' failure and uttered the parable as a negative exemplum is a moot one. The parable seems rather a paradigmatic story about a king at war. Such a stock story could match any number of wars.³⁶

While the historicity of the speech of Agrippa II to Jewish authorities before the start of the Jewish War, evoked by Josephus, is doubtful, there are some correspondences between this speech and our parable.³⁷ The king attempts to dissuade the Jews from rebelling against Rome, as their fight against a military superpower is doomed to fail. Engaging the Romans would bring destruction upon their country, the holy city and the Temple.³⁸ The speech shares with the parable the view that one should abstain from fighting against a more powerful enemy, but lacks the details of the narrative.

2.2.7 Careful Consideration in Moral-Philosophical Contexts

Considering the requirements and consequences of an undertaking before engaging in it and assessing the capacity to carry it out to avoid failure and shame are also encountered in moral-philosophical reflection. An often evoked parallel³⁹ is Epictetus' advice to those eager to take the path of philosophy but unable to cope with the difficulties, eventually failing disgracefully.⁴⁰ The principle of careful consideration is illustrated with an agonistic example (winning the Olympic games). Both paths require a radical change in lifestyle, determination, and thorough preparation.

Philo speaks allegorically of the war fought by wickedness and virtue for inhabiting the soul.⁴¹ Virtue, of a peaceful disposition, takes up the fight against evil nature only after ascertaining its own strength and ability to be victorious; she avoids engaging in the agon if her powers are weak, for it would be shameful for virtue to suffer defeat.⁴² Defeat, however, is not an option for virtue.⁴³

Overall, these oft-invoked parallels do not go beyond commonplaces (kings going to war, asking for peace) or literary topoi (wisdom required in peaceful and military ventures, the war between virtue and vice).

³⁴ J. Murphy-O'Connor, 'Paul in Arabia', *CBQ* 55 (1993) 732–7, at 734–5, n. 26; Bovon, *Lukas II*, 542, n. 101; J. G. Echegaray, 'Flavio Josefo en la interpretación de algunos pasajes evangélicos de Lucas. El caso de Lc 14, 31–32', *Fortunatae: Revista canaria de Filología, Cultura y Humanidades Clásicas* 22 (2011) 55–64; Massyngbaerde Ford, *My Enemy*, 106 (although preferring a reference to revolutionary Jews who rejected Roman rule); Thurén, *Parables*, 25, 319. Jülicher found the hypothesis unnecessary (*Gleichnisreden II*, 209); Loisy refuted it (*Luc*, 390).

³⁵ Josephus (*Ant.* 18.5.1/18.109–15) does not mention any entreaties from Herod to prevent the war (tr. L. H. Feldman, *LCL* 433). Apart from the confrontation of two kings, the narrative has no details that would fit the parable.

³⁶ Esp. the wars among the last Hasmonians (*Jos., Bell.* 1.5–7 / 1.120–58; tr. H. St. J. Thackeray, *LCL* 203); cf. *Ant.* 14.1–5.

³⁷ I owe this point to Katell Berthelot.

³⁸ *Bell.* 2.16.4/2.345–401. This piece of dissuasive rhetoric, written after the destruction of Jerusalem, is the antithesis of a military speech: it questions the usual arguments that would endorse a war, minimising the slights Jews have suffered, ridiculing their desire for freedom and claiming that it is impossible to withstand a superior enemy. Ironically, even God supports the Roman rule. On the speech: S. Rocca, 'From Human Freedom to Divine Intervention: Agrippa II's Address on the Eve of the Jewish War', *The Future of Rome. Roman, Greek, Jewish and Christian Visions* (ed. J. J. Price and K. Berthelot; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) 130–54.

³⁹ Wolter, *Luke II*, 229–30; Sellin, 'Kosten', 606; Snodgrass, *Stories*, 296. Yet, Epictetus emphasises rather the need for serious preparation, constancy and readiness to remove all deterrents. The conclusion may also suggest dissuasion. *Diss.* 3.15.11–13. (tr. W. A. Oldfather, *LCL* 218).

⁴⁰ *Diss.* 3.15.1, 9.

⁴¹ Philo, *Abr.* 105–6 (tr. F. H. Colson, *LCL* 289); Wolter, *Luke II*, 230; Sellin, 'Kosten', 606; Snodgrass, *Stories*, 296.

⁴² Philo, *Abr.* 105–6.

⁴³ Philo, *Abr.* 106.

2.3 Questions that Need Clarification

The interpretation of the parable depends on a couple of contentious issues: the initiative for starting the war and implicitly its nature, and the way out from war through a peace deal or through unconditional surrender.

2.3.1 Starting a War of Aggression?

Some translations suggest that our king intends to start a war, rendering *συμβαλεῖν* as going out to wage war.⁴⁴ But encountering in war or rather clashing would be more appropriate.⁴⁵ This, however, leaves open the question about the initiative. The second verb, which describes the encounter with the enemy, *ὑπαντάω*, may be neutral in itself,⁴⁶ but all three occurrences in Luke-Acts denote a tense and dangerous encounter with a potentially hostile character, ending in a conflict.⁴⁷

A careful reading shows that the matter under consideration is not starting an offensive. The other king is coming against our king (*ἐρχομένῳ ἐπ' αὐτόν*).⁴⁸ The very dilemma the latter faces—to go out and clash with a more powerful enemy coming against him or to sue for peace while he is still far away—indicates that he has not initiated the campaign, and he does not control the events. He only has the choice to engage in combat or to surrender without fighting. The question about initiative is important because it usually determines the nature of a war. Having the initiative is mostly characteristic of wars of aggression. While the aggressor chooses to invade, the one who fights a defensive war is doing so by necessity and may have no other choice.⁴⁹

Should our king be the aggressor, it would make no sense to consider suing for peace from the start.⁵⁰ Therefore, as Jülicher remarked, he does not consider starting a war of conquest but goes out to defend his independence while the enemy is already marching up against him; it is only in that sense that the decision about war or peace depends on him.⁵¹

2.3.2 The Purpose of the Embassy: a Peace Deal or Unconditional Surrender?

Deliberations open the possibility of sending an embassy to ask for (the terms of) peace. NA²⁸ has *ἐρωτᾷ τὰ πρὸς εἰρήνην*⁵² that would mean inquiring about the terms of a peace

⁴⁴ NRSV ('wage war'); NKJ ('make war'); TOB ('il part faire la guerre'). Bovon, *Lukas* II, 541, n. 95.

⁴⁵ Klein, *Lukas*, 516, with n. 36 (pointing to parallels from 1 and 2 Macc; Jos., *Ant.* 12.222), against Bovon, *Lukas* II, 541, n. 96. In a number of episodes during the Maccabean war, *συμβαλεῖν* refers to troops clashing: 1 Macc 4.34; 2 Macc 8.23; 14.17. (Commonly, the Maccabees go out to confront the troops of the invader.) For classical uses: J. J. Wettstein, *Novum Testamentum Graecum cum variis lectionibus et commentario* I (Amsterdam: Off. Domeriana, 1751) 755.

⁴⁶ LSJ, s.v. *ὑπαντάω*, BDAG, s.v. (b).

⁴⁷ Also Luke 8.27; Acts 16.16.

⁴⁸ Rightly, Derrett, 'Nisi Dominus', 254 (a defensive campaign), W. Schmithals, 'The Parabolic Teachings in the Synoptic Gospels' (tr. D. J. Doughty), *Journal of Higher Criticism* 4 (1997) 3–32; Klein, *Lukas*, 516, with n. 36; Quarles, 'Authenticity', 413–14 (the aggressor king would stand for Jesus). Pace Reid, Matthews, *Luke*, 435. For *ἐρχεσθαι ἐπι* as attacking: Wolter, *Luke* II, 231. Compare 2 Chron 28.20; 36.6; 1 Macc 5.39; 8.4; 11.15.68. For further references in classical literature: Wettstein, *Novum Testamentum Graecum*, 756.

⁴⁹ Max. Tyr., *Or.* 24.2. Maximus of Tyre, *The Philosophical Orations* (tr. M. B. Trapp, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

⁵⁰ Rightly, Klein, 516, n. 36; pace Knowles, 'Everyone', 293.

⁵¹ Jülicher, *Gleichnisreden* II, 205. Pace C. A. Reeder, *Gendering War and Peace in the Gospel of Luke* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018) 33, who regards the king as a negative example, evoking 'considerations of militarized masculinity'.

⁵² On the authority of \aleph^2 A D (also L N W Δ Θ Ψ M). *Τὰ εἰς εἰρήνην* in K suggests the same understanding.

deal.⁵³ However, \mathfrak{B}^{75} reads ἐρωτᾷ εἰρήνην.⁵⁴ Quite similarly, the Vaticanus has ἐρωτᾷ εἰς εἰρήνην and \mathfrak{N}^* πρὸς εἰρήνην. In these (seemingly earlier) readings, the king ponders simply about asking for peace.⁵⁵

Alternatively, some have suggested that ἐρωτᾷ [τὰ] εἰς εἰρήνην, inquiring about (one's) peace, translates the Hebrew formulaic עוֹלַם לְאָשׁ. In military confrontations or in encounters between a powerful king and one with lesser military capability, this common greeting formula means unconditional surrender,⁵⁶ in particular when tribute or gifts are offered. Thus, following David's resounding victories, King Toi of Hamath sends his son, Joram, to greet David, lit. to inquire about [his] peace (ἐρωτῆσαι αὐτὸν τὰ εἰς εἰρήνην), to bless him and bring him precious gifts (2 Kgdms 8.10, cf. 1 Chron 18.10). Peace negotiations are not mentioned. Toi accepts David as his overlord without a fight. It is obvious that in such contexts ἐρωτῆσαι τὰ εἰς εἰρήνην, whether understood as greeting or explicitly asking for peace, has the same effect: it signifies an act of surrender and submission, meant to avert a war with a powerful enemy.⁵⁷

There is little in favour of Derrett's view that peace might be offered by the enemy, who would recognise the strengths of our king, notably divine assistance.⁵⁸ While, as we shall see, certain conditions may indeed help a smaller army to victory, this is precisely one of the issues our parable does not consider.⁵⁹

While for the translators of the LXX, the rendering of עוֹלַם לְאָשׁ with ἐρωτεῖν τὰ εἰς εἰρήνην was obvious, it is unclear whether this was the meaning Luke meant to convey. The exact phrase does not occur elsewhere in the Gospel, but Luke 19.42 rebukes Jerusalem for failing to recognise τὰ πρὸς εἰρήνην. Since the passage refers to the destruction of Jerusalem (19.43–4), the expression implies circumstances that could have prevented the war, specifically, recognising Jesus and the time of divine visitation. (I will return to this text later.) Thus, reading Luke 14.32 with 19.42–4 in mind suggests that τὰ πρὸς εἰρήνην could refer to inquiring about the terms of peace (as unfavourable as they may be for our king). But the volatility of the manuscript tradition shows that copyists understood the purpose of the embassy differently. Anyway, whether the king asks for peace and surrenders unconditionally or asks for the terms of capitulation while being outnumbered, the effect is the same, and the logic of the parable seems to go against engaging in war. Luke seems to suggest that this would be a sensible decision in the face of an overpowering army.⁶⁰

⁵³ Jülicher, *Gleichnisreden* II, 205; Plummer, *Luke*, 365; Wolter, *Luke* II, 231; Klein, *Lukas*, 41 (as opposed to τὰ πρὸς πόλεμον, cf. Xen., *An.* 4.3.10); Johnson, *Luke*, 230 (a truce); Hays, 'Hating', 56–57. A similar sense is found in the slightly differently formulated *TestJud* 9.7. Werner Foerster reads τὰ πρὸς εἰρήνην, but interprets it here as unconditional surrender (s.v. εἰρήνη, *ThWNT* II 410, ll. 22–24). The parallel from Polyb. 5.29.4 (Wettstein, *Novum Testamentum Graecum*, 756; Bovon, *Lukas* II, 542, n. 101) is not really relevant, as it contrasts τὰ πρὸς τὸν πόλεμον with τὰ πρὸς τὰς διαλύσεις.

⁵⁴ Hanna Papyrus 1 (P⁷⁵), 1B.10r, [DigiVatLib](https://www.digi.vatlib.org/). For similar understanding: Ps-Cypr., *De centesima. De sexagesima. De trigesima* §19, cf. R. Reitzenstein, 'Eine frühchristliche Schrift von der dreierlei Früchten des christlichen Lebens', *ZNW* 15 (1914) 74–88 (at 80, l. 168): 'legationem mittit rogans pacem' (as opposed to the Vg: 'rogat ea quae pacis sunt'. *Biblia sacra vulgata Lateinisch-deutsch*, V. *Evangelia - Actus Apostolorum - Epistulae Pauli - Epistulae Catholicae - Apocalypsis - Appendix* (Sammlung Tusculum) (ed. A. Beriger, W.-W. Ehlers, M. Fieger; Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2018). But Basil has ἐρωτῆσαι τὰ πρὸς εἰρήνην: *Asceticon magnum* II 263, PG 31, 1052–305, at 1261.

⁵⁵ Klein, *Lukas*, 517. Acts 12.20 envisages submission, underscored by supplicants' economic dependence.

⁵⁶ Thackeray, 'Study', 389–99, esp. 391, 393 ('voluntary submission or unconditional surrender'); also Bovon, *Lukas*, II, 542, n. 101; Marshall, *Luke*, 594; Quarles, 'Authenticity', 414; Klein, *Lukas*, 41; Hultgren, *Parables*, 143.

⁵⁷ Thackeray, 'Study', 395; Bovon, *Lukas* II, 542.

⁵⁸ Derrett, 'Nisi Dominus', 255–6.

⁵⁹ Pace Derrett, 'Nisi Dominus', 256.

⁶⁰ Quarles, 'Authenticity', 414 ('the importance and urgency of unconditional surrender to the invading king as the only means of deliverance'); Bovon, *Lukas* II, 542 ('the only sensible way out in the case of clear numerical inferiority').

3 What is Missing from our Parable?

Reflecting on the discrepancy between the parables and their application, Jülicher made an important observation long ago that may open a different perspective in the interpretation of our parable. He showed that if the twin parables were indeed about giving up everything for the sake of discipleship, as v. 33 suggests, they should sound quite differently, endorsing sacrifice and commitment, not careful consideration. Thus they could read like:

Who among you who wanted to build a tower and his resources were insufficient, would not rather sell his house and farm, to avoid being ridiculed? And *what king, who would have to defend his independence against a foreign invader, would not risk property and life to defeat the enemy in spite of his superiority?*⁶¹

In what follows, I will pursue this alternative path, to show that the parable of the king going to war leaves out of sight a number of important issues commonly considered when deciding to engage in a war. It may be unusual to propose an interpretation of a text based on what it could have addressed but does not. However, we need to ask these questions if we wish to consider whether a New Testament text, which deals with warfare and peace making, can have some relevance for an ethics of war and peace.⁶²

3.1 *The Casus Belli and the Justness of the War*

Most ancient recollections of wars comprise some reflection on the events that spark or justify an armed conflict. Addressing the causes of the war matters; shedding light on the reasons for fighting is decisive for the ethical evaluation of the war.

The Bible recounts wars which Israel fights to fulfil the divine promise of the land, defensive wars or holy wars. (The latter, cf. Deut 20.10–12, 16–17, are in fact wars of aggression.) The wars enemies wage against Israel are interpreted as manifestations of divine judgement. The Maccabean wars are envisaged as a holy combat meant to free Israel from an ungodly rule, to defend the Law and restore the holiness of the temple.

Greek and Roman writers define the conditions that justify starting a war, and historians usually identify the causes of particular wars.⁶³ Wars fought for rightful reasons, in

⁶¹ Jülicher, *Gleichnisreden* II, 209 (tr. KZ, emphases added).

⁶² Applying ethical systems or inquiring whether the New Testament may be a source of ethics is beyond the purpose of this paper, just as the analysis of contemporary ethical debates on just war, just peace and pacifism. The New Testament may contain what Ruben Zimmermann has called ‘implicit ethics’: ‘The “Implicit Ethics” of New Testament Writings: A Draft on a New Methodology for Analysing New Testament Ethics’, *Neotestamentica* 43 (2009) 399–23; id., ‘How to Read Biblical Texts Ethically: The New Method of “Implicit Ethics” for Analyzing Biblical Ethics’, *Key Approaches to Biblical Ethics. An Interdisciplinary Dialogue* (ed. V. Rabens, J. Grey, and M. Kamell Kovalishyn; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2021) 15–49. But I am rather sceptical about readings of the New Testament that do not contextualise texts with moral implications. Rightly, R. A. Burrige, ‘Is “Biblical Ethics” a “Genre Mistake”?’ *Methodological Reflections on New Testament Ethics in Debate with Gustafson and Hays*, *Key Approaches to Biblical Ethics*, 237–68. More specifically, I doubt that (problematic) biblical texts may be used today to question the legitimacy of defensive wars.

⁶³ C. O’Driscoll, ‘Rewriting the Just War Tradition: Just War in Classical Greek Political Thought and Practice’, *International Studies Quarterly* 59 (2015) 1–10; A. Keller, ‘Cicero: Just War in Classical Antiquity’, *From Just War to Modern Peace Ethics* (ed. H.-G. Justenhoven and W. A. Barbieri, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2012) 9–30; E. M. Keazirian, *Peace and Peacemaking in Paul and the Greco-Roman World* (New York/Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2014) 79. Aristotle lists the arguments that can be used to legitimise a war (‘we have been wronged in the past; and now that opportunity offers ought to punish the wrongdoers; or, that we are being wronged now, and ought to go to war in our own defense – or in defense of our kinsmen or our benefactors; or, that our allies are being wronged and we ought to go to their help; or, that it is to the advantage of the state in respect of glory

particular defensive ones, are just and attract divine assistance (an issue to which I will return).

Our parable has nothing to say about the causes of the war. It appears though as an act of aggression, faced with surprising pragmatism. It is simply happening, and a decision needs to be taken. More importantly, the circumstances that would legitimise engaging the enemy – self-defence and the reasonable interests of the attacked kingdom – are not addressed either.

3.2 Circumstances that Could Contribute to Victory

The parable does not address a number of conditions that might allow engaging the enemy in spite of his numeric superiority. The point was well made by Derrett: ‘A king may well decide that, so far from suing for peace, he may take advantage of his foe’s being in hostile territory, of a long siege, of the terrain, or his troops’ morale, and rout the invaders.’⁶⁴

Ancient authors are well aware of such circumstances, which may secure victory against the odds. These combine strategy and logistics, the human factor and divine assistance.⁶⁵ I am interested here in the two latter aspects.

One of the most important virtues in ancient recollections of wars, with a decisive role in victory, is courage.⁶⁶ Courage means acting rightly in the face of danger, for a right cause, for noble reasons, to preserve the welfare of the community and honour.⁶⁷ It involves a balance between fearlessness that would take unnecessary risks and excessive fearfulness.⁶⁸ Courage is linked to motivation. Thus, fighting for the most cherished values is crucial. Defending one’s family and country rank highest, but religious ideals or public welfare are also important. These values boost courage and provide unrivalled strength, allowing the lesser army to achieve victory.⁶⁹

or wealth or power or the like’); *Rhet. ad Alex.* II, 1425A (tr. H. Rackham, LCL 317). These reasons are not enumerated as just causes that have to be met to start a war but as arguments for a pro-war decision. Nonetheless, they are envisaged as concerns that would have resonated with the audience.

⁶⁴ Derrett, ‘Nisi Dominus’, 256. Also Klein, *Lukas*, 516; Bovon, *Lukas* II, 543.

⁶⁵ ‘Success is always due either to the favour of the gods which we call good fortune, or to man-power and efficiency, or financial resources, or wise generalship, or to having good allies, or to natural advantages of locality.’ *Ar.*, *Rhet. ad Alex.* II, 1425A. See also Val. Max., *Mem.* 2.7.10 strict discipline and obedience to orders allowed the troops to overcome a numerically superior army (tr. D. R. Shackleton Bailey, LCL 492). On *topoi* in military harangues: E. Krentz, ‘Paul, Games, and the Military’, in *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook*, (ed. J. P. Sampley; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003) 344–83 (at 349). The outcome of battles was determined by motivation (fighting for protecting their land and family, for collective or personal glory), the attitude of soldiers, notably their determination and endurance of hardships, courage defying death and religious considerations: Keazirian, *Peace*, 28.

⁶⁶ In the case of numeric inferiority: Val. Max. 3.2.5; further examples are discussed below. Exaggerating the number of the enemy troops to bolster courage may even be a deliberate strategy, as reported of Caesar: *Suet.*, *Jul.* 66.1 (tr. J. C. Rolfe, LCL 31).

⁶⁷ *Ar.*, *Eth. Nic.* 1115b (tr. H. Rackham, LCL 73); Polyb. 6.54.3 (tr. W. R. Paton, LCL 138); N. L. Schwartz, ‘“Dreaded and Dared”: Courage as a Virtue’, *Polity* 36 (2004) 341–65 (344–5). Courage is inextricably linked to noble reasons. M. Deslauriers, ‘Aristotle on Andreia, Divine and Sub-Human Virtues’, *Andreia: Studies in Manliness and Courage in Classical Antiquity* (ed. R. Rosen and I. Sluiter; Leiden: Brill, 2017) 187–211.

⁶⁸ Schwartz, ‘Dreaded’, 344–7; Deslauriers, ‘Aristotle on Andreia’, 188; cf. Pl., *Laches* 195A; *Prot.* 360D (tr. W. R. M. Lamb, LCL 165); Pl., *Rep.*, 422C (tr. P. Shorey, LCL 237); *Ar.*, *Eth. Nic.* 1106A–1107B. For the orators: J. Roisman, ‘The Rhetoric of Courage in the Athenian Orators’, in *Andreia: Studies in Manliness and Courage in Classical Antiquity* (ed. R. M. Rosen and I. Sluiter; Mnemosyne Sup 238; Leiden: Brill, 2003) 127–43. Courage requires both cautious self-confidence (confidence in the ability to overcome the obstacles, ὀπίσθησις) and spiritedness (θουμός). Schwartz, ‘Dreaded’, 348–9.

⁶⁹ *Aen. Tact.*, prol. 2: ‘for those who are to incur peril in defence of what they most prize, *shrines and country, parents and children*, and all else, the struggle is not the same nor even similar. For if they save themselves by a

The Maccabees who fight for the temple and their country display exceptional bravery (ἀνδραγαθία), military prowess and resilience in the face of a more powerful enemy.⁷⁰ In a crucial moment of the war, Judas and his ten thousand men face the far greater army of Lysias (1 Macc 4.28–35). Realizing the boldness (θάρσος) of Judas and his men, their resolve to die a noble death, and facing the high losses incurred by his army, Lysias withdraws to Antioch (4.35). He will prepare for a later invasion by enlisting mercenaries. But this window of opportunity will allow Judas and his troops to free and reconsecrate the temple. This campaign will also open the way to further victories against an even larger force (5.37–43). 2 Maccabees summarises: although they were ‘few in number, they seized the whole land, pursued the barbarian hordes, and regained possession of the temple [...], liberated the city, and re-established the laws [...]’, showing noble courage (ἀνδραγαθία) and high spirit (εὐψυχία) (2.20–2; also 1 Macc 14.18).⁷¹

Herodotus’ exempla of attacked rulers, who stand up against a much more powerful king, emphasise both the courage of those who defend their country and the negative outcome of wars of aggression. Tomyris, the queen of the Massagetae, confronts the mighty Cyrus and dispatches a messenger to dissuade him from invading her land.⁷² Cyrus will not abide by the established borders. He will engage the Massagetae, will even obtain a partial victory, but will eventually face a crushing defeat and death.⁷³ Cambyses will also fail when he sets off to seize Ethiopia. The Ethiopian king rejects his expansionist intents, arguing that Cambyses lacks just motives to start the war and fails to respect the borders.⁷⁴ Cambyses will incur serious losses, forcing him to give up the campaign against Ethiopia.⁷⁵

Plutarch’s sayings of Spartan rulers repeatedly stress that lesser numbers are not decisive if men fight with courage, for the right reason—in self-defence, to fend off assaults of evil enemies, with appropriate motivation, with a sense of responsibility for their country.⁷⁶

Courage and fighting for a just cause are also associated with divine succour. ‘[I]t is neither numbers nor strength which wins victories in war’, Xenophon asserts, ‘but whichever of the two sides it be whose troops, by the blessing of the gods [σὺν τοῖς θεοῖς], advance to the attack with stouter hearts’.⁷⁷ Fighting for the right reasons, in particular a defensive war, ensures exceptional courage through heavenly help. Onasander argues that:

it should be evident to all that one fights on the side of justice. For then the gods also, kindly disposed, become comrades in arms to the soldiers, and men are more eager to take their stand against the foe. For with the knowledge that they are

stout defence against the foe, their enemies will be intimidated and disinclined to attack them in the future, but if they make a poor showing in the face of danger, no hope of safety will be left’. (LCL 156, 27). Also Polyb. 3.109; 6.52.4–7 (while Carthaginians employ mercenaries, the Romans fight for their country and their children). A. D. Lee, *Warfare in the Roman World* (Key Themes in Ancient History; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) 54–5. Courage is a core military virtue, linked with service to the country, preserving public welfare, and acquiring fame. Polyb. 6.54.1–3; Lee, *Warfare*, 62–9, at 62.

⁷⁰ On the bravery of Judas and his brothers and their fight for a just cause: 1 Macc 3.2–5; 14.29.

⁷¹ On the Maccabean wars: J. C. Bernhardt, *Die Jüdische Revolution: Untersuchungen zu Ursachen, Verlauf und Folgen der hasmonäischen Erhebung* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017) esp. 290–328.

⁷² Hdt. 1.206 (tr. A. D. Godley, LCL 117).

⁷³ Hdt. 1.206–14.

⁷⁴ Hdt. 3.21. Herodotus II (tr. A. D. Godley, LCL 118).

⁷⁵ Hdt. 3.25.

⁷⁶ Plut., *Reg. et imp. Apophth.*, Mor. 190B–D; *Apophth. lac.*, Mor. 210C, 215D (Brasidas and Agis); *Apophth. lac.*, Mor. 225CD (Leonidas). (*Moralia* III, tr. F. C. Babbitt, LCL 245).

⁷⁷ Xen., *An.* 3.1.42–4 (tr. C. L. Brownson, LCL 90). Paradoxically, those who withstand the enemy and are ready to embrace a noble death, are more likely to survive.

not fighting an aggressive but a defensive war (οὐκ ἄρχουσιν ἀλλ' ἀμύνονται), with consciences free from evil designs, they contribute a courage that is complete; while those who believe an unjust war is displeasing to heaven, because of this very opinion enter the war with fear, even if they are not about to face danger at the hands of the enemy.⁷⁸

Josephus makes a somewhat similar point in Herod's speech to the Jews who prepare to confront the Nabateans. They are said to fight for a just cause, they should punish the lawless, they enjoy a special religious status, and 'those who have justice with them, have God with them, and where God is there too are both numbers and courage'.⁷⁹

As expected, faith and trust in divine assistance feature prominently in religious texts.⁸⁰ Israelites going out to war against a far larger army should not be afraid because God, their liberator from the Egyptian captivity, is with them (Deut 20.1). Relying on God, King Asa overcomes the far superior army of the Ethiopians and Libyans (2 Chron 16.18, cf. 14.6–13). Victory does not depend on large numbers, but strength comes from heaven (1 Macc 3.19).⁸¹ The passage contrasts the δύναμις of a large army to the ἰσχὺς coming from heaven. Judas' resounding victory over the more than six times larger army of Lysias is due not only to the courage of his warriors but to their faith in the saviour God (1 Macc 4.28–35).⁸² Judas prays before facing an overpowering army, evoking God helping David and Jonathan to defeat the Philistines. To those who believe, invisible troops, heavenly appearances may also come to rescue (2 Kgs [4 Kgdms] 6.15–16, and esp. 2 Macc 2.21; 3.34; 10.29). God is expected to fight together with those who love him (1 Macc 4.33).

But even a military manual can start by asserting that the first duty of the cavalry commander is to fulfil the religious rites and pray, to be pleasing to the gods and gain their goodwill. Only afterwards should he look for recruits in sufficient numbers.⁸³

Certainly, there are records of confrontations that went wrong in spite of the heroic defence of a lesser army fighting for a just cause. Yet, these tragic last stands do not speak about despair but about preserving honour. In the Maccabean war, the campaign of Bacchides and Alcimus and their overpowering army will have a tragic outcome (1 Macc 9). Judas, still hoping that they may have the strength to fight, will not listen to those telling him that they are outnumbered, that they should save their lives and return with a larger force (9.8–9). Dying honourably and fighting courageously for their kindred is preferable to fleeing. There is a sort of fatalism in Judas' response: if their time is near, they should die fighting courageously for their brothers and their glory (9.10). After a fierce battle with some gains, Judas dies and the remaining troops flee.

Before the battle of Thermopylae, Leonidas defiantly rejects Xerxes' summoning to surrender the weapons.⁸⁴ Leonidas' and his 300 hoplites' heroic resistance against a ten

⁷⁸ Strat. 4.1–2. J. T. Chlup, 'Just War in Onasander's ΣΤΡΑΤΗΓΙΚΟΣ', *JAH* 2 (2014) 37–63.

⁷⁹ Jos., *Ant.* 15.127–46 (esp. 15.138); also 15.129–31 (their war is just). On the speech: Derrett, 'Nisi Dominus', 255–6; L. Sementchenko, 'On the Two Conceptions of Just War in the "Jewish Antiquities" of Flavius Josephus', *Revue des Études Anciennes* 103 (2001) 485–95.

⁸⁰ Derrett, 'Nisi Dominus', 255–6 ('Jewish history, biblical and apocryphal, tells that superior forces can be defeated by those who know they have God on their side, not by calculation but by faith.')

⁸¹ See Derrett, 'Nisi Dominus', 256, adding Jos., *Ant.* 4. 296–8; 15.138.

⁸² On a parallel with 1 Macc 4.29: Bovon, *Lukas* II, 541; Klein, *Lukas*, 38. Ten thousand is also the size of the army of Barak, confronting Sisera (Judg 4.6,14); that of Gideon against the Midianites (after the first sift, Judg 7.14); and that of Saul fighting against the Philistines (1 Sam 14.23). On ancient armies organised in units of one thousand men: Bovon, *Lukas* II, 541–2.

⁸³ Xen., *Eq. mag.* 1.1–2 (tr. E. C. Marchant, LCL 183).

⁸⁴ Plut., *Apophth. lac.*, Mor. 225D. On the battle: Hdt. 7.204–33; on Leonidas and his soldiers' courage: Val. Max., *Mem.* 3.2. ext. 3.

times larger army could not halt the Persian invasion, but, in the long term, it probably contributed to later Greek victories, and it certainly became a source of awe and inspiration for millennia.⁸⁵ Seneca will evoke the example of Leonidas' soldiers, ready to fight to their death, knowing that they have fought for their wives and children.⁸⁶

As a rule, boldness without prudence can, indeed, be harmful.⁸⁷ Prudence makes the difference between courage and senseless daring. But merely calculating the odds of success without a sense of courage, all the more while knowing the values that may be lost, would be inconceivable.

3.3 Honour and Shame

These examples of tragic heroism also evoke the issue of honour and shame, quite surprisingly, absent from our parable.⁸⁸ It is commonplace that in ancient Mediterranean societies preserving honour and avoiding disgrace was crucial, and this was particularly true for political and military leaders.⁸⁹

In military contexts, honour is associated with courage and heroism. Judas and his brothers are praised for having fought for Israel, defending and bringing glory to their people.⁹⁰ Before the confrontation with Lysias, Judas prays for the shaming of the enemy's army through defeat: God should fill them with cowardice and melt the boldness of their strength (1 Macc 4.31–32). Even the much more pious 2 Maccabees finds it important to highlight the *philotimia* of Judas and his brothers (2.20–22).⁹¹ Honour was a value worth dying for. In his last fight, Judas argues that dying in combat and preserving honour is preferable to the shame of a cowardly retreat (1 Macc 9.10). Surviving at any cost is not an option.

Polybius shows how funeral orations evoked and immortalised the fame 'of those who performed noble deeds', 'who did good service to their country', inspiring young men 'to endure every suffering for the public welfare in the hope of winning the glory that attends on brave men'.⁹²

⁸⁵ It is debated whether the last stand at Thermopylae had a role in later Greek successes by holding up the Persian troops, but it may have indirectly contributed to the Persian defeat at Salamis. C. Carey, *Great Battles. Thermopylae* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) 204–5, 210–12; D. L. Berkey, 'The Legacy of the Battle of Thermopylae', *Democracy and Salamis: 2500 Years After the Battle That Saved Greece and the Western World* (ed. E. M. L. Economou, N. C. Kyriazis, A. Platias; Cham: Springer, 2022) 147–58.

⁸⁶ Sen., *Ep.* 82.20–21.

⁸⁷ Pl., *Meno* 88B.

⁸⁸ Pace Poorthuis, 'Invasion', 217.

⁸⁹ D. L. Cairns, *Aidōs. The Psychology and Ethics of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greek Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); J. E. Lendon, *Empire of Honour. The Art of Government in the Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 237–49, 265–6; S. E. Phang, *Roman Military Service: Ideologies of Discipline in the Late Republic and Early Principate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 38, 113, 142–5; S. Hoss, 'On Making Honour Visible', *Ad Vallum: Papers on the Roman Army and Frontiers in Celebration of Dr Brian Dobson* (ed. A. Parker; Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 2017) 19–34; B. J. Malina, *The New Testament World. Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001³) 27–57, *passim*; B. J. Malina, J. H. Neyrey, 'Honor and Shame in Luke–Acts: Pivotal Values of the Mediterranean World', *The Social World of Luke–Acts* (ed. J. H. Neyrey; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991) 25–65; David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000) 23–42 (at 35); id., *The Hope of Glory. Honor Discourse and New Testament Interpretation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2009) 2–33; Schwartz, 'Dreaded', 344–5, 349; Roisman, 'Rhetoric', 131–2; O'Driscoll, 'Rewriting', 4.

⁹⁰ 1 Macc 2.51; 3.2–5; 14.29, 35.

⁹¹ On the Hellenistic conceptual frame, the emphasis on *doxa* and heroism in 1–2 Maccabees: M. Himmelfarb, "'He Was Renowned to the Ends of the Earth'" (1 Maccabees 3:9). Judaism and Hellenism in 1 Maccabees', *Jewish Literatures and Cultures: Context and Intertext* (Brown Judaic Studies 349; ed. A. Norich, Y. Z. Eliav; Providence: Brown University, 2008) 77–97 (78, 84, 94–6).

⁹² Polyb. 6.54.1–3; Lee, *Warfare*, 62–9 (here 62).

Onasander emphasises that a general who has made public his decision to start a war would face shame, should he back off, proving to be incapable of carrying out his intent:

it is most disgraceful and dangerous for a general, after he has given intimations of a beginning of war [...] then to back out. For while everyone laughs at folly and rashness, we despise weakness, and the enemy [...] even if they experience no harm, have good reason to hate the would-be invaders, as men who have not lacked the will, but lacked the ability to put a matter through.⁹³

This perspective resembles that of our parable, addressing the need to consider beforehand the implications of going to war and the importance of being able to go through with the endeavour. But as opposed to Luke, it stresses the shame of pulling back. Read against this background, the silence of our parable on honour and shame is all the more surprising, as shame is explicitly addressed in the previous parable, which speaks of a far more peaceful venture.

3.4 The Outcome of the War

The outcome of the war is discussed only from the perspective of a possible defeat, and surprisingly, most commentators embrace this perspective. The king does not seem to consider the cost of compromise and the potential harmful consequences of an unconditional surrender for himself, his state and his people. But surrender would expectedly lead to the loss of sovereignty, the obligation to pay tribute and other economic disadvantages, and disgrace.⁹⁴ It would also open the door to foreign cultural and religious colonisation. But even a peace deal offered by the adversary can be treacherous and be meant only to buy time for a subsequent attack (1 Macc 6.57–62).

More dramatically, peace at any cost may not be peace at all. Orators evoke circumstances when there is no other choice than risking battle, for a peace dictated by the enemy may be closer to slavery.⁹⁵ Surrender would expose the population to looting, rape and killings perpetrated by the occupier. Writing in a world shaped by the *pax Romana*, Luke may have also been aware that for the Romans, peace was conceivable only as victory, which excluded the option of negotiating peace, and was followed by the violent pacification, humiliation and spoliation of the vanquished after their full surrender (*deditio*) into the good faith (*fides*) of the victor.⁹⁶ Surrender held no guarantee of

⁹³ Onas. 4.5–6.

⁹⁴ Jülicher, *Gleichnisreden* II, 205; Sellin, 'Kosten', 607. These are not considered by C. L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990) 281–4.

⁹⁵ Isocr. 6.51 (Archidamus): 'those who wish to be free ought to shun a peace whose terms are dictated by the enemy as being not far removed from slavery, and should make treaties only when they have defeated their adversaries, or when they have made their forces equal to those of the enemy; for the kind of peace which each side will obtain will be decided by the manner in which they conclude the war.' (tr. G. Norlin, LCL 229). Also Dem. 19.96: 'As for the peace, [...] without realizing, we've been enjoying it like men borrowing money at high interest.' (Demosthenes, *On the False Embassy* (oration 19) (ed. D. M. MacDowell; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 101; for background: 1–14, 248).

⁹⁶ J. Rüpke, *Peace and War in Rome. A Religious Construction of Warfare* (orig. *Domi militiae – Die religiöse Konstruktion des Krieges in Rom*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1990, tr. D. M. B. Richardson; (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2019)) 215–216; more critical: C. A. Barton, 'The Price of Peace in Ancient Rome', in *War and Peace in the Ancient World* (ed. Kurt A. Raaflaub, Malden/Oxford: Blackwell, 2007) 245–55; also N. Rosenstein, 'War and Peace, Fear and Reconciliation at Rome', in the same volume, 226–44 (at 227–8, 234–6); based on Polyb. 20.9.10–10.9, 36.4.1–4; Tac., *Agr.* 30–1; Livy 28.19.4. See also Val. Max., *Mem.* 2.7.1: P. Cornelius Scipio after the Roman army had 'sullied itself by the conclusion of an unseemly treaty', Scipio 'with valour raised, burned down and demolished, levelled with the ground that bold, high-hearted Numantia'.

humane treatment. The occupied territories were turned into a wasteland. As Tacitus' Calgacus, the leader of the Britons, would put it: 'Theft, slaughter, and plunder they [Romans] falsely term empire; where they create a wasteland, they call it peace.'⁹⁷ Conversely, fighting for freedom can preserve the means of survival and subsistence.⁹⁸

Considering these issues, it seems that our king could lose anyway, even when he would not risk engaging in combat.⁹⁹ But taking the decision to avoid fighting at any cost, he would forfeit the chance to preserve his country.

3.5 Why Not Go Against the Odds? Realism and Extravagance in the Parable

In view of the above, we could imagine a scenario in which our king would decide to go against the odds, compensating numeric inferiority with strategy and courage, trusting in divine assistance, deciding, after careful reflection, to fight for the right reasons, to defend his country and his people. The question is, therefore, why none of these issues is considered?

The minimalism of the story may be due to the particularities of the genre. The two twin parables can be best defined as similitudes—short, uncomplicated stories reduced to the bare minimum, describing a common, typical human attitude or a recurring action, with little interest in details and complex discussions to make a single point.¹⁰⁰ While Jülicher's distinction between similitude and parable has been challenged,¹⁰¹ in our case these particularities make perfect sense. A similitude is not meant to explore causal relations, effects, the motivation of actions or various scenarios. The example of the king going to war, like that of the tower-builder, conveys a single idea: the need to assess the odds of succeeding. The *tertium comparationis* is prudence, required for the success of both peaceful and military endeavours.

The pragmatism of our story may also be seen as a feature of parables in general, of those about discipleship in particular.¹⁰² The lack of religious considerations may be due to the this-worldly character of the narrative in parables.¹⁰³

The combination of realism and surprise is typical for parables, which draw on real life and common human actions but also rewrite reality.¹⁰⁴ Ricoeur has pointed to the striking 'contrast between the realism of the narrative and the extravagance of the dénouement and of the main characters': a parable is marked by 'the presence of the extraordinary within the ordinary'.¹⁰⁵ The parable is, thus, *meant to be* arresting, intriguing, out of the ordinary, extravagant, irritating, upsetting, and in some cases, even immoral.¹⁰⁶ However, this literary explanation may too easily downplay the oddity of a story that speaks of going to war or refraining from engaging in war as an exemplum for the disciples of Jesus.

⁹⁷ Tac., *Agr.* 30.6: Rosenstein, 'War and Peace', 228. The speech goes on describing the fate of women and children, the enslavement and plunder of the defeated.

⁹⁸ Max. Tyr., *Or.* 23.3: 'while freedom remains, so too will land and trees and crops'.

⁹⁹ Sellin, 'Kosten', 607.

¹⁰⁰ A. Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu I* (Freiburg: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) 1888) esp. 97–9 (at 98); Bultmann, *Geschichte*, 184, 188; Dodd, *Parables*, 18. In Thurén's classification, these are 'extended rule' parables (*Parables*, 204).

¹⁰¹ Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 107–27 (at 117–25).

¹⁰² Knowles, 'Everyone', 286.

¹⁰³ Dodd, *Parables*, 16; Poorthuis, 'Invasion', 210, on the mashal.

¹⁰⁴ Dodd, *Parables*, 16; J. Kloppenborg, 'Jesus and the Parables of Jesus in Q', in J. Kloppenborg, *Synoptic Problems: Collected Essays* (WUNT 329; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014) 515–54, at 518; id., 'The Representation of Violence in Synoptic Parables', in the same volume, 600–30, at 603; Knowles, 'Everyone', 286.

¹⁰⁵ P. Ricoeur, 'Biblical Hermeneutics', *Semeia* 4 (1975) 27–148 (32, 99).

¹⁰⁶ On the immoral character of certain parables (Luke 16.1–8, GThom 98) and our parable: Poorthuis, 'Invasion', 210, 216.

4 Luke, A Pacifist?

Our parable seems to go against the idea of engaging in war, even when the king is not the aggressor, when preserving his honour and status would possibly require it, and by both ancient and contemporary standards, it would be appropriate to defend his country and his people. It would be, therefore, tempting to see Luke as a pacifist.¹⁰⁷ Alternatively, given that the parable advocates peace talks before the confrontation with an overpowering enemy and even surrender, the parable may suggest a ‘realist’ approach in matters of war.

This impression might be strengthened by other Lukan texts which, compared to parallels in Matthew, do not include references to violence and war. The outcome of the parable of the Great Festive Meal (14.15–24) is much more peaceful compared to that in Matthew (22.2–13). It does not include the marshal of the king going to war, and it does not allude to the destruction of Jerusalem.¹⁰⁸ There is nothing comparable to the terrifying divine war, described so vividly in Matt 22.7, there is no reference to the anger of the divine King, his sending of troops to destroy the murderers of his servants and burn down their city. Matthew’s allegorical version of the banquet suggests that he heavily redacted the parable.¹⁰⁹ Since Luke wrote independently, there is no reason to expect him to have such violent details.¹¹⁰ Even so, the peaceful outcome in Luke is conspicuous, considering that he was also writing after the tragic end of the Jewish War.

Luke’s version of the logion about Jesus not bringing peace (12.51) is also less violent compared to that in Matt 10.34. In Matthew, Jesus outrightly rejects (μὴ νομίσητε) his disciples’ supposition that he came to bring (lit. throw, βαλεῖν) peace to earth. He did not come to bring peace but a sword (μάχαρον). The sword stands here as *pars pro toto* for violent conflict and war.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ Massyngbaerde Ford, *My Enemy*, 106. On peace as a hallmark of Luke: M. Becker, *Lukas und Dion von Prusa: das lukanische Doppelwerk im Kontext paganer Bildungsdiskurse* (Studies in Cultural Contexts of the Bible 3; Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2020) 364–7; M. A. Powell, *What are They Saying about Luke?* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1989) 89–91; J. H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994²) 11, 21–88; W. M. Swartley, *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 123–51.

¹⁰⁸ On Matt 22.6–7 referring to the destruction of Jerusalem: U. Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus. Mt 18–25* (EKK I/3; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener/Zürich: Benziger, 1997) 242; J. S. Kloppenborg, *The Tenants in the Vineyard: Ideology, Economics, and Agrarian Conflict in Jewish Palestine* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006) 216; id., ‘Representation’, 325, 346–7, 349; M. Blickenstaff, ‘While the Bridegroom is with them’. *Marriage, Family, Gender and Violence in the Gospel of Matthew* (London/New York: T & T Clark, 2005) 161–2. Pace K. H. Rengstorf, ‘Die Stadt der Mörder (Mt 22:7)’, *Judentum, Urchristentum, Kirche: Festschrift für Joachim Jeremias* (ed. W. Eltester; Berlin: Alfred Töpelman, 1964) 106–29, at 125; Poorthuis, ‘Invasion’, 215, 222–3.

¹⁰⁹ The source is probably Q, although the issue is debated. *The Critical Edition of Q. Synopsis including the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Mark and Thomas with English, German, and French Translations of Q and Thomas* (ed. J. M. Robinson, P. Hoffmann, J. S. Kloppenborg; Minneapolis: Fortress / Leuven: Peeters, 2000) 432–49 (including GThom 64); *Die Spruchquelle Q. Studienausgabe Griechisch und Deutsch* (ed. P. Hoffmann and C. Heil; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft / Leuven: Peeters, 2002) 94–5; H. T. Fleddermann, *Q: A Reconstruction and Commentary* (BiTS 1; Leuven: Peeters, 2005) 722–3; also Wolter, *Luke II*, 229. Luz argued that Matt, Luke and GThom 64 are independent versions of the same parable (*Matthäus I/3*, 233, 235–6); similarly J. Gnillka, *Das Matthäusevangelium* (HTHKNT I/2; Freiburg: Herder, 1988) 235.

¹¹⁰ Pace Massyngbaerde Ford, *My Enemy*, 107, who thought that Luke omitted the violent features from the parable.

¹¹¹ M. Black, ‘“Not Peace But a Sword”: Matt 10:34ff., Luke 12:51ff.’, *Jesus and the Politics of his Day* (ed. E. Bammel and C. F. D. Moule; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, 287–94, at 289); K. S. Baek, ‘The Sword-in-the-Mouth of Jesus the King: Declarations of War and Peace in the Gospel of Matthew’, *The War Scroll, Violence, War and Peace in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature. Essays in Honour of Martin G. Abegg on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday* (ed. K. Davis, K. S. Baek, P. W. Flint, and D. Peters; STDJ 115; Leiden: Brill, 2016) 354–63, at 360.

In Luke, Jesus brings dissension not a sword.¹¹² A version of this logion in GThom 16.1–3, which seems to combine elements also found in Matthew and Luke and mentions war explicitly,¹¹³ may strengthen the impression that Luke is more peaceable.

Nonetheless, this impression is contradicted by texts which envisage Jesus and God as agents of violence.¹¹⁴ I will refer to Ch. 19, which pictures Jesus as a warrior king who destroys those who rebelled against his rule (19.12,14–15,27) and God as waging war against Jerusalem, the city which has failed to recognise the time of Jesus' visitation (19.41–4).

4.1 *Jesus and God Waging War Against Their People*

In the parable of the throne claimant,¹¹⁵ the nobleman departing to acquire royal power (v. 12) sees his plans threatened by a delegation of citizens of his country (v. 14). Returning as king, he has those who rebelled against him killed (vv. 15, 27). While the parable may echo historical events,¹¹⁶ in the context it receives a puzzling Christological and eschatological interpretation. Identifying the return of the king and the execution of his opponents with the Parousia and eschatological judgement (or seeing in the citizens an allusion to Jesus' Galilean critics¹¹⁷ or to Jewish authorities¹¹⁸) poses serious problems. As much as one would try to bring in socio-historical considerations about rulers punishing their opponents as a matter of honour, the act of the king is one of particular violence and cruelty: he has his enemies slaughtered in his presence (19.27).¹¹⁹ In the Christological reading of the parable, this act is assigned to Jesus.¹²⁰ He is the king who

¹¹² One could discuss here Luke 22.38, where Jesus appears to approve his disciples' remark that they are equipped with two swords, but the meaning of Jesus' answer is controversial. See Wolter, *Luke II*, 479; Klein, *Lukas*, 680–1.

¹¹³ GThom 16.2: 'They do not know that I have come to bring divisions on the earth – fire, sword, war' (Gathercole, *Gospel*, 275–6, noting that 'war', particular to GThom, is a gloss explaining 'sword'). See Wolter, *Luke II*, 167; Schwartz, *Gleichnisse*, 229.

¹¹⁴ Kloppenborg, 'Representation', 603. On violence in the parables, also T. E. Goud, 'Telling Stories in a Violent World', *Encountering the Parables in Contexts Old and New* (ed. T. E. Goud, J. R. C. Cousland, J. P. Harrison; London: T & T Clark, 2022) 105–28. On the tension between the message of non-violence and passages in which Jesus condones violence, also K. Berger, 'Der "brutale" Jesus. Gewaltsames in Wirken und Verkündigung Jesu', *BuK* 51 (1996) 119–27.

¹¹⁵ For the story of the throne claimant as an independent parable: F. D. Weinert, 'The Parable of the Throne Claimant (Luke 19:12, 14–15a, 27) Reconsidered', *CBQ* 39 (1977) 505–14 (505–6); J. Lambrecht, 'Q-Influence on Mark 8.34–9.1', *Logia: Les paroles de Jésus – The Sayings of Jesus. Méorial Joseph Coppens* (ed. J. Delobel; BETL 59; Leuven: Peeters, 1982) 277–304, at 296; Wolter, *Luke II*, 351–2; Klein, *Lukas*, 606. For a careful discussion of the hypotheses (redactional motif vs. two parables, preferring the former): A. Denaux, 'The "Parable of the King-Judge" in Luke-XIX,12-28 and its relation to the "Entry Story" of Luke XIX,29-44', *ZNW* 93.1–2 (2002) 35–57.

¹¹⁶ On the possible historical background Wolter, *Luke II*, 352, 354–6, 361; Denaux, 'Parable', 53–4. I thank Simon Gathercole for sharing with me his forthcoming article in which he provides a detailed and critical overview of the suggested historical parallels: 'Does the Parable of the Minas Address the Delay of the Parousia? Luke 19.11–27 in its Lukan, Rhetorical and Roman Settings' (to appear in *ZNW*).

¹¹⁷ Weinert, 'Parable'.

¹¹⁸ Bovon, III, 289.

¹¹⁹ On the act of violence: F. Bovon, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas (Lk 15,1-19,27)* (EKK III/3; Zürich: Benziger/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2001) 299; Klein, *Lukas*, 611; Kloppenborg, 'Representation', 325.

¹²⁰ Notably, social scientific readings have questioned the identification of the throne-claimant with Jesus. I thank Harry Maier for pointing to William R. Herzog's interpretation: *Parables as Subversive Speech. Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994) 150–68 (the third servant as whistleblower). However, such interpretations disregard the literary context and the obvious parallels with other parables that associate God/Jesus with a negative character. Rightly critical of such interpretations of our parable: Gathercole, 'Parable' (forthcoming). Most importantly, such readings appear to be motivated by a biased wish to rescue the just and compassionate nature of God/Jesus and read into the text contemporary concerns about social justice.

wages war against his antagonists.¹²¹ The end of the parable most likely refers to the destruction of Jerusalem.¹²²

Luke 19.42–4 envisages the destruction of Jerusalem as a consequence of Israel's failure to recognise and welcome the terms of peace (19.42), the time of God's visitation in Jesus.¹²³ In the lament over the fate of Jerusalem, Jesus foretells terrible events. The enemy will besiege Jerusalem, will crush the city to the ground together with its children (vv. 43–4).¹²⁴ While divine agency is not directly asserted, it is obvious that Luke understands the devastation of Jerusalem as an act of divine retaliation.¹²⁵ Since the Roman military intervention is a manifestation of God's judgement, it is indirectly the divine ruler waging war against Jerusalem through the Roman troops.¹²⁶ Ultimately, this, too, is a confounding account of divine violence. The message is quite similar to that of Matt 22.6–7, except for a more compassionate image of Jesus.¹²⁷

Read together, the parable of the throne claimant and Jesus' interpretation of the destruction of Jerusalem as divine punishment through war apply the topos of the king waging war on a city to punish it for its resistance or revolt.¹²⁸

We could add here the equally drastic ending of the parable of the wicked tenants (Luke 20.9–19). Luke shares with the two other Synoptics the slaying of the tenants as punishment for their misdemeanour and the killing of the owner's son. The returning *kyrios* destroys the workers (Luke 20.16 follows Mark 12.9). Luke is less brutal compared to Matt 21.41, which has the *kyrios* put the evildoers to a miserable death.¹²⁹ But here, too, the *kyrios*, who stands for God, turns to violent retaliation.

¹²¹ Wolter, *Luke II*, 355–6, 361–2 (noting the problem with Luke having Jesus announce the brutal punishment of the opponents). Although Weinert rejects the reference to the Parousia, a warning to Jesus' Galilean antagonists is no less problematic ('Parable' 506–7, 514).

¹²² V. Fusco, "'Point of View' and 'Implicit Reader' in Two Eschatological Texts. Lk 19,11–28; Acts 1,6–8)", *The Four Gospels. FS Frans Neiryck II* (ed. F. Van Segbroeck, C. M. Tuckett, G. Van Belle and J. Verheyden; BETL 100; Leuven: Peeters, 1992) 1677–96, at 1689; Denaux, 'Parable', 55; id., 'The Parable of the Talents/Pounds, *The Sayings Source Q and the Historical Jesus* (ed. A. Lindemann; BETL 158; Leuven: Peeters, 2001) 329–460, at 459; Klein, *Lukas*, 611.

¹²³ Wolter, *Luke II*, 373; Klein, *Lukas*, 618.

¹²⁴ For the biblical background: Wolter, *Luke II*, 374.

¹²⁵ Fusco, 'Point of View', 1689 (noting the harsh realism of the punishment).

¹²⁶ Derrett, 'Nisi Dominus', 256.

¹²⁷ Yet, Jesus' compassion may reflect a topos with military connotations: S. Matthews, 'The Weeping Jesus and the Daughters of Jerusalem. Gender and Conquest in Lukan Lament', *Doing Gender – Doing Religion. Fallstudien zur Intersektionalität im frühen Judentum, Christentum und Islam* (ed. U. E. Eisen, C. Gerber and A. Standhartinger; WUNT 302; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013) 381–403, esp. 389–93. Jesus' lament has some similarities with, but even more differences compared to the rabbinic mashal of the king who remains in his house after his enemies have set it on fire, a moving parable addressing the destruction of the temple. The Eternal One remains seated, weeping at the sight of the burning sanctuary. *Jalkut Schimoni zu Threni (Klagelieder)* (ed. D. Börner-Klein; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021) §1025; Ziegler, *Königsgleichnisse*, 75 (par. 39); Poorthuis, 'Invasion', 223, n. 50. This does not mean that Rabbinic Judaism did not regard God as the agent of the destruction of the temple: A. Gregerman, *Building on the Ruins of the Temple: Apologetics and Polemics in Early Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism* (TSAJ 165; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016).

¹²⁸ The rabbinic mashal of the king sending his general to destroy the city that rebelled against him (Pesiq. Rab. Kah. 159b; Sifre Bamidbar 131; Poorthuis, 'Invasion', 213–14, 221–2) has some similarities with Matt 22.6–7 and Luke 14.31–2. But while the general gives the city time to reconcile and avert punishment, in Matthew the king will eventually destroy the city. The exhortation to reconciliation comes closer to Luke 19.42–4, but there again Jerusalem cannot avert God's punishment. The parable of the king planning a campaign against his city also refers to divine judgement and to repentance averting God's anger (midrash Tanh Ha'azinu 123b; cf. also Pesiq. Rab. Kah. Piska. 24; Poorthuis, 'Invasion', 217–18).

¹²⁹ B. Reid, 'Violent Endings in Matthew's Parables and Christian Nonviolence', *CBQ* 66 (2004) 237–55 (249–50); Kloppenborg, *Tenants*, 201–18, esp. 211; id. 'Representation', 332–6, 345.

4.2 Peace on Earth, Violence in Heaven?

This violence assigned to God and Jesus, culminating in a war of annihilation against Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple is difficult to explain. To be sure, Luke seems to approve of these acts of divine violence. Blaming disastrous outcomes of wars on human failure, on the lack of faith and the sins of the community is a view inherited from Deuteronomistic theology and prophetic literature, explaining historical tragedies.¹³⁰ The explanation was probably useful, as it averted a grave question of theodicy. Yet, the violence attributed to God and Jesus is unsettling. It is hard to reconcile with the message of non-violence found in many of Jesus' exhortations, challenging the view that the Gospels in general, or Luke in particular, are pacifist. There are different ways to attempt to solve this dilemma, from acknowledging but minimising the problem to condoning divine violence, to outrightly denying it.

Focusing on Matthew, Barbara Reid distinguishes between the acts of violence perpetrated by humans, incompatible with the non-violent message of the Sermon on the Mount, and the end-time divine punishment depicted in the parables.¹³¹ However, the distinction is not entirely accurate, as some violent parables describe this-worldly punishment, culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem.¹³² More significantly, the underlying message remains violent. God retains the right to punish and inflict suffering. Further, as Reid notes, it is not obvious whether non-retaliation applies in all circumstances, and whether the precept of loving one's enemy is applicable at international level.¹³³

Klaus Berger, on the other hand, challenged the view that Jesus articulated a set of ethical principles among which pacifism would be the ultimate value.¹³⁴ Berger actually accepted (divine) violence as part of a religion which should not be reduced to an ethical system and linked it to the biblical understanding of embodiment, manifested in prophetic signs. The violent words and acts belonging to Jesus' proclamation and the threatening apocalyptic images would be meant to warn believers to take divine judgement seriously.

At the opposite end, Marie Hause rejects the common understanding that violent parables envisage God as condoning and demanding violence. Thus, she argues that in an oppressive imperial context, the parable of the wedding banquet (Matt 22) could not have meant to identify the king with God. Conversely, the parable would advocate for passive, non-violent resistance against oppressive systems of power and exploitation.¹³⁵

These explanations have the merit of acknowledging the problem of attributing violence to Jesus and God. But they also show that while struggling with such texts, authors seem constrained to choose between accepting them as part of the Bible or explaining them away as legitimate, eschatological divine intervention, or, again, simply discarding the idea that the New Testament would associate God with violence.

John Kloppenborg argues, instead, that the acts of unimaginable violence God and Jesus carry out in the Synoptic parables may be due to a process of transferral, in which the violence actually perpetrated by humans in war is ascribed to the divinity, resulting in what he calls 'imaginary violence', a representation of violence increasingly disconnected

¹³⁰ An explanation not limited to Israel, as shown by the Mesha-inscription, ANET 320-1 (Kemosh allowed Omri to oppress Moab). Also Lee, *Warfare*, 48 (Roman interpretations of defeat as loss of divine favour).

¹³¹ Reid, 'Violent Endings', 252-3, 255.

¹³² Rightly, Kloppenborg, 'Representation', 326. Reid is aware of further serious difficulties. Thus God's end-time 'vindictive violence' sets compassion aside. 'Violent Endings', 253-4. That the Gospel would use metaphorical language only to emphasise the gravity of human decisions is not entirely convincing.

¹³³ Reid, 'Violent Endings', 254-5 (the confrontation between pacifism and just war theory).

¹³⁴ Berger, 'Der ‚brutale‘ Jesus', 119-27.

¹³⁵ M. Hause, 'The Parable of the Wedding Protest: Matthew 22:1-14 and Nonviolent Resistance', *The (De)Legitimization of Violence in Sacred and Human Contexts* (ed. M. Shafiq, T. Donlin-Smith; Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021) 49-61, at 53-4.

from real-life experiences.¹³⁶ This heuristic concept may explain the depiction of God and Jesus in the Synoptic parables as agents of violence directed against humans, both outsiders and members of the in-group,¹³⁷ while acknowledging the problem it poses.

5 Conclusion

The incongruence between our parable and its application shows that the story itself is not about dedicated discipleship. Like its twin simile, it recommends prudence, assessing the odds of success, and advising against actions when these are likely to fail. Through its minimalism and by being placed within an exhortation on discipleship, a story about war and peace making is effectively blunted ('verharmlost'). Most interpreters go along with the reading recommended by the context, explaining away the tensions with the context and the intrinsic problems of the story. A few authors pay attention to the narrative itself and suggest that it may have expressed Jesus' views on war in his particular historical, political setting.

The parable itself speaks of a king confronted with the dilemma of going to war against a more powerful enemy or asking for an inauspicious peace. Both those who read it as a parable on discipleship and those who discover in it a political message agree that the king should refrain from engaging in war and make peace with an overpowering enemy. This appears to be the reasonable decision Jesus advises. Read in conjunction with other more peaceable texts, the story itself seems to strengthen the impression that Luke, and by extension, Jesus is a pacifist. That is why, as I was struggling with a title, I was also thinking of alternatives like 'the wisdom of surrendering without a fight' or 'how to make Jesus a pacifist'.

However, in spite of some opinions, the parable cannot be used to make judgements on the appropriateness of war or peace making. The story does not address fundamental concerns, some essential in antiquity, others also relevant today: the role of military strategy and tactics versus numbers, the morale of the troops, religious questions (faith and trust in divine assistance), cultural issues (honour and shame), or more fundamental questions about the justness of the war and the right to defence or the costs of an unfavourable peace. The pragmatic perspective overlooks the importance of virtues like courage, self-sacrifice or concern for the fate of one's people. It is, indeed, an immoral parable that cannot be used to ground an ethics of war and peace.

More generally, Luke cannot be made a pacifist, as violence is not foreign to the Gospel that envisages Christ and God as waging war against humans. Jesus is portrayed as a king brutally destroying his opponents. God inflicts terrible punishment on Jerusalem through the Roman military for having failed to recognise the time of divine visitation. It is striking that, with few exceptions, interpreters take for granted the violence perpetrated by God and/or Christ in episodes addressing historical and eschatological punishment. It seems to be the sovereign right of the divine Judge to punish those who fail to welcome Jesus, to destroy human beings and countries.

We are confronted, thus, with a paradox. On the one hand, in a story about war, humans are apparently suggested to refrain from military conflict and make peace whatever the costs; more generally, most interpreters agree that the message of Jesus was non-violent and pacifist. But on the other hand, Jesus and God are thought to be entitled to wage war against their own people. The question is, why do we take it for justified

¹³⁶ Kloppenborg, 'Representation', 326, 330, *passim*. He compares this procedure with the sublimation of violence in archaic Greek representations of war in contrast with graphic images where gods and heroes perpetrate acts of astonishing violence. 'Representation', 328-9. This transferral of cruelty onto gods would allow assigning to warriors more humane virtues like manliness and courage.

¹³⁷ Including the destruction of Jerusalem. Kloppenborg, 'Representation', 328, 330, 346-7, 351.

when the Bible explains historical tragedies, like the defeat of the Jews' fight for freedom, as divine punishment for alleged human failure when these were, in fact, due to political causes, specifically to the expansionism of a military superpower like Rome? Why do we take it for granted that Jesus has preached a radically non-violent Gospel that would disallow humans to defend the survival of their community, while God and Jesus have the right to destroy entire cities and nations? Reflecting on this paradox should warn against using biblical passages uncritically to ground an ethic of unconditional peace.

In a speech given at a conference hosted in Vienna in February 2023, Ukrainian human rights lawyer and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Oleksandra Matviichuk pleaded forcefully for the need to bring perpetrators of war crimes to justice because the decades-long impunity of the aggressor has made the current full-scale war possible.¹³⁸ This may remind us that while we are privileged to live in freedom, peace and welfare, it is an easy temptation to preach pacifism to the victims of aggression and demand they give up their fight for survival based on biblical quotes. Asking the victims to make peace at any cost in the name of an alleged non-violent Gospel means, in reality, condoning and prolonging the violence inflicted on them by the aggressor.

Competing interest. The author declares none.

¹³⁸ 'Impunity Breeds War Crimes. How to Fight It?' (15.02.2023), Symposium on *War in Ukraine - Theological, Ethical and Historical Reflections* (13–17.02.2023, Faculty of Catholic Theology, University of Vienna). Also S. Musaeva, 'Nobel Peace Prize Winner Oleksandra Matviichuk: "Those Who Committed War Crimes Should Not Hide Behind Putin"', *Ukrainska Pravda* (9.01.2023).

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