

Rereading the “Vineyard” Parable: Squeezing the grapes of a fresh hermeneutic for a radical “kingdom” and a “weak” God

Andrew OBERG

(Received : September 26, 2019, Accepted : December 16, 2019)

「ぶどう園の譬え」を再読する：過激な「神の国」と「弱い」神のための新しい解釈をぶどうから絞り出す

オバーグ アンドリュー

(2019年9月26日受付, 2019年12月16日受理)

Abstract

One of history's most singular figures is that of the first century Jewish teacher and (quite likely) unintentional founder of the Christian faith: Jesus of Nazareth. There is little that we can ascertain with absolute certainty about his life, and his teachings too remain somewhat opaque, a problem worsened by centuries of enforced understandings and a lack of access to originary documents. Both of those aspects have in recent decades considerably lessened, however, and the “kingdom” teachings that we come across today have a regained authenticity and sharpness to them that was perhaps unimaginable only a short while ago. In this piece we therefore attempt to re-read some of what we have received, set against a background of a more historically grounded Jesus, differing possibilities for what the “resurrection faith” may entail, and for what the crux of parables such as the famous “Laborers in the Vineyard” might be aiming at. We finally consider an alternate understanding of divine-human interaction that is based on a return to the earliest biblical texts and perspectives. There, buried beneath millennia of comprehending the ancient in terms of the modern, we may at last be able to recognize what has always been present – and find ourselves quite surprised.

Keywords: hermeneutics; historical Jesus; kingdom teachings; resurrection interpretations; theophany; vineyard laborers parable

要 旨

歴史の中で最も並外れた一人は、第一世紀のユダヤ人の教師であり、意図せずしてキリスト信仰の創始者となったナザレのイエスであろう。イエスの生涯については確定できることが多くなく、その教えもどちらかと言えば不透明である。それは何世紀にも亘る強硬的な解釈と原資料の欠如によって、より悪化したと言える。しかしながら、ここ数十年の間にこれらの問題はかなり改善され、今日私たちが見聞きする、「神の国」についての教えは信ぴょう性と明快さを取り戻したのである。しばらく前までは想像もできなかったことであろう。今回の論文においては、さらに歴史に根差したイエスの背景と照らし合わせて、すでに受け継がれてきた資料をいくつか再読し、「復活信仰」が意味することの異なった可能性を、「ぶどう園の労働者」の譬えが何を意味しているのか、という観点から探求してみたい。最後に、もっとも初期の聖書テキストの文脈に遡ることによって神と人間の相互関係についての代替的な理解を試みる。そのこ

とによって、古代資料を現代の視点から理解しようとして見逃してしまったものの中に、常に既にそこにあったものが何かに気づいて、大いに驚くかもしれない。

キーワード：イエス・キリストの復活の解釈、解釈学、「神の国」の教え、テオファニー、「ぶどう園の譬え」、歴史的なイエス・キリスト

1. Lord - in many (possible) ways

The figure of Jesus of Nazareth¹ compels every thinking person towards some kind of reckoning, some kind of appraisal or acknowledgement, some kind of settling. One simply cannot live in a world where the very calendar in daily use is split between the many years prior to his birth and the few (by comparison) after it, even if this accounting has recently been window dressed with the shift from BC/AD to BCE/ACE,² or even if one lives in a society that (also) uses an alternative way to number (e.g. Japan's imperial era naming system of *nengo* (or *genko*), or the Islamic based *Hijri* system of tracking the (lunar) years since the Prophet Mohammad's migration from Mecca to Medina) – the Gregorian means of dating is far too prevalent. Yet still much of the world's population would not assign divinity to Jesus in the manner in which orthodox Christianity does, although most would perhaps label him a great teacher or spiritual sage whose instructions certainly did influence humanity's historical development. One problem with this view however, and others related to it, is that we seem – even now, after all this time (however one counts the time) – to have largely missed the point of those very instructions. If a clutch of contemporary biblical scholars and philosophers (philo-theologians) are right about the historical figure of Jesus and the actual content of his “kingdom of God” teachings then what we take to be the core of faith may really be little more than an *ex post facto* addendum, an affixation or – perhaps at worst – a distraction. Jesus can still, I think, be Lord on the alternative understanding I wish to present in what follows, he can still be the “Christ” (from the Greek for “anointed one”, i.e. “messiah” (a Hebrew term), “savior” in plain English, although each has its particular nuances), but this in a far more human way. For all that, and even so, a figure no less miraculous and no less worthy of one's adoration, respect, awe. What we will therefore attempt in the following is firstly a very condensed overview of Jesus as an historical figure and what the “resurrection faith” that succeeded him meant then and could mean now, before thereafter turning to focus on his “kingdom” teachings via an examination of one exemplar narrative: the parable of “The Laborers in the Vineyard”.³ Offering an alternative conceptual grounding that allows for a re-interpretation of both the intent of the story and its nuances we will seek to stretch out what really might be going on in it, and by implication within the “kingdom” teachings generally. Finally we will take our hermeneutical principles into some brief explorations of a “weak” (i.e. non-forceful, non-forcing) theology. While ours will remain grounded in the here and now – no heaven, no beyond – it will nevertheless call for a “then”. May “then” come.

¹ “Yeshua” more properly in the man's own daily language of Aramaic, Anglicized via the Greek “Iēsous” (and through the German custom of writing a pronounced “y” sound with the letter “j”) to “Jesus”.

² “Before Christ” and “Anno Domini” (Latin for “year of our Lord”) versus “Before Common Era” and “After Common Era”.

³ Found in the gospel of Matthew 20:1-15; verse 16, which closes the story in the canonical version, is considered to be taken from different source material, a point we will return to.

2. Searching for the authentic, stabbing at the verifiable

Merely the effort to arrive at a historical Jesus, at what might be claimed to be at least realistic historical conclusions about the person of Jesus, is one that has never seemed far from controversy. Little wonder really, considering how very dear to the hearts of millions and millions of people Jesus is – or rather, the idea(s) held about Jesus are. Moreover, in the absence of much which we would like to have by way of record keeping that is primarily what we are left with: ideas, concepts, assumptions; but not only, for we do have the ongoing personal experiences of believers too, and these individual touches can carry meanings and significances that far outweigh whatever might (or could) be written on dusty parchments. Still, it is those dusty parchments that lend our way in. What do they tell us? What might the real Jesus walking the roadways of first century Palestine have said and done?

A number of scholars and groups have attempted such a reconstruction – a profiling – of Jesus the man, and the general agreement is that he was a Jewish itinerant teacher of humble background who gained a widespread following in the particularly apocalyptically leaning climate of Roman occupied Israel at the time (a strain of Jewish sages such as John the Baptist (sometimes called the "Baptizer" instead) then anticipated an imminent "end of the world").⁴ For a long while it was thought that Jesus himself was a "the end is nigh" type of speaker too, but that interpretation has been challenged and appears (at least as far as I can tell) to be on the decline.⁵ This Jesus was a peasant and not a properly accredited religious leader, figure, or authority. He was not of the priestly caste (the Jewish Temple still stood during his lifetime and Judaism naturally remained centered around it and its cycle of events), and may not even have set out on his own until after the death of John the Baptist. He was thoroughly a Jew, and his efforts were at reforming Judaism and the form of one's relationship with God that it taught – that is, the manner of such relating – and, as John D. Caputo reminds us, he had never heard of this thing called "Christianity".⁶

That thing (i.e. Christianity) was to come much later, either by way of the invention of the Church's early missionary Paul (formerly Saul of Tarsus) or, if one is interpretively differently inclined, via the transformation brought about under Constantine the Great, the fourth century Emperor who instituted the faith as the new state religion, thus unifying a field of beliefs and rituals as diverse as the far-flung Roman Empire itself. Whenever the "official start" is taken to be, it was clear enough by the second century that the burgeoning group of Jewish Christians who had embraced the changes to practice and understanding of Jewish Law that Jesus advocated had come into sufficient conflict with the post-Temple's destruction re-ordering of Judaism around the (still current) Rabbinic model⁷ that a split was bound to happen sooner or

⁴ For some very accessible starters into the study of the historical Jesus I recommend the following: Robert W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (San Francisco: Polebridge Press/HarperCollins, 1996); John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: HarperOne, 1994); and Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (New York: HarperOne, 2014).

⁵ On this point of Jesus not being an evangelist of apocalypse see also Robert W. Funk (ed.), and the Jesus Seminar (group), *The Gospel of Jesus: According to the Jesus Seminar* (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 1999), particularly the notes to Chapters 1 and 2 found on pp. 91-92. A very interesting take on the figure of Jesus can also be found in Harold Bloom's interpretative essay attached to Marvin Meyer's revised translation of the Nag Hammadi text *The Gospel of Thomas*. Bloom indicates other intriguing scholarly sources and ideas about Jesus in his essay as well; see Marvin Meyer (trans.), *The Gospel of Thomas: Hidden Sayings of Jesus*, rev. edn, intro. and notes by Marvin Meyer, inter. by Harold Bloom (New York: HarperOne, 1992).

⁶ See the wonderful John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

⁷ Funk discusses this briefly in Funk and the Jesus Seminar 1999, *op. cit.*

later. When it did finally take place the process of Jesus' exaltation probably sped up, and the man who was an orator of reformation became not only a "son of God" (a common enough term in the classical world for someone praiseworthy or remarkable in some way) but actually and literally raised from the dead, thereafter to be transported directly to heaven in front of his gathered disciples like the prophet Elijah had been, only without the intermediary chariot being required.⁸

This aspect of resurrection is central to virtually everything connected with Christianity and so I wish to dwell on it at slightly more length than a mere mention since I believe we can take Jesus to be resurrected (and to be Christ) in a way which not only does not conflict with contemporary rational sensibilities (and does not call to mind any unsettling zombie-esque tales) but that in fact is also much closer to the original understanding of Jesus as the "risen Lord". Here we go all the way back to the New Testament for support, and we attempt to read it without the later addition of taught comprehensions; in other words, we make efforts to remove whatever filters may have been given to us, we try to approach it with a clearer pair of eyes. If we do – if we can – what is there to be found?

The epistles of Paul are the oldest documents we have in the canonical New Testament, easily predating even the earliest gospel (that of Mark; more on that book and its possible – but non-surviving (at least in an extant format) predecessor – in the below). In the first letter he wrote to the church at Corinth Paul outlines that Christ is resurrected – he has risen again after having been absolutely dead – and that if such is not the case then the whole edifice of Christianity is for nothing, essentially meaningless.⁹ Of course Paul does not think that to be so; and therefore the resurrection is real and must be real, but how? He goes on:

⁴²So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown [the physical body] is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. ⁴³It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. ⁴⁴It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body.¹⁰

We might wish to take issue with a point of Paul's logic here since the fact of a physical body is not a necessary cause for (does not necessitate) a "spiritual body" – whatever that may be – even if it is a sufficient cause for one, but such is beside the point at present and a separate concern entirely. What is important here is not whether or not there absolutely "is" a spiritual body (in any sense) but rather the fact that Paul understands Jesus' body to have been raised not in a physical way but in a spiritual one, and the vision he claims to have of the post-death Christ is not of a man walking around but of a bright light, the identity of which Paul does not even recognize until a voice from out of the light informs him.¹¹ This elusiveness – the non-recognition of Jesus as Jesus in his post-resurrection form – extended even to those

⁸ The story of Elijah's ascension can be found in 2 Kings 2:3-9. A cup for him (for his return) is left out at Seder (Passover) celebrations, a tradition I confess to find quite moving.

⁹ See 1 Corinthians 15:13-14: "¹³If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; ¹⁴and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain." Quoted from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV); *The Go-Anywhere Thinline Bible with the Apocrypha*, New Revised Standard Version (New York: HarperCollins, 2010).

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 15:42-44; in the same New Revised Standard Version, *ibid.*

¹¹ The story of Paul's conversion (and the changing of his name from Saul to Paul) is related in Acts 9:1-19 (20); see also Funk 1996, *op. cit.*, p. 259.

who knew him personally and who later reported seeing him in the image of a man (i.e. and not as something vague like a "bright light"), such as the recounting of the risen Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene in John 20, or the followers who saw him on the road in Luke 24, or again the disciples who witnessed him by the sea in John 21 – none of them knew who he was although he is not described in any of those instances as a light but rather as a person, or anyway an apparition in human form. The so-called "resurrection faith" is thought to have begun with Mary Magdalene, and since her story as told in John 20 almost perfectly matches the salient features of the oldest divine/human interactive stories recorded in the Hebrew Bible (to be considered shortly below) I think it is worth quoting in full here, despite the presence of many fictional elements in John's account and its penmanship situated as the latest of the four canonical gospels and therefore the most historically distant from the events themselves (it was written around the end of the first century CE).¹² The relevant verses are John 20:1-2 and 20:11-17:

¹Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." ¹⁴When she said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." ¹⁶Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" ¹³

In these resurrection accounts of the New Testament we can trace a clear move between Paul (written earlier) and the gospels (written later) towards physicalism, and this raises some very intriguing lines of inquiry. The story that seems to have begun this trend, that of the empty tomb found in the final chapter of Mark (again the oldest of the narrative gospels but still not written until around or slightly after 70 CE, making it roughly forty years after the death of Jesus (Jesus' birth is recorded as being in the time of Herod the Great, who died in 4 BCE)¹⁴), is thought to have been his innovation as it seems unknown to Paul, and even that tale properly ends with Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James seeing an angel – not Jesus – at the tomb and fleeing in terror (up to verse eight); the rest of the chapter (verses nine through

¹² Funk and the Jesus Seminar 1999, *op. cit.*; see especially the Notes to the "Pillars and Pioneers" epilogue on pp. 105-106 and those for the Gospel of John on p. 112.

¹³ New Revised Standard Version, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Some useful contextual information can be found in this brief biography: Stewart Henry Perowne, "Herod: King of Judea", *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

< <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Herod-king-of-Judea> >. Accessed November 11, 2019.

twenty) is attributed to “Pseudo-Mark”, i.e. another author entirely.¹⁵ Robert Funk summarizes the direction that the relaying and comprehension of the resurrection took in the first to second centuries in this way: “as time passed and the tradition grew, the reported appearances become more palpable, more corporeal. They gradually lose their luminous quality and take on aspects of a resuscitated corpse.”¹⁶

Given the time span involved (with the earliest narrative written decades after the events it describes), the desire and even need to present Jesus in a miraculous light by the community wishing to distance itself from standardized Judaism (which anyway wished to eject them and their unorthodox interpretations of the Law from its synagogues), and the increasing Hellenization of the group as it ceased being a purely (originary) Jewish faith as more and more Gentiles joined and brought with them their own pre-existing ideas about the divine and about divine/mortal intermingling, it should be clear that the earlier Pauline understanding of resurrection is theologically “purer” (and less politically motivated/influenced) than the latter accounts. This, additionally, despite (or possibly because of) its vagueness and overt mysticism (what, after all, is a “spiritual body”?). There is also the further advantage of the way this viewpoint does not require such incredulousness on our part, although admittedly that is not really an argument in favor of it so much as it is a relief to not have the more extreme cognitive demand made, to be able to accept Jesus as Christ without having to take the leap into what is often euphemistically labeled a “childlike faith”. Perhaps this does not apply to many, and perhaps it is simply wrong, but in the absence of evidence one way or the other – indeed, in the impossibility of evidence – the compelling case that Funk and other scholars make for a re-working of how “resurrection” is to be understood is one that should at least be considered by thoughtful persons with and without existing belief, if not fully welcomed to one degree or another.

The picture is however not that clear, and a return to the historical background and conceptual climate of first century Palestine renders the above apparently clear-cut “solution” murkier than we may wish it to be. The problem here, as I see it, is that within Judaism itself the *earliest* of its scriptures describe God as being seen in very physical and “real” ways by a number of prophets and even by regular people throughout Israel’s past, very much along the lines of how the risen Jesus was said to be perceived in the gospel accounts (the later ones within that tradition, and a long ways from Paul’s “bright light”). James Kugel outlines the many instances in the oldest parts of the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible) where a theophanic event – God appearing before a person – is related quite matter-of-factly, although in most cases the subject involved did not at first realize it was God until the climactic moment in the story when her or his eyes were “opened” and she/he “saw” (in both of the same senses English grants to the verb: as a visual perception *and* as a mental comprehension).¹⁷ The reader will notice how these are precisely the elements involved in the Mary Magdalene account quoted above, emphasized especially in verse sixteen where Mary “turns” (realizes, has her eyes “opened”) and in Jesus’ curious remark not to hang on to him in verse seventeen (perhaps indicating only the illusion of physicality?).

Yet between the oldest Hebrew narratives and the retelling of visions of Jesus as risen Christ¹⁸ there is

¹⁵ Funk 1996, *op. cit.*, pp. 259-260; Funk and the Jesus Seminar 1999, *op. cit.*, p. 111; footnotes to Mark 16 in *The Go-Anywhere Thinline Bible with the Apocrypha*, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Funk 1996, *ibid.*, pp. 260.

¹⁷ James L. Kugel, *The God of Old: Inside the Lost World of the Bible* (New York: Free Press, 2003).

a wide gap in which centuries passed that witnessed more and more books being composed by Hebrew authors, and the emergence of a collection of those texts into a compiled single set of scriptures; along the way any notions of a human-like apparition of the divine gave way to God appearing in a storm, or a fire, or a calamity, or not at all in any visible manner, and then of course the final conclusion that God is not only never seen but not even see-able became the default norm. What presents itself to me as an absolutely fascinating possibility in all this is that the very movement amongst the early Church to claiming visions of Jesus as physically – as *bodily* – resurrected might have been a return (most probably an unintentional one) to these ancient understandings and reports: throwbacks, if you will, by a group of Jews to how their ancestors wrote and talked about meeting with God. If so, would that speak to a deeper veracity for an actual physical (even if only in appearance) resurrection? Such would not negate Paul's own take on a "spiritual body" (again, whatever that might mean) since the "body" in question may have only looked (or been understood as, et cetera) physical while actually being (i. e. compositionally, metaphysically, ontologically) spiritual. Not a walking corpse perhaps, but an image that came across as absolutely human and not luminous or otherwise aethereal.

Remembering – imagining – once more the particular historic climate in which these recordings took place deepens the possibility of such a conception taking root within the budding community even further. It is worth recalling – it is even crucial to recall – that this entire scene of Church building and Jewish Christian excommunicating was occurring around and within the timeframe of the Jewish military struggle for independence from Rome (66-73 CE), the period that the classical historian Flavius Josephus records in his *The Jewish War*.¹⁹ When Paul was writing his letters to the burgeoning group of believers scattered throughout the Mediterranean basin in the mid-first century the war had yet to begin, Jerusalem had yet to be besieged, and the Temple had yet to be destroyed. The sum total of Jewish life would have remained centered around that place and its practices – and that particular locale was in fact so essential to the Judaism that existed then that every single Jewish male was required to visit the Temple three times a year: at the festivals of Pesach (Passover), Shavuot (Weeks, or Pentecost), and Sukkot (Tabernacles, or Tents or Booths).²⁰ Every man, at the same time, every year and three times a year. Whether or not one actually did so (and from a practical point of view it seems highly improbable that such ever happened to the universal extent commanded), and even whether one was a male who had to pack up and leave or a female who farewelled a family member(s), the imposition would mean that the Temple and its importance would never be far from anyone's mind. We must never forget, and can probably never overestimate, how unconditionally indispensable that building and its rituals were to the people – and then suddenly the entire

¹⁸ Again, the gospel accounts of these were written down forty-some years after the events purportedly described, and although that is not a great deal of time (at least not so scientifically speaking) they were nevertheless penned under starkly different historical circumstances.

¹⁹ Available in a revised and paperback edition as Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish War*, revised edn., trans. by G.A. Williamson, ed. by Betty Radice, new ed., intro., notes, and appen. by E. Mary Smallwood (London: Penguin Books, 1959/1970; new material 1981).

²⁰ A simple explanation can be found here: Rabbi Daniel Kohn, "What Are Pilgrimage Festivals? Three major holidays mentioned in the Torah: Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot", *My Jewish Learning*.

< <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/pilgrimage-festivals/> >. Accessed November 11, 2019. Most versions of the Torah (the five books traditionally accredited to Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) will also contain commentaries explaining such events; my copy is the *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary, Travel-Size Edition*, The Rabbinical Assembly of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2004).

place was reduced to nothing, destroyed, the very heart and soul of the nation ripped out and shredded, the identity-granting and meaning-making core of Judaism fully eradicated, erased, vanished like smoke. Only at this historic crux do the gospel accounts with their completely physically risen Christ start to be written, but they are not the only documents that begin to make claims for once more “seeing” God in bodily form (or more technically in the Christian sense, seeing the resurrected Jesus as God, or a form or sign of/from God).

Kugel informs us that, “In rabbinic writings from the second to the sixth centuries C.E., God is frequently represented as having appeared to human beings, sometimes in altogether human dimensions…Time and again, God is presented in rabbinic texts as appearing in human form – indeed, this is one of that literature’s most striking traits.”²¹ The Temple was gone, Judaism had little idea what to do with itself and was still only making headway towards reorganizing around the rabbinical format and formulae for worship; it needed God to be here. Moreover, exactly at this historical moment Christianity asserts itself in an increasingly emergent set of practices, not only as a different version of Judaism and not only as an altered understanding of what it meant to be a Jew and to serve God as a Jew, but as a whole new way of life. No more synagogues, rather churches. The Temple had been destroyed, did that not speak to the necessity of a new worldview and did not Christianity offer a path out of the conundrum, providing fresh answers to the very troubling questions pressing in from all corners? Admittedly the most we can offer from our twenty-first century vantage point is speculation, but it seems quite possible to me that with regards to this specific change from Paul’s resurrected Lord seen as a blinding light to the gospel narratives’ walking and talking (even eating and drinking and touchable) physical “man as we knew him” the impetus (overt or not) could have been as a means of emphasizing within the wider socio-historic context both Jesus’ nearness to God and/or his factual divinity; and we must repeat that this is something which would have been highly desirable for a group that sought to so radically shift the existing Jewish rituals and theological comprehensions amongst which it dwelt. That such should happen within the psychological framework of the Temple’s destruction at the hands of the Romans makes perfect sense once we pause to reflect on how earth shatteringly shocking that would have been for Jews of all stripes, regardless of social standing, adherence to the Law, or depth of individual belief. It was a culture-wide total tragedy akin to little else in history (though sadly not the only one the Jewish nation was to undergo).

Returning our discussion to the present, what we perhaps have today are options for how we might approach the concept of Jesus’ resurrection: Paul gives us one that could be applied to any “seeing” (i.e. as a “spiritual body”, whatever that might mean and possibly even meaning different things at different times and circumstances), and the gospels give us another that – in line with the rabbis – is both a return to a very ancient understanding of theophany and is evidently one that is also based on human need. These twin traditions appear to be telling us that when the bottom falls out God shows up – conceptually and experientially – in a way that is as “real” as necessary. Of course none of this is verifiable as far as the historical figure of Jesus goes, but meditating on the abstractions and implications for our very human vulnerabilities is useful – helpful – I think, and this is a topic we will return to in the next section on applying the proffered hermeneutical principles to the “kingdom” teachings. Prior to doing that though the

²¹ Kugel, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-102.

methodology itself must be properly laid out, and we will do so via the “Laborers in the Vineyard” parable which we have chosen to demonstrate it.

3. Working (over) the “Vineyard”

In the remainder of our study I wish to first present the text of our parable in a translation that may be unfamiliar to some but which is probably closer in sense and nuance to the original language, and has moreover received a far more thorough historical vetting than other versions of the same story. The “Vineyard” narrative we will use is the one produced by the Jesus Seminar, and thus a few short remarks on that group and what it set out to achieve (and, in some small and now mostly scattered ways, continues to attempt) are in order.

To begin with, the group was neither sponsored nor funded by any institution, be it religious, academic, or otherwise. Its membership was open to anyone with the fitting credentials and was composed of professional biblical scholars. Those details ensured that the Seminar contained a wide spectrum of views within it (although its intellectualism has been subject to criticism from some scholars and clergy), and it enjoyed roughly two hundred different participants in its formerly biannual debates and around one hundred and fifty full members. The ultimate goal of the group was to inventory and vet the entire catalogue of surviving Christian (and/or what have generally been termed “Gnostic” or “Gnostic Christian”) documents prior to 325 CE (the year when Constantine convened the First Council of Nicaea in an effort to unify Church doctrine and scripture), and then to classify each for historical likelihood. This process entailed a multi-tiered voting system and resulted in a set of sayings and actions related to Jesus that were (in descending order): 1) undoubtedly said/done, 2) probably said/done, 3) not said but the contents are similar to what was actually said/not supportably done but still possibly done, and finally 4) not said/improbably done; most likely fictional. The Seminar then compiled what they concluded to be the most reliable words and deeds of Jesus and published three reports on their results, in addition to holding a number of public lectures and workshops. It was founded in 1985 and continued actively until 2006.²² The members created their own English translation of the documents they worked with, dubbed the Scholars Version, and it will provide us with the wording for our own efforts.²³ The parable therein reads as follows:

Vineyard laborers

⁴Jesus used to tell this parable:

⁵Heaven’s imperial rule is like a proprietor who went out the first thing in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ⁶After agreeing with the workers for a silver coin a day, he sent them into his vineyard

⁷And coming out around nine A.M., he saw others loitering in the marketplace ⁸and he said to them, “You go into the vineyard too, and I’ll pay you whatever is fair.” ⁹So they went.

²² Funk and the Jesus Seminar 1999, *op. cit.*; general information can also be found here: “The Jesus Seminar”, *Westar Institute*. < <https://www.westarinstitute.org/projects/the-jesus-seminar/> >. Accessed November 11, 2019.

²³ For readers who may wish to make a comparison I have also included a more traditional translation of the parable, from the widespread New Revised Standard Version; see the appendix to this paper.

¹⁰Around noon he went out again, and at three P.M. he repeated the process. ¹¹About five P.M. he went out and found others loitering about and says to them, “Why did you stand around here idle the whole day?”

¹²They reply, “Because no one hired us.”

¹³He tells them, “You go into the vineyard as well.”

¹⁴When evening came, the owner of the vineyard tells his foreman: “Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with those hired last and ending with those hired first.”

¹⁵Those hired at five P.M. came up and received a silver coin each. ¹⁶Those hired first approached, thinking they would receive more. But they also got a silver coin apiece. ¹⁷They took it and began to grumble against the proprietor: “These guys hired last worked only an hour but you have made them equal to us who did most of the work during the heat of the day.”

¹⁸In response he said to one of them, “Look, pal, did I wrong you? You did agree with me for a silver coin, didn’t you? ¹⁹Take your wage and get out! I intend to treat the one hired last the same way I treat you. ²⁰Is there some law forbidding me to do as I please with my money? ²¹Or is your eye filled with envy because I am generous?²⁴

Before we examine the content here we can note what is missing: verse sixteen as found in the authorized versions of the Bible (this parable is taken from the Gospel of Matthew 20:1-16), which reads: “So the last will be first, and the first will be last”, echoing the final verse of the previous chapter: “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.” (Matthew 19:30; the preceding in chapter nineteen has relayed the incident of “The Rich Young Man”, i.e. a would-be follower who could not agree to part with his wealth for the sake of the poor.)²⁵ In the Seminar’s book this verse is located immediately before the “Vineyard” tale and is given its own titling, reading:

First and last

³Jesus said, “The last will be first and the first last.”²⁶

The source documents listed for this “first/last” verse are the canonical Gospel of Mark (a reminder: this is the oldest of those in the New Testament, dating from around 70 CE), the lost Sayings Gospel Q (thought to be a collection of Jesus’ teachings and a common source for both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke but not yet discovered as a separate and intact work), and the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas, one of the Coptic language findings from the famous Nag Hammadi cache unearthed in Egypt in 1945 (it may also have been a source for Jesus’ teachings in Matthew and Luke and could date from as early as the middle of the first century – making it the oldest of any gospel we have).²⁷ Thomas has garnered a great deal of attention as a purely instructional collection of Jesus’ ministry, entirely devoid of any narrative or

²⁴ Funk and the Jesus Seminar 1999, *ibid.*, pp. 27 and 29 (documental source material is listed on p. 28). This section forms chapter four, verses four through twenty-one in their *The Gospel of Jesus* report.

²⁵ Both verses are taken from *The Go-Anywhere Thinline Bible with the Apocrypha*, *op. cit.*

²⁶ Funk and the Jesus Seminar 1999, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

²⁷ *ibid.*; pp. 111-116 gives a useful summary of the canonical New Testament gospels and related ancient documents. Matthew is often dated to around 85 CE and Luke to 90 CE. For additional information on Thomas see the introductory remarks in Willis Barnstone and Marvin Meyer (eds.), *The Gnostic Bible: Gnostic Texts of Mystical Wisdom from the Ancient and Medieval Worlds*, rev. edn (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2009), pp. 43-44.

connected events up to and including Jesus' death, which despite its centrality in the canonical books warrants nary a mention in Thomas. While we do not need to belabor these differences, I think it is worth citing Thomas' version of the "first and last" saying as doing so will help us understand just how subtle much of the work in this area can be. A first example comes from Marvin Meyer's translation, a scholar whose work we referenced in the previous section above: "For many of the first will be last and will become a single one."²⁸ Another translation of this same verse is Jean-Yves Leloup's, which reads: "Many of the first will make themselves last, and they will become One."²⁹ A final mention is Hal Taussig's rendering: "For many who are first will be last. And they will come to be one alone."³⁰ What obviously stands out in Thomas is the rather mystical sounding "become one/One (alone)", and further its neglect of the full reversal, citing only "first to last" (with Leloup's intriguing "make themselves"), and placing that phrase (i.e. "first-last") in the opposite ordering as what is found in the New Testament and in the Gospel of Jesus, where it reads "last to first" and then "first to last". It is however precisely this full reversal, and the placement of the last going to the first and then the first going to the last that I think is so demonstrative of Jesus' "kingdom" teachings and so let us now re-enter the "Vineyard" and seek our interpretation of it.

To start our fresh hermeneutic,³¹ our first dig of the shovel in the "Vineyard", we must examine this "kingdom" phrasing itself, for the term can be – and often has been – quite misleading, both in a temporal and in a locative sense. While we all "know" that Jesus taught the advent of the "kingdom of God" (whether we take that as an apocalyptic term or not) the terminology itself tends to muddle in modern ears what was almost certainly meant by it when actually uttered by Jesus. Even his first disciples, in fact, seem to have had trouble understanding its conceptual usage and they of course had none of the intervening years and historical zeitgeists between them and their teacher that we do. It is interesting to note that in the Scholars Version cited above "Heaven's imperial rule" is used instead of "kingdom of God". Funk, as founder of the Jesus Seminar, explains that the group differed sharply on how to phrase what Jesus was getting at when he spoke of God's domain, and that the issue is further complicated by the fact that Jesus (that is, the historical Jesus whom they studied) would sometimes employ it to refer to a location and sometimes to an action or a relating of God with (a) people or land. For their work the Seminar therefore adopted "God's domain" and "God's estate" for a place, and "God's imperial rule" for aspects of relationship. Even this is dissatisfactory to Funk though, as he notes that "It has been extremely difficult to find terms that accommodate both the absolute character of the divine reign and the pacific disposition of Jesus. This

²⁸ Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 21 (Logion 4:2-3); cf. Barnstone and Meyer, *ibid.*, p. 45, where the translation of Logion 4 also reads as: "For many of the first will be last/and become a single one."

²⁹ Jean-Yves Leloup (trans. and comm.), *The Gospel of Thomas: The Gnostic Wisdom of Jesus*, trans. and notes by Joseph Rowe, for. by Jacob Needleman (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2005), p. 9 (Logion 4 (without subdivisions as Meyer gives)). The reader will note that this is actually a double translation, with Leloup going from Coptic to French, and then Rowe taking Leloup's French into English.

³⁰ Hal Taussig (ed. and comm.), *A New New Testament: A Bible for the 21st Century Combining Traditional and Newly Discovered Texts*, for. by John Dominic Crossan (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), p. 15 (Logion 4:2-3).

³¹ Or anyway somewhat fresh, for indeed "There is nothing new/Beneath the sun!" (Ecclesiastes 1:9) and I would be the first to admit how indebted I am to the many scholars whose works I have read and greatly benefitted from; *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985), p. 1442. This book (Ecclesiastes) is sometimes also known by the Hebrew name Koheleth or Qoheleth, the name of the claimed writer in the opening verses (1:1-2): "The words of Koheleth [a footnote here reads 'Probably "the Assembler," i.e., of hearers or sayings; cf. 12:9-11.], son of David, king in Jerusalem. Utter futility! – said Koheleth – /Utter futility! All is futile!" (p. 1441). Robert Alter, in his magisterial re-translation and erudite commentary, prefers the titling of "Qohelet (Ecclesiastes)"; see his *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), pp. 335-391.

problem still awaits solution.”³²

By this “domain” (or “kingdom” or “relating”) Jesus wished to impart that it was something already present and for everyone – Paul’s classic “neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female” (Galatians 3:28)³³ – but instead of the New Testament conclusion that “for you are all one in Christ Jesus”, for Jesus at the time of his teaching it was not about himself at all: it was about God and every human being. Funk summarizes it as “In God’s domain, circumcision, keeping kosher, and sabbath observance [i.e. the pillars of Jewish Law] are extraneous. The kingdom represents an unbrokered relationship to God: temple and priests are obsolete.”³⁴ That formerly mentioned aspect of presence and universality, the now-ness of the “kingdom”, I think cannot be stressed enough. The Gospel of Thomas puts this rather beautifully in its penultimate logion, number one hundred thirteen:

Saying 113: “His followers said to him, ‘When will the kingdom come?’

[Jesus replied] It will not come by watching for it. It will not be said, “Look, here it is,” or “Look, there it is.”

Rather, the father’s kingdom is spread out upon the earth, and people do not see it.”³⁵

The “kingdom” is already “spread out” – it *is* here – yet at the same time “it will not come by watching for it”, implying both that the “kingdom” is invisibly present and merely waiting to be realized, but also that we actually have to do some work to realize it: it is both now and future. This dual existence of the “kingdom” is a crucial aspect of the interpretative principle that I wish to expound, and it will be returned to; in the meantime by way of an example of this presence/absence, and as an illuminating illustration of the confusion that can be wrought when we think of “God’s kingdom” or “God’s domain” in terms of an afterlife or a post-apocalyptic situation, let us look to another aphorism: the “Eye of the Needle”. Here it is in the Scholars Version:

Eye of the needle

Jesus said to his disciples, “I swear to you, it is very difficult for the rich to enter Heaven’s domain. And again I tell you, it’s easier for a camel to squeeze through a needle’s eye than for a wealthy person to get into God’s domain.”³⁶

³² Funk 1996, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

³³ The full verse in the New Revised Standard Version we have been using is: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

³⁴ Funk 1996, *ibid.*, p. 41; on the aspect of its immediacy see also Caputo, *op. cit.* (2006), and a later work by him as well: *The Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional* (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2016).

³⁵ Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

³⁶ Funk and the Jesus Seminar 1999, *op. cit.*, p. 73. The source is listed as the Gospel of Mark, and there (10:23-25) it reads as: “²³Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’ ²⁴And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, ‘Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’” Noteworthy here is the initial “will be” versus the latter “it is” found within these verses and the double use of “it is” in the Seminar’s version. The Gospel of Matthew (19:23-24) has: “²³Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’” Once more the emphasis in this translation regarding “entering the kingdom” seems to be on the future tense, and this I believe adds to our tendency to misread such texts. Finally, let us look to the same from the Gospel of Luke (18:24-25): “²⁴Jesus looked at him [the rich ruler of the narrative (who is, incidentally, the same figure as the “rich young man” in Matthew 19 referred to in the above)] and said, ‘How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’” It will be noted how Luke brings our attention back to the present in this rather straightforward account; all quotations from the New Revised Standard Version.

This rendering is very helpful in the way it demonstrates how "Heaven's domain" and "God's domain" – or even simply "Heaven" and "God" – could be (and frequently were, really still are) used interchangeably, and not only by ancient authors. Referencing a particular geographical region in a way synonymous with an associated person or group is of course not limited to scripture; journalists employ the identical when they write of "Washington" or "Tokyo" as shorthand for the governments of the United States or Japan. The specific problem encountered by the same trend (and this certainly appears to be a very natural manner of indicating, whatever the historical epoch) when it comes to spiritual matters vis-à-vis socio-political-economic issues is that even if we intellectually take "heaven" to be God's "headquarters" like Washington, D.C. or Tokyo are for their respective seats of governance, the associative nuance of a postmortem destination that the word "heaven" elicits is too firmly engraved in modern minds – we cannot help but to think of it, and whether we do so only at a level below cognitive awareness or not is beside the point. (Indeed, if only at that deep psychological level then the effects are in fact worse since they go unacknowledged.)

"Heaven's domain", "Heaven's imperial rule", "God's domain", "the kingdom"; in the teachings of Jesus these are each about bringing what is here in this present life out into the open: realizing the existent "kingdom" in the everyday, making it happen, making it so real that it is no longer a question of "when" but is rather a nod to this beautiful now, making a "what could be" into a "be". It is only that for some people such is a strenuous undertaking (the rich foremost amongst them apparently, and as will be seen "the rich" terminology itself is quite probably an abbreviated way to point to those invested in the status quo). The apparently counterintuitive nature of this teaching is perhaps witnessed by the existence from the fifteenth century (and possibly even from the ninth) of an argument that the "needle's eye" reference is to a certain gate in the walls of Jerusalem which could only be traversed by a camel if first any baggage the animal were carrying were removed and then she were made to kneel down and crawl through; no supporting evidence for such a structure has ever been discovered.³⁷ As difficult as they can be to grasp, Jesus' "kingdom" teachings, really the whole core of his public ministry, might be an extended attempt to seize the listener (now become the reader) by the shoulders and shake them into agreeing that Yes! the "kingdom" can come/is come, and we need not wait for death or a heralding miracle. Such is precisely what I take the "Vineyard" narrative to be getting at.

The primary figure in the parable of the "Vineyard laborers" is of course the proprietor, the landowner, and as it is with taking "the kingdom of heaven" or "the kingdom of God" to be related to an afterlife or otherworldly location, it is very easy to understand the main character here as an allusion to God, but that, on my reading at least, would be to very much miss the point. Rather I think that in light of the emphasis we have found on the "kingdom" as here, as now, the proprietor is an exemplar of someone who has embraced what Caputo has called the "topsy-turvy" ethics of the "kingdom".³⁸ He is a person for whom indeed the last has become first and the first last, he is clearly no longer bound by conventional views on what is and is not fair, nor is he restricted by what we might consider to be a "natural" attitude towards generosity. He is, in

³⁷ See Mike Ford, "Bible verses about Eye of a Needle", *Bible Tools*. < <https://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Topical.show/RTD/cgg/ID/3918/Eye-of-Needle-htm> >. Accessed November 11, 2019.

³⁸ Caputo 2016, *op. cit.*, stresses this point especially.

fact, ridiculously generous; though not to a fault, since – as he himself points out to the earliest hired hands, who have since started complaining – “you did agree with me for a silver coin, didn’t you?” (verse eighteen), and “Is there some law forbidding me to do as I please with my money?” (verse twenty). This man, our landowner, he is bringing/has brought the “kingdom” right there into his vineyard through the treatment he renders to those around him. He offers a traditional daily wage to every one of the workers, regardless of the amount of time they put in, and this does seem rather in line with a God who would offer love, mercy, and grace equally to all – the view of God that Jesus espoused, as we have “seen”.³⁹ The owner is not a figure or symbol for God, he is a normal person acting in a manner which God, as taught by Jesus, would approve of, he is taking the “kingdom” on board and making an effort to build it within the confines of his situation and circumstances. This, I take it, is a critical function. The “kingdom” may already be here “spread out upon the earth”, but as long as “people do not see it” (Thomas 113)⁴⁰ it really does remain as an “if”, a “could be”, a potentiality. It is therefore our duty and our task to make it happen, to notice that the “kingdom” exists in the duality we have alluded to and hence to exert the necessary efforts to transform that duality into a singularity: an only “is” and no longer an “if/is”. This is the challenge that Jesus gives us: overturning the social order, re-working our priorities, giving, giving, giving, and treating everyone equally regardless of extenuating details or the ascertainments of whatever status quo we happen to be living under. This is a radical message and it is one aimed solely at the moment every moment, deciding for the day about the day, certainly not with a mind for tomorrow – we can imagine that some of the first workers probably would not have signed up with our proprietor again the next day! – and absolutely not with a mind to any presumed afterlife. Make “God’s domain” happen, Jesus seems to be saying, and here is how. That we can *make* the “kingdom”, however, indicates that we can also *fail* to make it. If the “kingdom” does not come is that God’s fault or ours?

Once more I think a return to the concepts held by those in history who laid the groundwork and composed many of the founding texts that we currently base our thought on will be of great assistance, and so let us really travel back, all the way to “the beginning”. In a remarkably mind opening work Catherine Keller relates how the creation accounts in Genesis actually do not present God as having fashioned the lands, waters, sun, moon, stars, et cetera out of nothing but rather through the use of *already existing* – i.e. extant with God himself, neither preceding nor succeeding his own existence – materials, viz. a yet formless “earth”, a “deep”, and “waters”.⁴¹ These are listed in Genesis 1:1-2, waiting to be noticed by an observant reader who is able to pull the cobwebs of taught interpretations from her eyes and *see* what is actually being expressed in the text:

¹In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.⁴²

³⁹ I use the quotation marks to highlight the double sense of “see” for what I hope has been not only an intellectualization but also a realization. The works of Caputo, Funk, Keller (cited below), and Kugel in particular have helped me here, for what that is worth.

⁴⁰ Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

⁴¹ Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2003).

⁴² Quoted from the New Revised Standard Version.

"In the beginning...the earth *was*" we are told, there it sat, "formless" and just asking to have something done to it like an inviting lump of wet clay tempting the potter. "Darkness" was over the "face of the deep" and so whatever the "deep" might indicate there it was as well – already there – as were the "waters", which although disturbed on their surface by God's wind were at rest and real enough (without God having done anything to produce them) to be so subsequently unsettled. What is more, the ancients appear to have considered that it took God more than one try to arrive at a creation which he was satisfied with enough to declare it "good" (e.g. at the end of the account in the first chapter of Genesis we find the summative sentence, "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good."⁴³ The labeling of "good" here is either God's or the narrator's, but the weight of context tilts towards it being God's).⁴⁴ While it would be foolish to take such an account in any kind of literal sense as a record of factual events, what would be equally foolish would be to miss the implications of the picture of God that this reveals and that was, moreover, precisely the one held by Jesus and his followers and contemporaries: this is the image they had in mind when they spoke of God and struggled to work out how to relate to God and to one another in the setting of first century Palestine, of Israel under the Law as it was understood then, of Israel under Roman rule as it was experienced then. This particular comprehension of the divine as extraordinarily powerful but not technically omnipotent (i.e. God used only what was available to him and apparently did so in an unfolding (multiple tries, almost a "guess and check") way rather than all at once – note how this also implies non-omniscience) would moreover continue throughout the entirety of the Church's founding years; Caputo tells us it was not altered into the current perspective of God magically conjuring the universe out of a vacuum until the latter half of the second century, and then the notional change only occurred in response to a theological controversy at the time.⁴⁵ The results of this are a "weak" God who needs (in a highly reduced sense of "needs") our help, and thus in closing allow me to draw out some of what I believe the ramifications to be and what our work as co-creators might entail.

Firstly, and most importantly for we who are concerned with finding a better way to be on this planet, are the participatory demands placed on us. If God works with what is there, with what is "within reach" for him, then depending on the variables involved it is quite possible – perhaps even probable – that God's will might not be done. He took the "earth" and the "deep" and the "waters" and fashioned the universe as we know it (metaphorically, of course); therefore had a different "earth" and "deep" and "waters" been in place this universe would be one that we do not know: its end product, as with its constitutive elements, would differ and the final outcomes would have been otherwise. This is not only an issue for the inanimate either. Kugel quotes Psalm 139 as an example of a theology in transition, of an attempt to rectify God comprehended as "out there" with God comprehended as also "in here" (i.e. with relation to the soul); I think in following through on some of Kugel's thoughts on this psalm we can find too an application pertaining to our own. The central section which is most related to our concerns (verses thirteen to sixteen) reads as follows:

⁴³ Genesis 1:31; New Revised Standard Version.

⁴⁴ Keller, *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ Caputo 2006, *op. cit.*

¹³For it was you who formed my inward parts;

you knit me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

¹⁵My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret,

intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

¹⁶Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.

In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.⁴⁶

Kugel remarks how “It is not clear whether ‘secret place’ and the ‘bottom of the earth’ [Kugel uses his own personal translation, in the quoted NRSV above the same highlighted terms are rendered “secret” and “depths of the earth”] are metaphorical references to the mother’s womb or instead suggest that human beings all start off as some sort of prefab homunculus.”⁴⁷ If the latter, we may note, then such a “prefab” would clearly fall into the same abstract camp (manner of thinking/understanding) as the earlier “earth”, “deep”, and “waters”. Kugel continues his reflections on this passage with, “The point is that the psalmist is able to conceive of himself as he was back then – mere matter, *stuff*, waiting to be turned into a human being.”⁴⁸ Again, this aligns well with what we have been considering vis-à-vis creation, and the “Your eyes beheld my unformed substance” of verse sixteen seems to strongly strengthen our argument for the suggested point of view. God uses/can only use what is there to be used: this is a perception of God working with and within nature, and apprehending God and God’s efforts at completing his will in this way is precisely the mental turn that I think is called for in the “kingdom” teachings and reinforced by a conception of a “weak” God. If we wish to bring the “kingdom” we shall have to work for it, and if we wish that God’s will be done we shall have to work for it. “Weak” here in relation to a theological position is not indicative of powerlessness – quite the contrary. It is rather to take God as being by nature non-forceful, non-insistent. Once more, God’s will might not be done (and this neatly responds to theodicy (the problem of evil) questions as well).⁴⁹ On this view God may push or prod, especially if we seek to work with him, but he does not shove. Understanding the divine will (or plan) in such a sense places the onus of effort on us, just as Jesus’ emphasis on the “kingdom” as already is/could yet be indicates that any situational improvements are in our hands. The tools are there to be picked up – will they? For a vision we need look no further than the “Vineyard”.

4. To come

The hermeneutical principle outlined above is an attempt at a methodology that situates the “kingdom” teachings of Jesus in a more historical setting than that provided purely by the narratives of the New Testament gospel accounts and is one that considers how deeply the ideas we hold about God influence and

⁴⁶ Psalm 139:13-16; New Revised Standard Version.

⁴⁷ Kugel, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 68; emphasis in the original.

⁴⁹ This is perhaps also reflected in the many implicit “may’s” of the Lord’s Prayer, where “[May] Thy kingdom come”, “[May] Thy will be done”, “[May you] Give us this day our daily bread”, et cetera all contain wishes for such to occur and the acknowledgement that such might not. See “The Lord’s Prayer” on the website *Lords-prayer-words: Traditional and contemporary prayers*, where explanations for the sections of the prayer are listed beneath the recitation: < https://www.lords-prayer-words.com/lord_traditional_king_james.html >. Accessed September 18, 2019.

shape not only our relating to God⁵⁰ but also the form and manner of the treatment we render others. Quite a lot has been put onto Jesus in the intervening centuries since his life and death and the present time, but what is discoverable at the center of everything is the message he inaugurated of existing in such a way that realizes a "heaven" as (potentially) right here and now, today, made and ready to be made through our efforts. In order for this buried but extant "kingdom" to be unearthed God evidently requires our assistance; which is to explain that he will not bring it about for us, and especially will not ram it down our throats. If we are to repair – or at least upgrade – the world we have then we will need to get busy. No one is going to do it for us, but we do have many offers of (divine) help on the way.

On this interpretation we might view Jesus as Christ – as Savior, as Lord – or we might not: he may be a teacher along the lines of Buddha, a sage along the lines of Socrates, or even a social revolutionary along the lines of Mikhail Bakunin or Pyotr Kropotkin. We might choose to believe in Jesus as resurrected in a "spiritual body", or as risen in an apparition-like "physical" form, or we may simply think that the spirit of Jesus lives on as long as we keep up the attempt to live better, to make the numinous a central and important part of our lives, and to engage in community service and community building. This all remains open on the hermeneutic sought in the preceding, and that openness may be what is most crucial. The vineyard owner paid everyone a day's wages – "What a waste of money!" goes the claim. Profit, however, did not seem to be his primary motivation for behaving thus, and he certainly had other ideas about fairness and generosity than the standard measurements. Perhaps he is a figure for humanity's long-sought "new type" of person, one who is generous, selfless, gracious. More likely that mantle falls onto Jesus himself, however we may take the man behind the many myths. In closing out our study that is, I think, the most pertinent element: taking, making, now and here without expectations, without let-someone-else-do-it. The breathtaking beauty of the "kingdom of heaven" is already here/waiting to be here, and none of us need die to find it. We do "need" though, we need to work, and that starts with the conceptual reformation – the notional revolution – in whose direction we have sought to initiate a few unsteady steps. The "to come" – may it come, here it is.

References

Alter, Robert (trans. and comm.), *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010)

Barnstone, Willis, and Meyer, Marvin (eds.), *The Gnostic Bible: Gnostic Texts of Mystical Wisdom from the Ancient and Medieval Worlds*, rev. edn (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2009)

Caputo, John D., *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006)

Caputo, John D., *The Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional* (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2016)

⁵⁰ It may be mentioned here that not relating in any manner – e.g. a "militant" atheism or the like – is still a form of relating via an active negation; even ignoring the issue altogether is arguably a passive negation and thus too a type of relation.

Crossan, John Dominic, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: HarperOne, 1994)

Ehrman, Bart D., *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (New York: HarperOne, 2014)

Ford, Mike, "Bible verses about Eye of a Needle", *Bible Tools*. < <https://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Topical.show/RTD/cgg/ID/3918/Eye-of-Needle.htm> >

Funk, Robert W., *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (San Francisco: Polebridge Press/HarperCollins, 1996)

Funk, Robert W. (ed.), and the Jesus Seminar (group), *The Gospel of Jesus: According to the Jesus Seminar* (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 1999)

Josephus, Flavius, *The Jewish War*, revised edn., trans. by G.A. Williamson, ed. by Betty Radice, new ed., intro., notes, and appen. by E. Mary Smallwood (London: Penguin Books, 1959/1970; new material 1981)

Keller, Catherine, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2003)

Kohn, Daniel (Rabbi), "What Are Pilgrimage Festivals? Three major holidays mentioned in the Torah: Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot", *My Jewish Learning*. < <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/pilgrimage-festivals/> >

Kugel, James L., *The God of Old: Inside the Lost World of the Bible* (New York: Free Press, 2003)

Leloup, Jean-Yves (trans. and comm.), *The Gospel of Thomas: The Gnostic Wisdom of Jesus*, trans. and notes by Joseph Rowe, for. by Jacob Needleman (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2005)

Meyer, Marvin (trans.), *The Gospel of Thomas: Hidden Sayings of Jesus*, rev. edn, intro. and notes by Marvin Meyer, inter. by Harold Bloom (New York: HarperOne, 1992)

Perowne, Stewart Henry, "Herod: King of Judea", *Encyclopedia Britannica*. < <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Herod-king-of-Judaea> >

Taussig, Hal (ed. and comm.), *A New New Testament: A Bible for the 21st Century Combining Traditional and Newly Discovered Texts*, for. by John Dominic Crossan (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013)

Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary, Travel-Size Edition, The Rabbinical Assembly of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2004)

The Go-Anywhere Thinline Bible with the Apocrypha, New Revised Standard Version (New York: HarperCollins, 2010)

Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985)

"The Jesus Seminar", *Westar Institute*. < <https://www.westarinstitute.org/projects/the-jesus-seminar/> >

"The Lord's Prayer", *Lords-prayer-words: Traditional and contemporary prayers*. < https://www.lords-prayer-words.com/lord_traditional_king_james.html >

Appendix

Text of "The Laborers in the Vineyard" as found in the Gospel of Matthew 19:1-16 (New Revised Standard Version)

- v. 1: "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.
- v. 2: After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.
- v. 3: When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace;
- v. 4: and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went.
- v. 5: When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same.
- v. 6: And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?'
- v. 7: They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.'
- v. 8: When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.'
- v. 9: When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.
- v. 10: Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage.
- v. 11: And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner,
- v. 12: saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'
- v. 13: But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?'
- v. 14: Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.
- v. 15: Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'
- v. 16: So the last will be first, and the first will be last."