

SHORT STUDIES

THE ΟΜΟΙΟΣ WORD-GROUP AS INTRODUCTION TO SOME MATTHEAN PARABLES

It is well known that the parables of Jesus as recorded in the Synoptic Gospels have, as far as their openings are concerned, two basic forms. In the first, Jesus simply plunges into the narrative or comparison without ado, beginning with a noun in the nominative. This sort of introduction is preferred by Luke (7. 41; 10. 30; 12. 16; 13. 6; 14. 16; 15. 11; 16. 1, 19; 18. 2, 10; 19. 12) but is also found in Matthew and Mark (Mark 4. 3 par.; 12. 1 par.). In the second, Jesus uses the word 'like' in some form, and the parable often begins with a noun or pronoun in the dative. This second category may be preceded by a question: e.g. *τίνι ὁμοιώσω τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ*; (Luke 13. 20; cf. Mark 4. 30 f.); but whether the question is explicit or not, the parable itself begins with one of five 'like' expressions: *ὡς* (Mark 4. 31; 13. 34), *ὥσπερ* (Matt 25. 14), *ὁμοίός ἐστιν* (Matt 11. 16; 13. 31, 33, 44, 45, 47, 52; 20. 1; Luke 6. 49; 12. 36), *ὁμοιωθήσεται* (Matt 7. 24, 26; 25. 1) or *ὠμοιώθη* (Matt 13. 24; 18. 23). All of these forms have a recognizable Aramaic *l*^e underlying them, itself an abbreviation of several longer formulae; and neither the Aramaic nor the Greek may legitimately be translated, 'It is like . . .', but 'It is the case with . . . as with . . .'.¹ Thus, strictly speaking, *ὠμοιώθη ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ἀνθρώπῳ σπειραντι κτλ.* (Matt 13. 24) should not be rendered 'The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed etc.' – the kingdom of heaven is not like a man! – but something like, 'The kingdom of heaven is like the case of a man who sowed etc.', i.e. 'It is with the kingdom of heaven as with a man who sowed etc.'.

All this is common knowledge. Less frequently noticed is the variety of tenses which Matthew alone uses to introduce parables of the second category. Like the other Synoptic evangelists, he can use the future active to raise the formulaic question preceding some parables: *τίνι δὲ ὁμοιώσω τὴν γενεὰν ταύτην*; (11. 16); and like Luke he uses *ὁμοίός ἐστιν* to introduce some parables (11. 16; 13. 31, 33, 44, 45, 47, 52; 20. 1). But only he uses the aorist passive *ὠμοιώθη* (13. 24; 18. 23; 22. 2) and the future passive *ὁμοιωθήσεται* (7. 24, 26; 25. 1). Does he attach any significance to these alternative forms?

By and large, the question is overlooked in the commentaries, monographs, and journal literature. Jeremias points out that *ὁμοίός ἐστιν* is most distinctively Greek, for 'while *ὁμοιωθήσεται*, *ὠμοιώθη* refer to a previous subject which is about to be described, *ὁμοίός ἐστιν* often gives the erroneous impression of an identification';² but he does not discuss any

possible significance attaching to the tense of the finite verbal forms. Occasionally some attempt has been made to explain the aorist passive $\acute{\omega}\mu\iota\acute{\omega}\theta\eta$ – e.g. it is considered a ‘gnomic’³ or an ‘effective’ aorist,⁴ or in some older literature it is thought to be evidence that the parable was formulated by someone earlier than Jesus (‘the kingdom of heaven *was likened* etc.’);⁵ but the future passive is not so amenable to ‘solutions’ and is more frequently ignored.

The best approach seeks to explain *both* tenses. A few scholars have proposed what seems the right tack.⁶ They suggest, almost in passing, that $\acute{\omega}\mu\iota\omega\theta\eta\sigma\epsilon\tau\alpha\iota$ points to the future (‘the kingdom of heaven *will be like* . . .’) and $\acute{\omega}\mu\iota\acute{\omega}\theta\eta$ to the past (‘the kingdom of heaven *has become like* . . .’). The rest of this note seeks to put that interpretation on a solid footing by considering evidence not normally discussed in this connection.

The verb $\acute{\omega}\mu\iota\acute{\omega}\omega$ occurs fifteen times in the New Testament: Matt 6. 8; 7. 24, 26; 11. 16; 13. 24; 18. 23; 22. 2; 25. 1; Mark 4. 30; Luke 7. 31; 13. 18, 20; Acts 14. 11; Rom 9. 29 (citing Isa 1. 9); Heb 2. 17. The textual variants are for the most part unimpressive. The most interesting is found in Matt 7. 24, where many witnesses prefer $\acute{\omega}\mu\iota\acute{\omega}\omega\ \alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{\omicron}\nu$ to $\acute{\omega}\mu\iota\omega\theta\eta\sigma\epsilon\tau\alpha\iota$; but the latter is strongly attested in diverse and early MSS, whereas the case for the former is weakened by the reasonable assumption that it is an assimilation to the active future of Luke 6. 47, $\acute{\upsilon}\pi\omicron\delta\epsilon\lambda\acute{\iota}\xi\omega\ \acute{\upsilon}\mu\acute{\iota}\nu\ \tau\acute{\iota}\nu\acute{\iota}\ \acute{\epsilon}\sigma\tau\acute{\iota}\nu\ \acute{\delta}\mu\omicron\iota\omicron\varsigma$. From this list of the occurrences of $\acute{\omega}\mu\iota\acute{\omega}\omega$, several things stand out: (1) There is much higher frequency of the verb in Matthew than in any other New Testament book. This fact could count either negatively or positively toward the thesis being tested: negatively, in that the high frequency in Matthew makes it intrinsically more likely that a variety of forms of the verb will appear, without the need to attach too much significance to them; positively, in that a favourite verb in the hands of a skilful writer like Matthew, known for his subtle nuances, is more likely to yield valuable insights into his understanding when there are enough occurrences to provide some measure of control. The issue cannot be decided in advance. (2) All occurrences of $\acute{\omega}\mu\iota\acute{\omega}\omega$ in Mark and Luke are active and transitive, and belong to the ‘question’ part of the second category of parable introductions: ‘To what *shall I liken* . . .?’ The only parallel in Matthew is 11. 16 (= Luke 7. 31 [=Q?]). Matthew does not preserve this verbal form as it is found in Mark 4. 30 = Luke 13. 18 (cf. Matt 13. 31), nor as it is found in Luke 18. 20 (cf. Matt 13. 33). (3) The remaining New Testament uses of $\acute{\omega}\mu\iota\acute{\omega}\omega$ can be divided into two groups: those which introduce Matthew’s parables, using $\acute{\omega}\mu\iota\acute{\omega}\theta\eta$ or $\acute{\omega}\mu\iota\omega\theta\eta\sigma\epsilon\tau\alpha\iota$, and those not used in connection with parables at all. All of the latter are passive in form; and their meaning is quite unambiguous:

Matt 6. 8 $\mu\grave{\eta}\ \acute{\omicron}\upsilon\acute{\nu}\ \acute{\omega}\mu\iota\omega\theta\eta\tau\epsilon\ \alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{\omicron}\iota\varsigma$: i.e. ‘do not be like them’, not ‘do not be likened to them’.

- Acts 19. 11 οἱ θεοὶ ὁμοιωθέντες ἀνθρώποις κατέβησαν πρὸς ὑμᾶς. NIV: 'The gods have come down to us in human form' – lit. 'having become like men', not 'having been likened to men'.
- Rom 9. 29 (Isa 1. 9) ὡς Σόδομα ἂν ἐγενήθημεν καὶ ὡς Γόμορρα ἂν ὠμοιώθημεν i.e. 'We would have become like Sodom and we would have been like Gomorrah' (NIV).
- Heb 2. 17 ὁθεν ὠφείλεν κατὰ πάντα τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς ὁμοιωθῆναι. i.e. 'For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way.'

The point of listing these passages is to demonstrate what the lexica affirm, viz. that the verb does not have a normal but a deponent passive. One might expect the active voice, 'I liken X (acc.) to Y (dat.)' would generate the customary passive structure, 'X (nom.) is likened to Y (dat.)'; but in fact the passive voice of this verb loses any sense of 'to liken' i.e. 'to compare': it does not mean 'to be likened' or 'to be compared with' but simply 'to become like' or 'to be like'. This is so not only in the New Testament, but in the LXX and Hellenistic literature.

If we may apply these results to ὁμοιωθήσεται and ὠμοιώθη, then we must conclude it is unlikely these forms are telling us what the kingdom 'will be compared with' or 'has been compared with', but what it *will be like* or *has become like*.

This works out neatly in the six relevant passages. The aorist passive introduces the parable of the tares (13. 24), in which, even though there is mention of the eschatological 'harvest', the focus remains on the mixture of wheat and tares at present. The kingdom of heaven *has* (already) *become like* this. Similarly in the parable of the unmerciful servant (17. 23): the kingdom *has become like* the situation in which a servant may be forgiven much and yet not be forgiven: such a person will be called to account. Clearly the consummated kingdom will not be like this situation: if anything, it is paralleled by the *final* accounting. Again, the kingdom of heaven *has become like* the case of a king who prepares a wedding banquet for his son (12. 2), invites many people who offer empty excuses, and ultimately brings in others from the streets. By contrast, the verb in the future passive is used exclusively in connection with the kingdom at its consummation. In 7. 24, the person who hears and obeys Jesus' words *will be like* (i.e. on the day of judgment) the man who builds on a firm foundation. Similarly for the converse (7. 26). The last instance of the future passive (25. 1) points to the apocalyptic advent of the kingdom at the end of the age: it *will be like* ten virgins who etc. (In this last instance, Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich [both editions] notes that the future tense includes 'a glance at the Parousia'.)

It appears, then, that ὠμοιώθη and ὁμοιωθήσεται frame the eschatological significance of the kingdom parables they introduce. But to be quite

certain this is so, it should also be demonstrated that there is no instance of *ὁμοίως ἔστω* where, in the light of the foregoing, one might have expected *ὠμοιώθη* or *ὁμοιωθήσεται*. And this appears to be the case. Twice *ὁμοίως ἔστω* introduces comparisons that are not kingdom parables, and are therefore not relevant to the present discussion (11. 16; 13. 52). Of the six remaining instances (13. 31, 33, 44, 45, 47; 20. 1), however, each a kingdom parable, five obviously focus primary attention neither on the present aspect of the kingdom nor on its future, but on its organic wholeness (13. 31, 33), its intrinsic worth (13. 44, 45) or its essentially gracious nature (20. 1). The one possible problem is 13. 47 (introducing the parable of the net). In arguing that the parable must be separated from its interpretation, some have seen a reference in the parable itself (vv. 47 f.) to the *present* sorting and missionary activity of Jesus' disciples (= fishermen), which the interpretation of the parable (vv. 49 f.) transforms into a last judgment scene. If the introductory formula refers only to 13. 47 f., one might have expected *ὠμοιώθη*; if to the whole, with emphasis on the last judgment, one might have expected *ὁμοιωθήσεται*. I suspect both approaches are inadequate. Arguments for dividing the parable from its interpretation are not strong. The fishermen pull the net up on the shore *when it is full* (*ὄτε ἐπληρώθη*): this would be an extraordinary metaphor for continued missionary witness. And are Jesus' disciples anywhere commissioned to throw out *τὰ σαπρά*? Nor is it legitimate to detect in the *catching* of the fish the activity of the church, and in the *sorting* of the fish the eschatological division – any more than it is legitimate in the parable of the tares to distinguish between the harvesting and the final separation of weeds and wheat. Hill's contention that the interpretation is inappropriate because a 'furnace is hardly the place for bad fish'⁷ misses the mark; for the description of the furnace (v. 50) refers not to fish but to that which the fish symbolize, viz. the wicked. They are thrown into the 'furnace', a fairly standard apocalyptic image for hell. If Hill's objection carries weight, he will equally have to object that tares, when burned (13. 42), do not weep and gnash their teeth. If, then, the parable and its interpretation belong together, does this mean the focus is so oriented to the future that *ὁμοιωθήσεται* should have been used to introduce this parable? No; for unlike 25. 1 ff., for instance, this parable is not *about* the last judgment, with sharp warnings regarding the need for preparedness, but about the situation that exists when the last judgment takes place: there are 'good' fish and 'bad' fish, and only the final sweep of the net and resultant sorting is adequate to distinguish between the two. In other words, the parable is not wholly concerned with the kingdom perceived to be already inaugurated but now delayed, nor with the kingdom as it is heralded by the last judgment, but with the more conceptual question of the relation between the two; and for this *ὁμοίως ἔστω* seems admirably suitable.

Thus, in none of the passages with *ὁμοιος ἐστὶν* is it obvious that anything would be gained by using either *ὠμοιώθη* or *ὁμοιωθήσεται*. This confirms that whenever *ὠμοιώθη* or *ὁμοιωθήσεται* is used, a specific eschatological orientation to the ensuing parable is presupposed by the evangelist.

Three reflections on these observations are in order: (1) The long-standing debate regarding just how much realised or inaugurated eschatology is found in the First Gospel must take these things into consideration. Exegesis must make room not only for a combination of realised and future eschatology but also for a Matthew who is self-consciously aware of the difference, and is thoughtfully playing on it. This is perhaps more evident in those instances where Matthew is *not* presenting M material (viz. 22. 2 = Luke 16. 16; 7. 24 = Luke 6. 47 f.; 7. 26 = Luke 6. 49; and compare 25. 1 with Luke 12. 35 f.); for then it becomes necessary to explain why only the First Gospel offers these distinctive verbal forms. That all of these belong to Q material (however Q be conceived), with none from Mark, may be coincidental; but in any case, it is difficult to think that Matthew's differences are accidental and redactionally unimportant. (2) If this interpretation of *ὠμοιώθη* and *ὁμοιωθήσεται* in Matthew is sustained, it contradicts the thesis of Margaret Pamment⁸ that in Matthew 'the kingdom of heaven' always refers to the future kingdom, in contradistinction to 'the kingdom of God' which is realised (e.g. 12. 28). Her thesis is forced in any case: for instance, it handles 11. 11 f. poorly, and ignores compositional subtleties, such as the fact that although both John the Baptist and Jesus preach that *ἤγγικεν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν* (3. 2; 4. 17), yet the former does so in the context of his mission as *one preparing the way for the Lord* (3. 3), and the latter in his capacity as the light that has *already dawned on the Gentiles* (4. 12-16). If this paper is substantially correct, 'the kingdom of heaven' is presumed inaugurated at least in 13. 24; 18. 23 and 22. 2. (3) It goes beyond the evidence to state, with Kingsbury, that Matthew uses the aorist passive 'to indicate that the Kingdom of Heaven, *from his vantage point* (emphasis mine), is a present reality and already has a certain history behind it'.⁹ Quite the contrary: he uses the aorist to affirm that *Jesus* claims the kingdom has already dawned in his own mission, and therefore failure to recognize it *in Jesus' day* was already a mark of spiritual hardness. Whether Matthew's witness is believed or judged anachronistic is, of course, another matter.

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NOTES

[1] J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, tr. S. H. Hooke (London, 1963) 100 f.; E. Beyreuther, G. Finkenrath, in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. C. Brown (Exeter, 1976), vol. 2, 50; M. Zerwick, *Biblical Greek Illustrated by Examples* (Rome, 1963), §65.

- [2] *Parables*, 101, n. 53.
- [3] So Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, §256.
- [4] A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville, 1934) 835.
- [5] Cf. references in John A. Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Valley Forge, PA, 1886) 294 f.
- [6] *Ibid.*, 295; C. A. Bugge, *Die Haupt-Parabeln Jesu* (Giessen, 1903) 128; G. Strecker, *Der Weg der Gerechtigkeit: Untersuchung zur Theologie des Matthäus* (Göttingen, 1962) 214 ff.; J. D. Kingsbury, *The Parables of Jesus in Matthew 13: A Study in Redaction-Criticism* (London, 1969) 66 f.
- [7] David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (London, 1972) 238.
- [8] 'The Kingdom of Heaven According to the First Gospel', *NTS* 27 (1980-1) 211-32.
- [9] *Parables*, 67.