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A PARABLE OF SCANDAL

Speculations about the "Wheat and the Tares"

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"Between ourselves," writes Montaigne near the end of his essays, "there are two things I have always observed to be in accord: supercelestial thoughts and subterranean conduct... [Some people] want to get out of themselves and escape from the man. That is madness: instead of changing into angels, they change into beasts." [1]

Montaigne's observation about the religious turn of mind was doubtless inspired by the fanatic civil wars of his century. Yet his remark is one that modern men and women understand well. We live in conscientiously practical times. We know instinctively when invoking theological dogma is a breach of good citizenship or good taste. We recognize that the "supercelestial" aspirations Montaigne refers to can be politically explosive; that, if diverse groups of people have any common ground for living together, it is in mundane interests and necessities rather than definitions of the world beyond. Or we might understand our modern attitude in a more sweeping sense. We might hold that Western religion, on the whole, has contributed more to the world's violence than to peace and fellowship. We might feel it has failed the test of time.

Nonetheless, it would seem difficult to determine by perfectly rational means what moral lesson should be drawn from the turbulent history of scriptural religion. Has it been more beneficial than harmful? Is it measurable on *any* moral scale? One is at a loss to know how to make even a beginning with that inquiry. But it might be no less interesting to examine a Gospel text that comes close to addressing our modern concern,

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[1] Michel de Montaigne, "Of Experience," *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald Frame (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1965), p. 856.

a text that treats the sort of religious conviction that permits implacable conflict. This text is the parable in Matthew about the wheat and the tares. It is one that perhaps reminds readers today of the irreconcilable enmities that arose along with the various interpretations of Christianity. On a close but speculative reading, however, this parable makes a different impression. The present essay will sketch out the possibility that it aims at almost the opposite of what the history of religious conflict might have led us to imagine. The parable aims not at endorsing human dissension but, on the contrary, at exposing its root. On the proposed reading, Matthew's text treats sectarian zeal with irony -- ever gentle though amusing irony-- and focuses more thoughtful readers' interest on knowledge of the depths of the soul. The evangelist may even remind us, if momentarily, of Montaigne. For, like the famous essayist, Matthew would draw readers away from antagonisms with others and into an intimate meditation about good and evil.

Here is the main text of the parable of the wheat and the tares, from Matthew chapter 13, in the New King James Version[2].

> "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field (*agroi*) but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way. But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. So the servants of the [master of the house] (*oikodespotou*) came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' He said to

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[2] Minor corrections, necessary to render the Greek more exactly, are indicated by brackets. The source for the Greek text is the *Nestle-Almond Novum Testamentum Graece* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993).

them, 'An enemy, [a man,] has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Do you want us then to go and gather them up?' But he said, 'No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn."'(Matthew 13: 24-30)

This parable is one of the few that Jesus explains -- or appears to explain -- to his disciples in the pages of the Gospel. That related text cannot fail to be significant. We may therefore start by looking at this commentary of the Gospel on itself. After two more brief parables have gone by, Matthew comes to the explanation of "The Wheat and the Tares."

All these things Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables; and without a parable He did not speak to them, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet saying: "I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things kept secret [since] the foundation of the world."

Then Jesus sent the multitude away and went into the house (*oikian*). And His disciples came to Him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field." He answered and said to them:

"He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world (*kosmos)*, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather

out of His kingdom all things that offend (*skandala*), and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" (Matthew 13: 34-43)

Here the reader has Jesus' "official explanation" of the parable. It spells out the story's cosmic sense, that the ultimate origin of good and bad must be referred to two symbolic powers, the Son of Man and the devil. But this distinction of good and bad is only made at the end of history, the Apocalypse. The righteous and the unrighteous will be separated; the former will shine, and the latter burn in the furnace. At one level this is not hard to grasp. Jesus' explanation of the parable discourages people from a final spiritual judgment of their fellows. Light and fire in the allegory are reserved for the end of the age.

Already one could make a small inference. If the righteous can only be discerned in a Last Judgment, then righteousness is implicitly distinguished not only from unrighteousness, but also from self-righteousness. That is to say, before the completion of time itself, absolute condemnations of others, and the unqualified confidence in one's own spiritual superiority from which these usually proceed, cannot be justified. Moral utterances or deeds that arise from, or are meant to convey, such self-elevation lose something essential to their morality.[3]

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[3] The general interpretation offered up to this point parallels (but was not derived from) Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man, A Christian Interpretation*, vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), p. 292. It would be interesting to consider to what extent self-righteousness is the stance not of a "self" at all, but of a collective

To repeat, this would be an inference, not without edifying value, from the text as it stands. But by following the text more closely, we can see that it goes into this subject in a more interesting and radical way. After all, what is the fun if Matthew's Jesus should reveal everything about the parable to the most superficial glance at his "official explanation"? What makes us think Matthew's Master should be so, not just straightforward but, simple-minded? Let us consider whether Jesus' apparent frankness here might not turn out to be part of his delicious subtlety.

Notice that Jesus' explanation of the parable does more than just postpone the resolution of our conflicts about what is spiritually salvageable. Although the disciples may be relieved that the world's problems will be gathered into a mass of evil to be burned, Jesus' explanation goes beyond this simple representation in the parable. He identifies the tares as the "sons of the wicked one" but then further *divides this evil into two categories*. According to the text, the angels of the Son of Man gather from his kingdom both the "things that offend" and "those who practice lawlessness." This sudden division calls for careful consideration. One possibility is that Jesus is subtly correcting a presumption of his disciples, perhaps a natural presumption to conceive of evil as a unifiable thing or type of person. The disciples specifically ask him to explain "...the parable of *the tares of the field*," as if to say that, since the tares are the problem, let us hear what is going to happen to them. But Jesus surprises them. The tares represent two different things. There are lawless people, on the one hand, and there are all the *things that offend* (*skandala*), on the other.

This new distinction is deeply troubling. As a disclosure of apocalyptic truths, it is a little vague. Granted, the part announcing the demise of lawless people sounds clear

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identity. This is linked to the Gospel's awareness of the problematic "crowd."

enough. But the other term of the distinction -- the offensive things that are also destroyed -- is more unsettling in its breadth. Are the things that offend offenses committed against us? Or are they things we find offensive in other people but that are not necessarily unlawful? Perhaps the term refers to the differences among individuals or classes of individuals, differences that spark hostility but that are not in themselves controlled by law. Could it even refer to differences of religious belief that do not necessarily entail lawlessness? This list of possibilities is, of course, speculative; but the text seems to call for speculation. The vagueness of the category "things that offend" -- *gratuitously* introduced in the "official explanation" -- seems calculated to raise a question about what we censure in other people.

In fact, all of these speculations about the "things that offend" are within the range of meanings that the word *skandala* acquires in the New Testament.[4] Scandal (to use the related English word) is one of the most important concepts in these scriptures.[5]

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4 See, for example, Romans 14:13, I Corinthians 8:7-13 and 10:32.

5 See also, for example, see John Calvin, *Concerning Scandals*, trans. J. Fraser (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1978; orig. 1550), and Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. D. Swenson, revised by H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1962), especially the appendix "The Paradox and the Offended Consciousness (An Acoustic Illusion)," pp. 61-67; Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), pp. 44, 186, 303, 315, 319, 363, 392; and Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, *Fire of Mercy, Heart of the Word: Meditations on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), pp. 645-650.

Most recently, the interpretive work of Rene' Girard has brought its power to readers' attention.[6] It will be helpful to reconsider the meaning of scandal here.

One may get a quick idea of the importance of the term scandal by remembering that the verb *skandalizo* is understood to mean "to cause someone to sin;" so that the noun *skandala* can be translated as "the causes of sin" (as it is in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible). But already there is a difficulty. What is the connection between these two translations, "the things that offend" and "the causes of sin"? There is an obvious possibility: the things that offend might in some way cause someone to sin! This formulation is not misleading and opens up a crucial dimension of the biblical idea of scandal. It opens up the interpersonal dimension, the idea that people have a profound, but not necessarily evident, power over other people. It is the power of eliciting unreflective reactions.

Even usage of the English word "scandalize" conveys something of this biblical meaning. When you scandalize someone else you exert a subtle power, deliberately or not. If you are scandalized by someone, conversely, you are in their power by virtue of your reaction. But let us look more closely into the Greek word. For what sounds like a

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6 My understanding of this powerful biblical expression is influenced by Rene' Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, trans. S. Bann and M. Metteer (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1987), pp. 416-431. Part of the psychological meaning of scandal is exhibited for me in Rene' Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 165-183. Curiously, Girard eschews the parables in *Quand ces choses commenceront* (Paris: Arléa, 1994), pp. 171-172.

shallow social game when we speak of "scandal" in English, is closer to the essential strategy of power in the language of the New Testament.

Skandalizo is thought to come from words for limping and lameness, and means to ensnare someone in a trap, to cause him to stumble and fall. One expresses something of *skandalizo* in the English phrase "to bait someone," which derives from the same metaphor of snaring animals.[7] Now to scandalize someone in this biblical sense -- to cause someone to fall, to cause someone to sin -- is an odd sort of action. Even in the active voice, it is really a negative kind of action, a power of inciting someone else's ability to hurt himself. Of course this is condemned in the Bible. But what is striking is that, not only this negative action of ensnaring but also -- this is important -- *becoming the victim of snares is disapproved.*[8] The point seems to be, not to decide that those who trap are bad and those who get tripped are good, but to expose the *whole seduction* of antagonism -- to warn about both of the ways that individuals become involved in, even defined by conflict.[9]

Jesus may therefore be saying more than first appears when he states that, at the Apocalypse, the *skandala* are removed before the separation of the righteous and the unrighteous. It is as if human definitions of righteous and unrighteous will only have

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[7] At the same time, this moral psychology can be reflected in a different New Testament word for stumbling, *proskopto* (John 11:9, Romans 14:13, 1 Corinthians 10:32, Philippians 1:10.).

[8] For examples of active and passive uses of even the noun *skandalon*, compare Romans 14:13 and 1 John 2:10. One is not to "make something" of differences -- neither to place "obstacles" (e.g. judgments) nor to suppose, or react to, others placing them.

[9] Besides the several examples that follow in this essay (Matthew 13:21, 18:6, John 6:61), see also Matthew 17:27, Luke 17:1-4, and 1 Corinthians 8:9.

exemplified the very scandal, the mutual antagonism, that people failed to understand. Perhaps it is no accident that, in Jesus' "explanation" of the parable, the righteous themselves shine forth *only after* some wailing and gnashing of teeth -- that is, after being relieved of their scandals!

In any case, these apparently vague translations of *skandala* -- "the things that offend" and "the causes of sin" -- begin to make sense. The word describes all those things that get between people, those obstacles they place or simply imagine between them, those ways they trip one another up. It describes the triggers to negative and reactive behaviors, the exchange of aggravations, accusations, resentments, revenges, insecurities, and need for triumph. Scandal covers a multitude of sins. For it traces them to a common delusion in which deceivers are themselves deceived, the blind ensnare the blind. We may see why the biblical texts focus, not so much on *who* is responsible for these entanglements, as on *how to become* responsible, and resist the wearisome game.[10] This is one meaning of Jesus' calling whoever "has ears to hear:" it is a call to responsibility.

The act of hearing, indeed, is the subject of the first parable in Matthew's Gospel, the one right before the parable of wheat and tares.[11] It is worth noticing this previous

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[10] It is interesting that common discourse recognizes something obstructive and inappropriately competitive about individuals "being offensive" *or* "getting defensive."

[11] "Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. And some fell among thorns and the thorns sprang up and choked them. But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some

parable because it will give a more precise idea of the delusive entanglement with others that goes by the name scandal. It is also a parable of a sower, thematically related to the story of the tares. In this previous parable the sower sows seed: some falls by the wayside and is gobbled up by birds, some falls among stony places and springs up but gets scorched by the sun because it has no depth of earth, some falls among choking thorns, and some on good ground that yields a rich crop. Now when Jesus explains this parable, he mentions scandal specifically with regard to the seed that gets scorched by the sun after falling on shallow earth and stones. This is the person who hears the word with some enthusiasm but who, because he "has no root in himself" (13:21), does not persist with it. When trouble or persecution arises, Jesus states, he "stumbles," he is "offended" or "scandalized" (*skandalizetai).*

Of course, the way the Greek verb works, one cannot necessarily distinguish whether the stumbler is tripped by someone else or trips himself. That is indeed the case here: the man gets tripped up, he gets all entangled. One is not sure whether to focus on the other's action or the man's reaction. Jesus speaks with deliberate ambiguity, it would seem, because *the image in his parable preserves the same ambiguity.* According to the figure, each type of person *is* the type of ground, good or bad, that receives the seed. The scandalized man *is* that shallow earth *with the stones in it.* The stones he stumbles on,

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thirty..." (Matthew 13: 3-8) "Therefore hear the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside. But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles (*skandalizetai*)." (18-21)

therefore, are not other people simply, but something of other people that has got *into him*. They are his internalization of the others, the power of judgment surrendered to them. They are his internalization of his persecutors' perspective. Jesus has not explained this parable of different ways of hearing to teach that the scandalized man is simply the unfortunate victim of others. The man "has no root in himself" -- these are Jesus' words. The man is liable to be offended "immediately" (13:21) -- that is, without having to be given much cause. The way an individual unwittingly complies with a persecutor, the way his or her reaction allows another's ruse of power to work -- this is what is suggested by the figure as well as by the Greek.

Before returning to the details of the parable of wheat and tares, we should address what might be an obstacle to our further reading. We have been concentrating on the theme of scandal which came to our attention because of its sudden appearance in Jesus' explanation of the Apocalypse. Yet once we have become aware of the problem of scandal, it might occur to us that this whole scene of Jesus telling the parable to a crowd and then offering its explanation to "insiders," this whole scene itself flirts with scandal. In fact, this blatant division of disciples and crowd occurs twice in this chapter of Matthew, and the first time, after telling the first parable, Jesus seems to dwell on the distinction. The disciples ask him why he speaks in parables, and he responds at some length that "...it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given." (13:10-11)

Now if the reader understands this to mean that one's capacity to be enlightened by the text is somehow determined by a mysterious pre-selection of souls, then this would be an obstacle. The distinction between outsiders and insiders becomes a scandal and an offense. Or, one might be more optimistic and assume that the division the text develops between disciples and crowd is not hostile but favors the reader. Then, presumably, by merely reading -- reading literally or with little effort -- what the book says Jesus told the disciples privately, one learns the secret teachings and is included in

the disciples' company. But this supposition might simply re-inforce that sense of spiritual superiority that is identical to scandal; it too might simply have fallen into the snare of the text. It is possible, however, to conceive a different, a third solution as it were, to the possible scandal between disciples and crowds. It is possible that Matthew is fully aware of creating a problem for the reader and that he does this to focus attention on scandal in a more immediate way. By attuning readers to their own implication in scandal, he would make it hard for them to presume the privileges of discipleship without a more arduous journey into the soul and into the text.[12]

But that is to anticipate our own course. Let us go back to the details of our text, back to comparing the parable and Jesus' explanation of it, as we set out. We may continue to let the issues arise from that serious form of play called reading. Only now, given the eruptions of scandal in the text, we should not be surprised if, at a later point, the theme of scandal should re-emerge.

If we compare the images of the parable of wheat and tares with Jesus' list of their apocalyptic meanings, we see something else interesting. Jesus' "explanation" does not in fact identify all the main figures of the original parable. He tells about the Son of Man and the devil, about the sons of the kingdom and of the wicked one, and about a new world purged by angels. But Jesus neglected to identify the "servants of the owner."[13]

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[12] Jacques Derrida, reading other passages of this gospel, shows that Matthew writes within the paradox of a secrecy that is the end of secrecy; for Matthew discloses the ultimate but still inviolable secret of our "invisible interiority." See Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 100-109. Our reading of the parable-episode that deals most explicitly with secrets confirms that such a concluding of secrecy, within a person's inwardness, is indeed a central Matthaian theme.

[13] Compare other episodes of Jesus as a trickster, whose tricks always have interesting

They appear not to be reapers; for the owner in the parable tells the servants not even to weed and tells them what he will later say to the reapers. Whoever they are, these servants raise the central question of the parable. They ask why the field has tares if the owner sowed good seed. They ask about the problem of there being "bad people" in the world. This omission of the servants from the parable's purported explanation might ultimately be relevant to understanding the answer to their question. In the meantime, Jesus' "explanation" of the parable, ironically through what it fails to explain, raises one's interest in the original story.

Indeed, reconsideration of the owner's answer to his servants reveals him saying more than that moral difference will be sorted out later. He is telling the servants something curious about good and evil. He tells them they must not uproot the tares because that may also uproot the wheat. This suggests two possibilities. First it suggests that men cannot necessarily tell the wheat and tares apart because the two species look alike. This is a traditional understanding of the text, and biblical dictionaries agree in defining the Greek word for tares (*zizania*) as a plant resembling wheat.[14] A second, compatible possibility is that the roots of the wheat and the tares are intertwined. The master of the house thus teaches that the difficulty with eliminating weeds is the enlaced roots beneath the visible surface of the field.

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meanings: John 20:15, and Luke 24:1-53.

[14] E.g. Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, being Grimm's Wilke's Clavis Novi Testamenti* (New York: American Book Co., 1889), p. 272; William Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 340; and *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 2, p. 816.

These two points complicate the relationship of so-called "good" and "bad" people. Not only is human discernment not able to separate these species, but also, if their roots are entangled, people are not aware of how interdependent they have all become. Yet, further on in Matthew's text, he gives the impression that one might dig deeper still, beneath this entanglement of good and bad. The rest of Jesus' discourse to the disciples inspires optimism about what else lies below surfaces.

Here is what follows the passages already cited:

> "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure (*thesauroi*) hidden in a field (*agroi*), which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, which, when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels but threw the bad away. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate [the evil] from among the just, and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth."
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> Jesus said to them, "Have you [discerned] (*syneikate*) all these things?" They said to him, "Yes, Lord." Then he said to them, "Therefore every scribe instructed (*grammateus matheteutheis*) concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a [master of a house]

(*oikodespotei*) who [puts forth] out of his treasure (*thesaurou*) things new and old." (Matthew 13:44-52)

As readers continue on to these passages, they could easily assume that Jesus is finished with the explanation of the wheat and tares and is suddenly, for some reason, offering a new group of parables.[15] But Jesus' concluding question implies that this is not the case! "Have you discerned (*syneikate)* all these things?" he asks. He has been continuously and privately instructing the disciples, who need to "discern" -- or "put together," according to another definition of *syneikate*[16] -- his *accumulated meaning.* "Have you put together all these things?" On a stricter reading, one sees that these paragraphs *continue Jesus' answer to the disciples' single request*, to explain the parable of the tares, after he dispatches the multitude! Under the belittling supposition that Jesus' point is only to identify the figures in the parable with figures in the Apocalypse, one might easily terminate Jesus' private explanation too soon (as we did in our initial quotations). But these new little parables are *part of the commentary* on the wheat and the tares. They are parables interpreting the original parable.

In this light, the "treasure hidden in the field (*agroi*)" that commences the sequence of additional parables (verse 44), is not an independent figure. It can refer to what the reader will find in the field (*agros)* mentioned in the main parable if he or she keeps digging. The next little parable referring to precious pearls could also be linked to

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15 For a recent example of that reading, see David McCracken, *The Scandal of the Gospels: Jesus, Story, and Offense* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 97-106.

16 The verb *synieimi* also carries the metaphorical sense of "to put together," to get the inward sense of outward images, according to Liddell and Scott *Greek-English Lexicon.*

such "hidden treasure," and the one after that about the dragnet cast into the sea may be another quest for such pearls. These new images all indicate some great discovery; and they would thus be connected to one another, as Jesus' final question implies.

Jesus' words following the little parable must also be enlisted in the reader's search. Indeed they give the best hint toward an interpretation of the entire episode. Jesus says that when his listeners have "put together" his discourse they can be likened to "master(s) of a house" (*oikodespotei*) bringing out new and old items from their treasure. The word Jesus uses for the new master is the same word (*oikodespotes*) he used for the landowner in the original parable, the man who sowed good seed. The implication is that *the discerning disciple could become like the master of the house in the very parable Jesus has been explaining.* In the original parable, the landowner who sowed the wheat turned out to be the Son of Man, the divine essence of human beings which Jesus presumably reveals.[17] Now if the disciples should finally become metaphorical landowners, they become in some way Sons of Men. They become more essentially like Jesus. This appears to be confirmed by the single dramatic action in the episode. Before sharing the inward teaching, Jesus indeed goes "into the house" (*eis ten oikian*), to be followed voluntarily by his friends. As if to say: yes, the disciples might become masters of a spiritual world like the householder in the story.

The whole sense of the parable would thus shift from Jesus as master of human beings at the end of time to Jesus as model of human beings now. It would shift from a

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[17] John Dominic Crossan, *The Essential Jesus: Original Sayings and Earliest Images* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), pp. 160-1, note to p. 54, relies on reading the "Son of Man" as essential humanity. See also Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, *The Gospel and the Sacred: Poetics of Violence in Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 40.

teaching for the crowd, that speaks to the crowd's concern (their concern about the ultimate fate of "bad" people), to a private teaching directed at the individual disciple, that speaks about him. The original parable suggested a meaning for the individual by its opening: "The kingdom of heaven is like *a man* who sowed good seed in his field." But this individualistic meaning was not followed up in the "official explanation," Jesus' listing the apocalyptic identities of the characters. Only now, in this latter part of his private discourse which encourages us to dig deeper, is the movement of the disciples away from the crowd and into the house becoming significant. The kingdom is within and it is now.

But how are these disciples entering the kingdom? This question is not so different from the unanswered question about the role of the servants in the parable. It is to ask, how do individuals cope with evil, how might they become helpers of the Son of Man? Indeed, when the few disciples follow Jesus to inquire about the "parable of the tares," they resemble the parable's servants asking their master about the tares in the field. Yet Jesus hints that the disciples, if they become more discerning, might resemble more the master. This is what suggests an alternate way of reading the whole parable. Individuals who would identify with the Son of Man, the master of the cosmos, must learn to become masters in their own houses.

On this alternate reading, the owner's field which officially symbolized the cosmos, would become the disciple's natural soul. The individual is *micro*-cosmos; the psyche, a partial mirror of the world. The wheat and tares are an individual's *own* entanglement of good and bad. Or better, one's natural goodness is entangled with some foreign badness, in the obscure depths of one's soul. Individuals need to understand this in order to understand their own activity. They need to untangle this tangle of roots, if the knowledge of subterranean depths is to become a treasure. Thus would one become "master of his own house," a master who unpacks his treasure (*thesaurou*), as Jesus hints in his final remark. This mastery is not imaginable for the servants in the story. Their

interests are detached from the master's. "Sir," they ask, "did *you* not sow good seed in *your* field?" For them, ultimate responsibility, like ownership, rests with ...the Management. But this attitude changes in the first small parable (13:44). A lucky man finds buried treasure (*thesauroi*) and goes to *purchase* the field and become a landowner.

One should not be surprised that Jesus' words refer to psychic depths and our appropriation of them. The Gospels commonly allude to mysteries of what is called the unconscious mind.[18] As observed above, in Matthew's earlier parable of a sower, if a seed is to secure the kingdom of heaven it must sink roots *deep into the earth* and avoid being scorched by the sun. Jesus states that this represents being rooted in oneself (13:21).[19] How much clearer could his advice get, that one become grounded in a hidden source within, and shun the fanaticism of trying to move directly toward the light? Other Gospel lessons agree that the kingdom is not about conscious exertions. It is like a man scattering seed from which the wheat sprouts *without his knowing how* (Mark 4:27). It is like the lilies of the field, which flourish without anxiety and toil, without straining to raise their height (Matthew 6:27-28). Nonetheless, human beings may need a wisdom that liberates this effortless growth, a wisdom about how it is obstructed.

Is obstruction not the very lesson of the parable of wheat and tares? The master explains the tares to his servants: "An enemy, a man, has done this." A hostile man came to frustrate his work by sowing weeds that would entangle the wheat. The master explicitly makes the point that the enemy is *a man* like himself. It curiously calls

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[18] Some compelling psychoanalytical readings may be found in Françoise Dolto, *L'Évangile au risque de la psychanalyse, Tomes I et II* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1977).

[19] Indeed this parable, specifically about the effect of the word, may refer to the symbol's gradual germination in the unconscious mind in order to become meaningful. This matches the psychological conditions of the first (oral) transmission of the Gospels.

attention to the phenomenon of rivalry and antagonism. And the entanglement of the wheat with tares – can this be anything else than the idea of *ensnarement* expressed in the idiom of plants? In essence – and here our theme definitively returns! – the parable is an image of scandal.

The cosmic and microcosmic levels work together in this picture of scandal. On the microcosmic level, the clandestine planting of weeds suggests that others' sin gets into a person subcutaneously and beyond one's control. Unacknowledged, this alien seed grows into a sin that is truly *the person's own.* Others are not responsible for that; it is for each person not to be the unwitting subject of others' power. But the individual's acquisition of full responsibility is one with his or her awakening to a larger problem. For, while the propagation of evil affects each on a personal level, it is always a mere episode in the unconscious and universal process by which people infect one another. This universal process, taken as an autonomous whole, is what the diabolical Enemy signifies on the cosmic plane.

With respect to the depiction of this universal process, notice that the Enemy comes *while men are sleeping.* Such a reference to every soul's unconsciousness brings especially to mind the psychological condition of children, their vulnerability before parents and other adults. Matthew's Gospel stresses the very point. There Jesus preaches woe to "...whoever scandalizes (*skandalisei*) one of these little ones."(18:6) So the parable, too, can be indicating the origination of evil in human lives, not as a defect transmitted biologically, but as our shared susceptibility to the unconscious process of scandal.[20]

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[20] For a critical examination of the doctrine of original sin, see the studies of F. R. Tennant, *Sources of the Doctrine of the Fall and Original Sin* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), and Paul Ricoeur, "'Original Sin': A Study in Meaning," in *The Conflict of*

Incidentally, Shakespeare takes up the theme of the propagation of evil in the first scenes of *Hamlet*, and he similarly modifies the idea of original sin from a congenital defect to a problem of human influence. He has Hamlet discourse on the original flaw in human beings, poetically calling it a "mole of nature."(I.iv.24) But at that very moment the ghost of his father appears to him for the first time, to require of him the act of revenge. When the ghost burrows around in the earth under his feet, the amused Hamlet calls him an "old mole!"(I.v.162) Hamlet is unaware of his own play on words. But Shakespeare has taken the vague idea of a genetic flaw and depicted it as the nefarious moral collusion with the father. Again, this is not simply to blame parents but to see them as crucial links in the interpersonal chain of scandal. Anyone might consider how this has taken place in his or her own life. Such symbols allow for the widest application, the symbol of Hamlet's father-from-Hell burrowing into the ground he treads, no less than that of the Enemy in the parable secretly sowing weeds among the wheat.

Application of the parable's symbolism might further follow the double-image it describes of the world and the individual, the macrocosm and the microcosm. This double-image suggests that a genuine understanding of one's own scandals is not separable from an understanding of those of the world around one. Conversely, one's judgment of what goes on in the world necessarily reflects one's prior self-interrogation. Perhaps, in the same way, no one is isolated in a merely private guilt. The double disclosure, of self and world, implies a solidarity with others, founded on our common falling into scandals. Hence the genuine responsibility the individual takes on must be (as Dostoevsky taught[21]) a responsibility for a frailty that afflicts humanity as a whole.

Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), pp. 269-286.

[21] The parable intimates something like the "responsibility of all for all" in *The Brothers*

The bond between the disciple as microcosm and the Son of Man who cares for the macrocosm would be no vain metaphor.

But, like the servants in the parable, the disciple must learn just how much the tares have adulterated the present crop. The servants imagine that they could pull them up and remove them from the field. The master hints at the complications: the wheat and tares are not easily differentiated, and their roots are so intertwined that the servants had better not attempt a weeding. As a figure for the human situation this is hardly good news. We, along with the world, are more deeply entangled at the roots than we ordinarily realize, more than we can single-handedly expect to sort out. William Blake understood the problem, for he understood scandal to infect all social and cultural systems. What we call virtue, for example, is scandal insofar as virtue pursues moral superiority, the right of condemning transgressors.

> Our Moral Virtues ne'er can be,
> Nor Warlike pomp & Majesty,
> For Moral Virtues all begin
> In the Accusations of Sin,
> *And all the Heroic Virtues End*
> *In destroying the Sinners' Friend.*[22]

Karamazov, e.g. p. 320, the sense of solidarity based on a *cosmic* sense of the human need of forgiveness. (Cf. the references to "other worlds," p. 362).

[22] William Blake, "The Everlasting Gospel," lines 31-36, in *Poems and Prophecies*, ed. Max Plowman (London: J. M. Dent, 1975), p. 347. The italics are Blake's additions in mss. Regarding this complete re-valuation of good and evil, also see Jean Delumeau in *Le Savant et la Foi: des scientifiques s'expriment* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989), p. 15.

(By the "Sinner's Friend," of course, Blake means Jesus.) The problem of the tares entangling our wheat signifies a legacy of scandal conditioning the soul. The twisted roots we need to unravel are nothing less than our false cultural and personal systems of the knowledge of good and evil.

Let us try to indicate better the Gospels' awareness of false distinctions of good and evil, and the underlying similarity of good and evil people ordinarily deny. A provocative example comes up in the sixth chapter of John. A crowd has tracked Jesus down and is asking him for a really good sign like, for instance, delivering manna from heaven to eat. So Jesus announces that he is the bread of God to whom whoever comes will never hunger. A striking enough response. But the story becomes increasingly eerie. For Jesus does not proclaim just once that he is the bread of humankind, but he hammers the point five or six more times and in the rather too graphic terms of *eating his flesh and drinking his blood.* One might almost say "in unambiguous terms," but the effect is precisely to call attention a particular ambiguity. The speech of the new Manna, the speech about eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood, blurs deliberately into the subject of cannibalism. The disciples murmur, "This is a hard saying, who can listen to it?" Notice, Jesus pulls them up short. "Does this *offend* you?" he asks. Again the Greek word for "offend" is *skandalizei.* "Does this *scandalize* you?"(John 6:22-61)

Of course Jesus refers to the possibility of human beings assimilating his spirit. But by linking this assimilation with cannibalism, he hints at the resemblance of the good and bad which ordinary human judgment and literal ways of thinking fail to grasp, precisely as they fail to grasp their involvement in scandal. His listeners can only react to his ambiguous speech. They are offended and indignant, for they know themselves to be morally superior to the abominable suggestion of cannibalism. But this is a false distinction, and their offended reaction betrays them. Their "moral" reaction attests to the fact that *they* are already engaged in a kind of cannibalism. They tacitly incorporate "bad cannibals" into a moral system which makes judgment easy and the judges self-

secure.[23] Jesus' shocking speech critiques such purported morality. All unconscious modes of *internalizing the other*, represented in the allusion to cannibalism, need to be examined. In the light of the revelation of scandal, the good and bad of moral systems are not so easy to tell apart. The human practice of eating other human beings seems only an overt expression of the code of revenge, a mere moment of the pervasive process of human antagonism.[24] Jesus' speech again hints at the underlying problem. He offers himself as both the non-retaliating victim of human scandal and the model of its transcendence.

It may be useful at this point to survey what we glean from these Gospel images. The stones in the earth which prevent a plant from taking firm root (Matthew's first parable), the tares' seeds planted in our field, and (most graphically) the suggestion of eating another human being -- all these images converge in the idea of a self-deceiving absorption of the other. Furthermore, the texts all associate the images with the language of scandal, which expresses the antagonisms by which people hinder themselves.

Would one be mistaken in thinking that many pathologies of the human spirit might be encompassed in this concept of delusively internalizing the other? However, if that thinking is justified, it would explain the importance of scandal in Jesus' preaching.

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[23] For irony's sake, one might compare Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John Russell (New York: Atheneum, 1971), pp. 386!

[24] See Montaigne, "Of Cannibals," *op. cit.*, p. 155. "This is not, as some people think, for nourishment...it is to betoken an extreme revenge." Closer to the biblical viewpoint, cannibalism is mentioned as one of the curses that follow disobedience to the law in Deuteronomy 28:53.

It would explain the key insertion of scandal into his parable of "things kept secret since the foundation of the world." Scandal would be the original pattern of sin.[25]

The original pattern of sin, rather than the "original sin" simply, because what our reading does *not* yield is the idea of sin as willful offense and disobedience to an autocratic God, and certainly not the idea of a unique sin resulting in punishment biologically transmitted through the human race. This at least is how original sin is popularly understood. The connection to the story of Adam and Eve is rather that of scandal, which the Serpent personifies. The Serpent initiates scandal in Genesis by getting human beings to feel their own inadequacy, and to attribute the problem to the Creator whom they see as a tyrant threatened by their desire for wisdom. The Serpent's stratagem succeeds. He arouses in human beings desire for a wisdom that affronts this unfit God, and then they try to play the God's part. Just as the Serpent recommended, they take themselves as standards of good and bad.[26] But these would-be gods run into the obstacle constituted by their conflicting claims. These self-certain judges find themselves in conflict; yet they are unable to remove the block of presumption on which they equally stumble. Sin is not a matter of *human* genetics. With respect to sin, we are the *viper's* brood.

But the very revelation of scandal makes it possible for human beings to find their way out of this process. And that clarifies the positive signification of the original Garden. For the obstacle that scandal creates is, more than anything, an obstacle to individuals' own growth. Jesus frequently refers to the naturalness of plant growth as an

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25 Note how scandal stands diametrically opposed to love in 1 John 2:10.

26 Cf. Genesis 3:15, and Romans 14:13, where the act of judging the other is the first degree of scandal. Also cf. René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, trans. Y. Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), chapter 2..

illustration of his teachings; and shows particular concern for children who cannot direct and protect their own development. Indeed, the idea of liberating spiritual growth comes up regarding our parable of wheat and tares *apart* from its obvious lesson in plant husbandry. For we skipped over two brief parables at the outset that seemed to interrupt the text, coming in between Jesus' public preaching of the parable and his private explanations to the disciples. These brief parables are those of the mustard seed that grows into a great tree and of the little leaven that raises three measures of flour. These figures now seem to have been placed with good purpose, to signal readers about the astonishing growth that the kingdom is, the growth that comes with the clearing away of the soul's embedded obstructions. The kingdom is a metaphorical return to the Garden where spirit might flourish.[27]

But let us return to Jesus' private discourse on the parable to see how such a spiritual mutation, such a liberation for development is described. We may pick up this thread by noticing a particular snag in the text. It occurs in the part that follows Jesus' "official explanation," in the third image of the kingdom, after the images of the man finding treasure in a field and the merchant finding his pearl of great price. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, which when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels but threw the bad away."(47-48) The snag here, what looks like bad composition, is that the text says "they" sift through the catch, grammatically as if it had already told us who "they" are. But it did not. ...Or did it? Might "they" who sift the catch not be the merchant who has found the precious pearl and the man who discovered hidden treasure? Have the man and the merchant been transformed into the fishermen?

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[27] Again, cf. John 20:15.

What makes it plausible that the lucky man and the merchant have been transformed into the fishermen, is the very transforming power of their discoveries. The two fortune-finders are alike in this repect. The man sells all that he has in order to buy the field with the hidden treasure, and the merchant sells all to buy the special pearl. Their transactions exceed ordinary economic exchanges: they are neither entering into a bargain nor buying on a budget. Their big discoveries come as a surprise, and the key is in their hands before they sell all. The image is of a find that unexpectedly changes everything, changes the worth of all other possessions in view of it. One might reasonably say that their discovery represents a re-valuation of values, a radical shift in understanding good and evil like the one the revelation of scandal implies, and that their discovery concerns the reclaiming of the soul. For the first man buys a *field* -- as we saw, an image of the microcosm in the original story. The second man's pearl of great price moves the symbolism of fortune-finding toward the sea, and toward the dragnet-fishing from its depths, the final figure of sublime self-consciousness. Jesus would make of his disciples fishers of their own souls.

Re-reading this sequence as a re-valuation of values, a revolution of heart and mind in the light of new insight about evil, helps explain Jesus' second description of the Last Judgment. He says in connection to the sifters at the shore: "So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate [the evil] from among the just, and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth."(49-50) Clearly this parallels the first account of Apocalypse he gave the disciples; the angels come forth and so on. But does Jesus repeat this point for style, a final touch of *gravitas*? Or is his repetition a subtle *reformulation*? Jesus might be offering a reformulation, a second and different picture of Judgment at this point because he is describing a mutation in individuals' power of judgment, a mutation possible if they take his hint about scandal. Remember in the first version of the Last Judgment Jesus divided the evils into: scandals and lawbreakers. But in this second version that duality is gone. Scandals and

lawbreaking have been replaced simply by the word about evil. Jesus' reformulation of the Last Judgment may represent an enlightened process of judgment that he no longer needs to qualify.

In another way, too, the text implies that this new process of judgment takes place *in* human beings, that it is one with their awareness of scandals and their own removal of them. Notice that the second image of Judgment, the fishing for and sorting of the contents of the sea, clarifies the human activity in a way that the original parable of wheat and tares never did. The original parable never declared what the services of the servants were, but only that they could not weed the field. One might have wondered why these servants weren't at least given the work of reaping in the harvest to come. The second image of Judgment, by contrast, is an elaborate job-description. They cast the net which gathers the many kinds, draw it to shore when it is full, sit down and sort out the good into vessels. These workers simply *are* reapers, reapers of the sea from start to finish. And, whereas the explanation of the parable of the wheat and tares failed to assign the servants an apocalyptic function, the text of the sea-harvest compares the fishermen *directly* to angels separating out the evil at the end of time. Their work is likened to the angels' luminous discernment. Only now, if we think of the dragnet as dredging the aqueous depths of a soul, we may understand differently the "wailing and gnashing of teeth" that accompany this angelic work. Might that not be the reapers' own anguish and tears?[28]

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[28] Cf. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 321; and Dostoevsky's source (mentioned in the novel), *The Ascetical Homelies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, trans. anon. (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984), Homily I, p. 34, Homily 6, pp.59-60.

If it is right that Jesus' private discourse on his parable is not just a collage of aphorisms, if he is even instructing readers there to look for connections among his remarks, then it indeed might describe a course of initiation into the kingdom. It might even be the disclosure of "things kept secret" promised by Matthew, secret things that turn out to include the scandal in the reader's soul. On this view, all the images of the kingdom -- the discoveries of treasures, the labor of the dragnet, the mustard seed and, of course, the wheat and the tares -- all fit together in the Evangelist's picture of wisdom. They fit together in his picture of a soul's emancipation from scandal, emancipation for untrammeled growth. They are a description of personal Apocalypse.[29]

So it seems fitting that, as Matthew concludes this text, he alludes to his own initiation into the kingdom. For he refers to "scribes" who, with the help of divine teaching, achieve new fruitfulness, a power of producing and sharing their abundance. Here is his conclusion again:

> Jesus said to them, "Have you [discerned] all these things?" They said to him, "Yes, Lord." Then he said to them, "Therefore every scribe instructed (*grammateus matheteutheis*) concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a [master of a house] who [puts forth] out of his treasure things new and old."(13:51-52)

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[29] Hence, although our reading of scandal in this parable-text profits from Girard's connection of scandal and mimetic rivalry, it does not lead us to understand apocalypse *strictly* in the violent terms of Girardian theory (Cf Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1995), pp. 14-15). On our reading of Matthew, apocalypse includes the interior psychological dimension which Northrop Frye described in *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1982), pp. 136-137.

One might well guess that one of the "instructed scribe[s]" is the Evangelist. But further, the words in Greek, *grammateus matheteutheis*, would be an extended pun on Matthew's name, *Matthaios*.[30] Perhaps an intimate signature on a page of secrets.

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[30] Early manuscripts attribute authorship to "Matthew." It is doubtless significant that the *scandal* of Jesus' eating with tax collectors and sinners follows his calling of Matthew "sitting at the tax office" in Matthew 9: 9-13.