

Matthew 13 and the Function of the Parables in the First Gospel

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INTRODUCTION

FROM THE DAYS of their original delivery down to our own time, the parables of Jesus have served to stimulate, intrigue, invite, repel, inspire, and invigorate those who have encountered them. Countless books, articles, and sermons have wrestled with what the parables are, how they are to be interpreted, and what they mean. The current edition of this journal is yet another paving stone in this long and winding road.

To review or rehearse even the contours of this road requires lengthy discussion, and thankfully, many good overviews do exist. One such recent work is Klyne Snodgrass's *Stories with Intent*.¹ Snodgrass provides a thoughtful and well-researched discussion of the many matters relevant to our understanding of the parables. These include the nature of parables in terms of metaphor and allegory, the classification of different types of parables, the history of the interpre-

tation of the parables, and the methodology for interpreting them.

For this essay my focus will be much narrower. Apart from one macro-level issue, discussed below, I will explore only the specific question of the coherence and function of the collection of parables in Matthew 13.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION— THE PARABLES IN JESUS' MINISTRY AND ISRAEL'S STORY

Before turning particularly to Matthew 13, it will be beneficial to consider how Jesus' parables fit into his ministry and teaching overall. It is well known that Jesus gave much of his teaching in the form of parables, but less often discussed is how the content of these parables relates to the larger story and theology of the Scriptures, particularly the Old Testament and the story of Israel. One scholar who has reflected carefully on this question is N. T. Wright. In his book, *Jesus and the Victory of God*,² Wright is seeking to answer the simple but vast question of who Jesus was. His answer at least in part is: Jesus is the true King, Messiah, and Prophet of God who taught and

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brought about the final return from exile for God's people. Wright goes on to observe that Jesus' parables and the way he told them form a crucial part of this Messianic and Prophetic role.

Wright makes several important observations about Jesus' parables. They followed well-known Jewish lines, with several taken directly from Old Testament models, such as the vine or vineyard as Israel, and the sheep and shepherd as Israel and her king. At the same time, several of Jesus' parables are quite close to apocalyptic discourse, with a strange story interpreted so that its secret symbols may be understood by those with ears to hear.³ One can think immediately of Daniel and other Old Testament prophets whose metaphorical visions needed and were given a prophetic interpretation.

The connection with the prophets on both of these points is very important. Stories were the means through which the Old Testament prophets usually communicated, and often with allegorical apocalyptic stories.⁴ So Jesus' choice to teach in parables is not entirely new, but is continuing this weighty tradition of telling the story of Israel and showing how it will arrive at its paradoxical conclusion. Indeed, beyond being just in the prophetic tradition, the closest parallel to Jesus' parables turns out to be the world of Jewish apocalyptic and subversive literature, in which seers receive visions of the mysteries which are explained via their correspondences with the real world.⁵ When one considers this parallel, it is striking to observe how in the Gospels the disciples play the role of the seers with Jesus as both the revealer and interpreter of the mystery. And inevitably, this mystery is about the story of Israel and God's coming work and judgment.⁶

Now the key point is this: Jesus' parables are not merely ways of communicating *information about* the coming kingdom but much more radically, they are a retelling and retooling of the very story of the OT, now centered and consummated in Jesus himself. Jesus is not just adding another phase to the story of Israel (though he is doing

that in part), but is offering a new and alternative, Christ-centered worldview and inviting people to embrace this as their own. Thus, as Wright says, Jesus' parables "belong with, rework, reappropriate and redirect Israel's prophetic and apocalyptic traditions." They are part of his work as a prophet of judgment and renewal. The parables are not simply teaching or informing or making a moral or religious point. They are instead the vehicle for the paradoxical and dangerous campaign which Jesus was undertaking, namely a redefinition of the people of God and a reorientation of the grand story of Israel's hope.⁷

This insight is not only helpful for our overall understanding of Jesus' parabolic teaching, but will also prove to be crucial for our understanding of Matthew 13, where we will see a similar apocalyptic retooling of Israel's self-understanding, namely, that the great separation of God's people from those condemned is not based on ethnic Israel identity but faith-response in Jesus.

A PARABOLIC HOTSPOT— THE PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM IN MATTHEW 13

We may now drill down to another layer of discussion and turn to the parables found particularly in Matthew. According to Snodgrass, there are between thirty-seven and sixty-five parables in the Synoptics, depending on what criteria are used to classify a saying or story as a parable.⁸ Of the parables in the Synoptics, ten are unique to Matthew, and Matthew has concentrated and thematically arranged his parables especially into chapters 13, 18, 20-22, and 24-25.⁹ There is no consensus on whether Matthew's parables reveal particular themes or tendencies relative to the other Gospels. Michael Goulder argued they tend to be more allegorical than others.¹⁰ Snodgrass notes that they tend to operate on a grander scale with regard to numbers and the social status of his characters, and with a predominance of kingdom language.¹¹ But beyond this it is difficult to find great differences between Matthew's parables and

the others in the Synoptics.

For our purposes, the most important observation to make concerns the highly concentrated section of Matthew 13. While parables are found in various places in Matthew, even a cursory reading makes it clear that the “one stop shop” for understanding the parables in Matthew must be chapter 13. Not only do we find here an intricately structured set of seven parables, we are drawn to this chapter because it presents itself as the focal point of Jesus’ parabolic teaching. It serves as the lodestar for our understanding of Jesus’ parables in Matthew. It does so in a number of ways: (1) by virtue of its being one of Matthew’s five major teaching blocks or discourses which draw attention to themselves throughout the narrative;¹² (2) through standing apart from the other discourses in that it consists only of parabolic teaching; (3) by offering two explicit fulfillment quotations from the OT regarding *why* Jesus is teaching in parables; and (4) through its placement at a crucial turning point in the overall narrative of the First Gospel.

GETTING A RUNNING START AT MATTHEW 13—THE NARRATIVE FLOW

It is this last point that provides a jumping off point for our understanding of the function of the parables in Matthew 13. To do so, we need to get a sense of how Matthew has structured his narrative as a clue to the purpose of the parables. Even as simple words between a husband and wife have greater meaning to each other—for good or for bad—because of the relationship and the amount of water that has “gone under the bridge” before that particular dialogue, so too, Matthew 13 comes to us with a lot of meaning pre-packaged into it because of the events that have happened in the preceding twelve chapters.

In brief, after a couple of chapters that describe Jesus’ identity and origin (chapters 1-2), we meet the fiery, kingdom-preaching prophet John, and this segues right into Jesus’ own proclamation

of the arrival of God’s kingdom (chapters 3-4). Chapters 5-9 hang together as a beautiful depiction of this kingdom kerygma, described as “the gospel of the kingdom.”¹³ This kingdom is imaged in a two-fold way, with teachings that describe life in the coming kingdom (the first major teaching block, Sermon on the Mount, chapters 5-7) and events that manifest the compassion and power of its King (chapters 8-9). All of this leads into the second of Matthew’s five discourses (chapter 10), in which he sends out his newly-minted disciples to do the same kind of kingdom work as he has just modeled for them. While Jesus’ teaching and ministry are met with great joy and acceptance by many, others express increasing consternation and opposition. So too he promises his disciples that they will encounter hostility on account of him (10:16-39). This functions as more than a simple prediction of future discipleship experience, but also as an important foreshadowing of the next two chapters. Chapter 11 describes misunderstanding and apathy on the part of many of Jesus’ hearers. Then in chapter 12 we find the simmering opposition to Jesus boils over. Jesus has two knock-down, drag-out conflicts with the religious leaders of the day over the issue of Sabbath-observance. Beyond being merely a sharp theological dispute, this proves to be the turning point of the book. In response to these conflicts the Pharisees resolutely decide that Jesus is *not* from God and “take counsel together” to destroy him (12:14). The two different responses to Jesus now become stark and irrevocably concretized, especially for the Pharisees. The result is that they accuse Jesus of being demonic, a desperate attempt to explain his obvious power in conjunction with his equally frustrating “unorthodoxy” (12:22-37). How else can they explain the clear fact that he is very powerful? And their decision in 12:14 will eventually culminate in the end of the Gospels, with their putting Jesus to death.

A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF MATTHEW 13—DIVINE CROP CIRCLES

Now all of this important story is what brings us to the crucial chapter 13. While there is much that could be said about each pericope within this chapter, equally important is the macro-level structure because this section is communicating at levels that go beyond the individual parables. There are distinct and directive patterns and pathways through this passage.

When we fly over this text with trained eyes we can begin to see that there is a structure or outline to be made out of the whole; it is not just a tangled mess, but is indeed a well-structured unit. Even as one may be lost in the midst of confusing Chicago streets, when one flies over in a plane the perfect symmetry and organization is perceivable by following the rows of street lamps. So too with Matthew 13.

It is at the altitude of the whole chapter that we can discern a pattern in these parables. We may begin by observing the non-accidental fact that there are seven parables and that these are organized by length and theme. There is one main parable to lead off, the "Sower" or the "Four Soils" (vv. 1-9). This parable is also in Mark and Luke, and there it also heads Jesus' parable teaching. This big parable is then followed by a question and answer time with the disciples (vv. 10-17) as they ask *why* Jesus is teaching in parables. He gives them a lengthy answer by quoting from Isaiah. Then, to complete this first part, Jesus unpacks and explains what this opening and important parable of the Sower means (vv. 18-23).

Then, notice that, after this opening parable, the remaining six parables come in two sets of three. We find the parable of the Wheat and the Weeds (vv. 24-30), another long story kind of parable like the Sower, followed by two little parables which are not of the story kind of parable but are really similes—"The kingdom of heaven is like this..."—a mustard seed growing into a tree, and leaven working through a whole lump of bread dough (vv. 31-33). All three of these go together

as can be seen by verse 34 where the voice changes and we have another OT quote about parables. This is then followed by the explanation of the Wheat and Weeds story (vv. 36-43). We may also observe that all three of these parables (numbers 2, 3, 4) hang together around the common theme of spreading or growth.

Moving on, notice in the last three parables (numbers 5, 6, 7) we have the same situation in reverse. We hear two short similes—treasure hidden in a field, the pearl of great price (vv. 44-46)—followed by another longer, story parable of the Dragnet of fish (vv. 47-50), followed again by its explanation even as the Wheat and the Weeds was explained. And once again it is remarkable that these three parables hang together by the shared theme of value or worth and the discerning of value/worth. Additionally, we see that in verse 51 the flow shifts as Jesus then turns to his disciples and asks them if they understand.

There is also an observable flow and connection throughout all seven parables. The Sower is about a farmer sowing seed. This is closely followed by another farmer sowing seed but an enemy sowing weeds as well. Then the two similes continue the theme with a mustard seed being sown in a field and growing, followed by the saying about leaven in bread, the very thing made from the result of such farming activities, wheat flour. Similarly, the last three parables have a merchant/business theme (as compared to the farming) with the purchase of a field and treasure, the purchase of a treasured pearl, and the fishmonger sorting out saleable and non-saleable fish.

This kind of structure is not accidental but is a mark of thoughtful literature in the ancient world, the kind of thoughtfulness that makes a book be copied and passed down for millennia. And it is also the kind of structuring that is typical of Matthew.¹⁴

But yet more can be noted. Looking over this set of seven parables we can discern another important bit of information: the second and seventh parables are nearly identical. That is, they are

both story parables that describe a mixed group of good and bad (wheat and weeds; good and bad fish), they are both given explanations by Jesus (unlike the short simile parables), and both of the explanations are identical: they are about the end of the age when Jesus will come and separate out evildoers and cast them out of the kingdom (vv. 36-43; vv. 49-50, in short-hand form).

So what we have here is a highly-structured group of parables: An opening parable about a sower of seed and its interpretation in relation to the kingdom, two other major parables about the separation of good and bad and their interpretation as the end of the age when the kingdom comes, and four little parables about the hiddenness and great value of the kingdom.

THE SOWER, THE SECRET, AND THE SEPARATION— THREE INTERWOVEN THREADS

What are we to make of this patterning? Is it merely play or is it purposeful? I think it is the latter. There are three threads that run through this entire chapter and structure that, when examined, pull it all together. These are the Sower, the Secret, and the Separation.

THE SOWER

As was mentioned above, the parable of the Sower is found in each of the Synoptic Gospels as the heading over Jesus' parable teaching. What does this parable mean? We don't have to look far to get at least an initial answer to this query because Jesus goes on to unpack its elements. The Sower is Jesus himself; the seed is the message about the kingdom; the four different soils are four different kinds of people and their response to Jesus' message. Bearing good fruit is clearly the good thing here, as it is in several other places in Matthew as well.¹⁵

What we may not realize is that this parable is not primarily an *exhortation* to be fruit-bearing ourselves but is rather an *explanation* of the mixed reception to Jesus' kingdom message. Certainly

the exhortation to us that we should be fourth-soil kind of people is there secondarily. We are right to feel the pinch and warning of the danger of not bearing fruit. We are right to be wary of trials causing our faith to wither (the second soil) and the danger of the cares of this world choking out our faith (the third soil). But reading the parable in its context, it becomes clear that primarily this parable serves to explain *why* the Great Sower, Jesus himself, meets with such mixed results with most people *not* receiving and believing! This parable is primarily *descriptive* of what happens when the Gospel seed is sown, by Jesus himself and, by extension, by his disciples as well. And this leads into the second thread-theme to note.

THE SECRET

One of the most interesting and unexpected elements of this story is what happens in verse 10. After Jesus preaches this parable of the Sower, the disciples are not sure what to make of it. They are perplexed. They have no idea what Jesus is doing. To feel the weight of their confusion one must think back to the narrative that precedes this text. These fishermen and tax collectors and political revolutionaries are following Jesus because they have seen his God-given miraculous powers and because every time he opens his mouth they amazed at his wisdom and authoritative and clear teaching. They are drawn by the power of Jesus and his teaching that speaks right to their hearts, fears, and hopes. Finally there is a prophet who seems to have the ear and mind of God, and he is offering this God as a gracious, loving Father to any who will follow him. That's all good. Nothing shows this better than the incredible teachings as summarized by Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount. What insight, wisdom, and clarity are found here, such that at the end of the Sermon everyone responds the same way: "Wow! He teaches as one with authority, not like our scribes!" (7:28-29).

But now here in chapter 13 Jesus' teaching seems crazy. What is this odd story? An appar-

ently careless farmer goes out and sows seed very poorly. Most of it is wasted on the road and clearly bad soil for sowing, and then one little portion produces an astronomical, unheard of, fairy-tale-like yield. What kind of sermon is this? What kind of story is this? What does this vague little story have to do with Jesus' teachings as in the Sermon on the Mount? We can easily imagine the disciples' perplexity: "What happened to that powerful, meaty teaching like Jesus used to give us?"

This is what motivates verse 10. The disciples come, probably rather sheepishly, and ask him why he is suddenly teaching with these vague metaphors, unlike his previous teaching. Jesus' response in verses 11 and following are crucial. His answer is as shocking as his parable is vague – "You disciples have been given the knowledge to understand these secrets (or mysteries) about the kingdom of heaven, but others are *not* given this knowledge." Even more, this revealing of secrets to some is happening to fulfill God's speech as given through Isaiah, namely, that as a word of judgment upon unbelieving Israel. Isaiah is sent to preach even though they will hear but not understand and they will see but not perceive because their hearts have become hardened. This is why Jesus is now teaching in parables—not to reveal the truth of God to all, but to conceal. There is a mystery—the "mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (verse 11)—that functions as a word of judgment. At the same time, Jesus offers an unprecedented word of blessing on his disciples: You are blessed because unlike many former prophets and righteous men, you do get to see and understand this mystery (13:16-17).

So, even though our tendency in Christian understanding is to think of Jesus' parables as evidence of his down-to-earth, relating-to-the-people teaching style, in reality they are just the opposite. The parables are notoriously unclear, especially when compared to the Sermon on the Mount. In fact, if Jesus didn't give us the explanation of some of these parables we would probably have no idea what they mean. The always-varied

history of the interpretation of every parable is evidence of this unclarity.

So we learn from these verses that Jesus has changed his teaching style from speaking openly and plainly as he did in the Sermon on the Mount to teaching in this mysterious, secret way of parables. This is done so that people whose hearts are hard won't understand. It is not accidental that this shift occurs after the great opposition of chapter 12 and the religious leaders' resolution to destroy Jesus (12:14). Jesus changes his teaching style to this prophetic double-functioning mode so that he can simultaneously judge and proclaim. This is the nature of parables: They conceal and at the same time reveal if one understands the interpretation. If one is not given the knowledge to understand (by God) then the meaning remains a mystery, a secret. If one is given the knowledge then understanding and perception occurs. Therefore, this whole parable section hinges on this idea of the revealing and concealing of secrets.

THE SEPARATION

This then leads to the third and final of our interwoven threads. As we have just observed, the point of Jesus' parabolic teaching is to separate those with understanding from those without; it is the use of mysteries to conceal from some and reveal to others. We may also observe that this theme goes through all three of the major parables here in chapter 13. The Four Soils is a separating of responses into four types. Even more pointedly, the purpose of the second and seventh parables (the Wheat and the Weeds and the Dragnet of fish) is to separate the good from the bad. This is apparent not only in the parable stories themselves but also in their explicit, eschatological interpretation. Both parables speak of a separating of the good from the bad at the close of age when the Son of Man, Jesus, comes and renders reward and judgment.

We also have just seen this same theme of separation in the reference to Isaiah 6 in Matt 13:14-17. Isaiah 6 is the dynamic and memorable story

where Isaiah gets a vision of the Holy Lord in his Temple and is then commissioned by God to preach a message of repentance to wayward Israel. But God tells Isaiah that this message will not be received and accepted because of their hardness of heart. Yet, in the midst of this prophetic judgment there is a word of hope. Isaiah's hearers will not understand the message (literally, the "good news" or "gospel" in several places such as Isa 40:9; 52:7; 61:1) until the time of their judgment is complete. Yet even in the midst of this judgment Isaiah is told that God will leave for himself a holy seed, the stump of the tree of David (Isa 6:13), a remnant of those to whom God does reveal himself, and ultimately, the Messiah (Isa 11:1).

The clear reason why Jesus quotes these verses about his own teaching in parables is because he is saying that this reality is now fulfilled and consummated in him. He is the root of David, the ultimate prophet who preaches the mystery of the kingdom of God—the mystery that God has come incarnate in Jesus himself—and who is calling to himself a chosen remnant who will be granted understanding and insight into the mystery or secret. Unlike the tares amidst the wheat or the bad fish in the net or the first three soils, "Blessed are your eyes and ears," Jesus says, "because they see and hear" (13:16). The Great Separation is already occurring according to how one responds to Jesus and his message. All who follow Jesus are the holy remnant whom God has graciously preserved even in the midst of His justified judgment.

Herein lies the reason for the parable of the Sower: The message of the kingdom has always and will continue to meet with a mixed reception. Many will not care at all (the first soil); many will show interest but then fail to truly believe (the second and third soils); and some will truly see and hear and believe and bear fruit. This is because all people stand under the just judgment of God and none have good soil hearts. But in the mystery of God's will he graciously chooses some to understand and reveals himself to them.

Our overall point here is that Matthew 13 is a

highly structured pattern of parabolic teaching. It is not just a concatenation of assorted parables to show Jesus as an interesting and engaging teacher. Rather, it is a set of parables which should be taken together as a whole. Woven throughout the whole chapter is a set of three themes which in concert speak a powerful truth: *Jesus' parabolic teaching is a sowing of the Word in the world. This Word from God is simultaneously a message of judgment on the unbelieving and a word of hope and blessing for the believing. The Word both reveals and conceals and in the process it performs a great separation of all people (cf. Heb 4:12), based on their response to the Son, the Incarnate Word.*

HAVING EARS TO HEAR— A WORD TO US

We would be remiss (and foolish) to approach such a passage as this and be content to merely analyze and dissect it. There is a great and sad irony that we could come to understand the separating function of the Gospel and conclude our study with mere observation and without sensing our need to respond. This is to treat Jesus and Holy Scripture as objects of our studied inquiry. Instead of seeking just to *understand* Matthew 13, we are called to a posture of *standing under* its message,¹⁶ lest we prove ourselves to be unfruitful soil. What would God have us to know and how would he have us respond to this text?

I think the message to us comes off the page quite straightforwardly. First, regarding the Sower and the sowing: This word of the kingdom, the "gospel of the kingdom" as Jesus calls it, is still going forth through us today as Jesus' disciples. To be a disciple of Jesus means to do the same things he did, to live a life of self-sacrifice, serving others, to minister grace to broken lives, to turn the other cheek when wrongly accused, to be poor in spirit, to forgive others, and crucially, to *proclaim* the gospel of the Kingdom. All these things Jesus did and so we are to as well. No servant is greater than his master.

Second, regarding the secret: Following Jesus'

model we should not be surprised when it meets with every response from apathy to persecution. Such was true for Jesus and such is true for his disciples. Some will care not; some will believe for a while and then fall away. This is all very discouraging and disheartening when we put our time and money and energy in sowing the seed. But we must take heart that although many will not, some will hear and believe and their lives will be transformed. Hearts will go from being dead, clayish, dusty soil to deep, rich, fruit-bearing oaks of righteousness. So, as we go with the gospel we should expect a lot of failure. But just as with the four soils, the yield of even one fruit-bearer far outweighs any loss!

Finally, regarding the separation: a call to praise and thanksgiving. For those who do have ears to hear and who have eyes to see the hidden mystery of the gospel and who are not content to merely analyze the text but to submit to it, then there is an entirely natural and appropriate response—humble praise and thanksgiving to God. This is because we see in this text and we know in our hearts that our believing is not a choice on our part but is a revelation that is given. This is grace. We did not choose God. We did not reason in all our brilliance and decide that faith in God was an acceptable risk to take. We did not earn favor with God by our great faith and goodness and God-centered hearts and lives. Rather, we were dead in our sins and God made us alive through Christ Jesus' resurrection from the dead. For no reason other than mysterious grace we have been granted to understand the divine secret of the gospel even in the midst of God's just judgment on all of the world. If it were our choice it would not be divine revelation. For those who understand this, the only response can be praise and thanksgiving. Any response less than this fails to understand what the gospel is and the function of the parables as we see them in Matthew 13.

ENDNOTES

¹Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Compre-*

hensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

²N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997).

³Ibid., 175.

⁴Examples include Ezek 17:2-24; 23:1-49; 37:1-14; Jer 24:1-10; Dan 7:1-8; 8:1-27.

⁵Wright, *Jesus*, 177.

⁶Ibid., 178. For more discussion about how the theme of the revelation of mysteries in Daniel relates to Matthew and Jesus' teaching, one may consult my essay, "Refractions of Daniel in the Gospel of Matthew" in *Early Christian Literature and Intertextuality, Volume 1: Thematic Studies* (ed. Craig A. Evans and H. Daniel Zacharias; London: T&T Clark, 2009), especially pages 74-80.

⁷Wright, *Jesus*, 180-81; quote from 180.

⁸Snodgrass, *Stories*, 22.

⁹Ibid., 23.

¹⁰Michael Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1974), 54, 60. Snodgrass (*Stories*, 21) rightly critiques this as being overdone.

¹¹Snodgrass, *Stories*, 21.

¹²One of the long-recognized and important observations to make about the Gospel of Matthew is that it contains five distinct and major blocks of Jesus' teaching or "discourse." These are (1) The Sermon on the Mount (chs. 5-7); (2) Instructions to the Disciples (ch. 10); (3) Parables of the Kingdom (ch. 13); (4) Instructions for the Church (ch. 18); and (5) Eschatological Teaching (chs. 24-25).

¹³Matthew's unique phrase, "the gospel of the kingdom" occurs three times: 4:23; 9:35; 24:14. The first two are especially important to note in terms of how they form a framing structure around Matthew 5-9. A close reading reveals that Matthew wants us to see chapters 5-9 as one unit with two parts, both picturing the "gospel of the kingdom". He does this by making the opening and closing sections of this unit match up in language. Compare 4:23-25 with 9:35-38.

¹⁴Matthew is a master of structure. One helpful place to find a discussion and explanation of many aspects of structuring in the First Gospel is Dale C. Allison,

Jr., *Studies in Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005).

¹⁵Matt 3:8-10; 7:16-20; 12:33.

¹⁶For a helpful discussion of the essential posture for studying Scripture see Joel Green, *Seized by Truth: Reading the Bible as Scripture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007).