

20For the kingdom of heaven is like a house-lord who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ²He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. ³And he went out in the third hour and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴He told them, You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right. ⁵He went out again in the sixth and ninth hour and did the same. ⁶About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing? ⁷They responded, Because no one has hired us. He said to them, You also go and work in my vineyard. ⁸When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first. ⁹The workers of the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius.

—commentary—

20:1 For the kingdom – This parable is introduced as a continuation of the previous chapter, deepening into the disciples’ question of “who can be saved.” It also ends with Yeshua’s words that “the first will be last.” It may seem like a redundant illustration of what the previous chapter taught. However, the author is just adding a different point to the previous topic. This parable is unique to Mattai; meaning, it does not appear anywhere else. However, there is a parallel in the gospel of Thomas. In Thomas we read: “Yeshua said, a man old in days will not hesitate to ask a small child of seven days about the place of life and he will live. For many who are first will become last, and the last will be first, and they will become one” (*Thomas #4*). The same structural elements are found in Mattai: First little children are brought near Yeshua, paralleling the seven days old child, then we have the rich man of good deeds walking away, paralleling a sage, what Thomas calls a man old in days. Then in both versions Yeshua says his phrase about the first and the last. Thomas ends with the words that both the first and the last “will become one.” Mattai’s parable in chapter 20 is analog to that last point, albeit he offers his unique version of it. The two versions are similar in content, yet both are unique of each author and convey different meanings, so we can safely deduce that neither author made up their passages neither copied from each other; rather, both are independently based on an original floating tradition, which most likely circulated in oral form. There is a similar midrash which begins with: “What can Rabbi Bon be compared to? To a king who had a vineyard... and hired labourers into it...etc” (*Shir HaShirim Rabbah 6:2*). This rabbinic version was probably influenced by Mattai’s parable, though, either directly or indirectly via oral circulation.

20:1 the kingdom of heaven – The work in this world (*See commentary on previous chapter; cf. Matt. 3:2, 13:24*).

20:2 he agreed to pay them a denarius – A denarius was the price for one day’s bread. Going out to hire workers in this manner is in agreement with the Jewish accounts of those days, for according to halakha one has to stipulate the payment before the work begins. “Rabbi Yohanan ben Matia said to his son, Go out and hire workers for us. He went out and agreed with them on their food” (*Mishna Bava Metzia 7:1*).

20:3 in the third hour – The Israelites divided the day into four quarters (*cf. Neh. 9:3*), each one consisting of three hours (*cf. John 11:9*). It is implied that the parable begins in the first hour of light, about six o’clock in the morning, which is the first quarter. Then it says the third hour (which is the end of the first quarter), then sixth (end of the second quarter) and ninth (end of the third quarter). The eleventh hour is one hour before the close of the working day, when it is already too dark to work. The times represent a person’s lifetime, the first hour being birth and the twelfth hour the time close to death.

20:9 The workers of the eleventh hour – Rabbi Yehuda haNasi similarly teaches: “There is one who acquires his portion of the world to come in one hour, and there is one who acquires his portion after many years” (*Avoda Zara 18a*).

¹⁰So when the first ones came, they expected to receive more, but each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹When they received it, they began to grumble against the house-lord, ¹²saying, These who were hired last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day. ¹³But he answered and said to one of them, I am not being unfair to you, friend. Did you not agree to work for a denarius? ¹⁴Take what is yours and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵Do I not have the right to do what I want with what is mine? Or are you envious because I am generous? ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last.

¹⁷Now Yeshua was going up to Jerusalem. On the way, he took the twelve aside and said to them,

textual variants

20:16 and the first will be last – Later manuscripts add: “For many are called but few are chosen.” This saying is missing in the most ancient manuscripts and quotations (cf. *Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, Dublinensis, Diatessaron...etc*) and it was probably not here originally; it is out of place as the actual saying happens in chapter 22. Aware of the misplacement, some manuscripts offer a variation of it that makes more sense, such as “For they [all] are called, but few are chosen” (cf. *minuscule 346, 579*). The author has made the point that the reward in the world to come is not bound to the time we spend on earth, neither to the number of years that one has been a Torah observant. Many are who work for the kingdom without being really righteous, yet they expect a better reward than others who came later. So, who is greater? In case the audience comes to the erroneous conclusion that there is no reward whatsoever for observing Torah, the second half of the chapter has Yeshua explaining who is bigger in the eyes of Heaven. This is how the spurious saying is contextualized according to the scribe who added it. Many (or everybody) are called to work, but few are chosen for a greater reward. It was said in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai: “I have seen the sons of Above עלייה [i.e., who are truly righteous], and they are few” (*Sukka 45b*).

commentary

20:14 Take what is yours and go – They received their portion and expected more. Some people receive their portion to the world to come in one hour, and some receive it after many years of toil. It would be expected that those who have been observing Torah for decades would receive “something more” than those who have been called to repentance one year before passing away. So too, someone who was born religious would expect a better reward than someone who was a former pagan. But they all are the same, for the entrance to the world to come is by God’s grace, as it is written, “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy” (*Exod. 33:19*). The reward of the world to come is not dependent on how many years a person has been religious. On what is dependent then? Yeshua will explain that in the second half of the chapter.

20:17 Now Yeshua was going up to Jerusalem – At first, this short paragraph appears to break with the main story, having Yeshua randomly say – once again – that he is going to be executed (see *Matt. 16:21, 17:22*). However, it is really part of the whole narrative. It serves as a ‘visual’ portrayal of the teaching which Yeshua is about to relay; a teaching which arises as a consequence of his disciples wanting to compare themselves to him and drink from his same “cup.” The teaching will also elucidate the previous portion, for one might have had the erroneous assumption that there is no benefits in living a life of Torah. Additionally, the reader is reminded that Yeshua is still in the journey which began on chapter 19.

20:17 took the twelve aside – Separated them from the other followers and family members.^a

^a Family members were following the disciples (cf. *Mark 15:41*), the very next paragraph in Mattai mentions the mother of two of them. The letters of Paul also suggest they traveled accompanied by their spouses (cf. *1Cor. 9:1-6; Rom 16:7*).

¹⁸We are going up to Jerusalem, and the son of man will be delivered over to the chief priests and to the scribes. They will condemn him to death ¹⁹and they will hand him over to the gentiles to be mocked and flogged and hanged. And on the third day he will arise!

—textual variants—

20:18 to the chief priests and to the scribes – The chief priests – or prominent priests – are Hanan (a.k.a., Annas) and Qayapha (a.k.a., Caiaphas). Hanan was appointed by the Roman legate Quirinius as the first chief priest of the newly formed Roman province of Judea around the year 6 C.E.. Qayapha was named high priest by the Roman procurator of Judea, Gratus (cf. *Josephus, Antiquities 18:2:2*). This corrupt priesthood was not, in the eyes of the Zadoqites, legitimate. They were in bed with the pagan oppressor. The Qumran scrolls (cf. *Peshet Habakkuk 8-9; Damascus Document A:7-8*) talk about the corrupt priesthood of their days, and even the Talmud talks negatively against this family, “Woe to Beit Hanin for their [serpent-like] whispers” (*Pesakhim 57a*). They represent the head of the Erev Rav, who opposed Moshe in the exodus and would certainly oppose a Messianic son of David, as he would remove them from their office.

20:19 they will hand him over to the gentiles – That is, to the Romans. There is a mystical aspect to it. After being handed to Rome, Yeshua became like Yosef, a conceptual leader of the pagan nations unknown to his own, as stated (*Gen. 42:8*): “Yosef recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him.”

20:19 flogged and hanged – If Yeshua predicted his death with such exactitude, he probably derived it as peshet on the Wisdom of Solomon. Wisdom is a 1st century BCE book that portrays a mixture of Hellenistic and Jewish philosophies. Although not Biblical, it was probably read as a religious work in some communities. The book is a compilation of different authors, so I venture to suggest that perhaps the Galileans had access to individual chapters in Aramaic, rather than the entire Greek book that we know today. In the chapter 2 of the book the wicked says against the tzaddiq: “Let us condemn him to a disgraceful death” (*Wisdom 2:20*). In Yeshua’s time, the Romans hanged on crosses to those accused of sedition or other important crimes, often leaving the bodies on display to dissuade other criminals.^b According to the Torah it is written: “He who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse” (*Deut. 21:23*). It therefore stands to reason that “a disgraceful death” in Yeshua’s point of view implied a death without honor, being hung by the Romans on a tree. This chapter of the Wisdom of Solomon plays an important role in the “Passion” chapters, as those accusing Yeshua seem to echo the words: “If this righteous man is indeed God’s son, he will assist him and deliver him... etc.” (*Wisdom 2:18*).

—relevant quotes—

“For the wicked people say... Let us lie [in ambush] for the righteous, for he is not like us and he is clearly contrary to our doings. He accuses us of breaking the Torah and condemns us for turning our backs on our education. He professes to have the knowledge of God, and calls himself the child of the Lord. He was made to reprove our thoughts. Let us see if his words are true, and let us prove what will happen in the end of him. If this righteous man is indeed God’s son, he will assist him and deliver him from the hand of his enemies. Let us test him with despitifulness and torture... let us condemn him to a disgraceful death, for by his own saying he will be respected.” (*Wisdom of Solomon 2:6-20*)

“Yosef recognized his brothers but they did not recognize him. This is one of the traits of Yosef not only in his generation but in every generation, that Mashiakh ben Yosef recognizes his brothers but they do not recognize him. This is the work of Satan, who hides the characteristics of MYB so that Mashiakh’s footsteps are not recognized and are even belittled because of our many sins”
(*Qol haTor 2:39*)

^b Even other Romans considered this capital punishment humiliating, barbaric and disgraceful; see Cicero, Pro Rabirio Perduellionis Reo 5:16; Josephus, Wars of the Jews 5:11.

²⁰Then came to him the mother of the sons of Zavdai, she with her sons, and she bowed down, and asked a favor from him. ²¹And he asked, What is it you want? She said, Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.

commentary

20:20 came to him the mother of – The incident took place while Yeshua and his disciples were going to Jerusalem, therefore she was part of those family members who were travelling with them. Although most of the time the text remains silent about the disciple's private lives, it is in this kind of verses that we have a short glimpse of them. Mattai does not mention her name, but harmonization scholars theorize that she is the same woman whom Mark calls Shalum (*comp. Matt. 27:56 with Mark 15:40-41*).

20:21 asked a favour from him – In the Markan version it is not her but her sons who make the request (*Mark 10:35-36*). In both versions Yeshua turns to them and asks: "Can you drink...etc" (*Matt. 20:22*), which implies their mother's request was instigated by them. They may have considered themselves like the first workers of the previous parable, having worked harder than other laborers.

20:20 the sons of Zavdai – Whom Yeshua called בני רגש Bnei Regesh, "sons of thunder" (*Mark 3:17*). Thunder represents a manifestation of God's power (cf. *Mishna Berakhot 9:1*), as it is written: "All the people witnessed the thunder" (*Exod. 20:15*) and again "They fled at the sound of your thunder" (*Psalms 104:7*). The Lukan tradition explains that this name was given because in their zeal they once wanted to make descend fire from heaven against people (cf. *Luke 9:54*). According to the synoptics, the two brothers together with Keifa had been initiated by Yeshua to the mysteries of heikhalot or heavenly ascensions (cf. *Matt. 17:1-8, Mark 9:2-8*). Keifa's holiness from such initiations was such that sick crowds gathered around him and were healed even if only his mere shadow fell on any of them (*Acts 5:15-16*). Similarly, it is very likely the two brothers could indeed make descend fire (in the form of thunder) from heaven if they wanted to – for the prophets were considered capable of such feats (cf. *2Kings 1:10-14*), although in the Lukan story Yeshua reprimands them.

20:21 one... at your right hand and the other at your left – She probably had in mind a physical kingdom, which Yeshua had not, but either way she meant, "make them have a spiritual status close to yours." Placing someone at your right hand to make them as your own is seen in Scripture, "I have placed Hashem before me constantly; he is at my right hand" (*Psalms 19:8*), and "Grant your help to the man at your right hand, the one you have taken as your own" (*ibid. 80:18*). To have them at his right and at his left is for the sake of consultation, similar to the verse: "I saw Hashem seated on his throne, and all the host of heaven were standing by him, on his right and on his left." (*1Kings 22:19*). Rashi explains: "They are for consultation... the ones on the right to defend [people], the ones on the left to prosecute" (*Rashi on Genesis 1:26; cf. Tanhuma Shemot 18*). A Talmudic passage relates that Rabbi Zeira had a dream in which Rabbi Hanina appeared to him and explained the spiritual position of other Rabbis in the heavenly Yeshiva: "Rabbi Hanina was seated... next to Rabbi Yohanan, and Rabbi Yohanan was seated next to Rabbi Yannai and Rabbi Yannai was seated next to Rabbi Hanina, and Rabbi Hanina was seated next to Rabbi Hiya. I asked: Is Rabbi Yohanan seated next to Rabbi Hiya? He responded: In the place of flaming torches, who will let the smith's son enter?" (*Bava Metzia 85b*).

²²Yeshua responded to them, You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink? They answered, We can. ²³Yeshua said to them, You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father. ²⁴When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. ²⁵Yeshua called them together and said, You know that the rulers of the gentiles are their lords, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,

—textual variants—

20:22 Can you drink the cup I am going to drink? – Byzantine type manuscripts read: “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink and be immersed with the immersion with which I am immersed?” but the immersion part is missing in the oldest manuscripts.

—commentary—

20:22 Can you drink the cup I am going to drink? – ‘You are asking for the same level of spirituality I will obtain, but can you take upon yourselves the same kind of suffering I am going to experience for the sake of the kingdom, which is the ultimate qiddush Hashem?’ The cup represents judgment and suffering, as it is written: “You have drunk from the hand of Hashem the cup of his wrath” (*Isaiah 51:17*), “Take this wine-cup of fury from my hand” (*Jer. 25:15; cf. Psalm 75:9 [8]*). It is further written (*Prov. 31:6*), “Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish, and wine unto those who have an embittered soul.” From this verse, Rabbi Hiya ben Ashi, in the name of Rabbi Hisda, taught: “One who was going to be killed, they used to give him a grain of frankincense in a cup of wine to drink in order to benumb his senses” (*Shabbat 43a*). This is how Yeshua used “drink my cup” as an idiomatic expression for suffering.

20:23 You will indeed drink from my cup – The two brothers would indeed be, as Yeshua said, persecuted and flogged for the sake of the kingdom (cf. *Acts 5:40*). As a matter of fact Yaaqov ben Zavdai was the first among the disciples to suffer martyrdom (cf. *ibid. 12:2*).

20:23 to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father – Only God determines the spiritual position of a person in the Heavenly spheres, like only the house-lord determined the salary of the workers he hired. Similarly it is taught in the Gemara that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi asked the prophet Elijah whether he will enter into the world to come. Elijah responded: “Only if this Lord **אדוני הזה** wills it so” (*Sanhedrin 98a*). When Yeshua says, It is not for me to grant... but to the Father, he is making a clear distinction between him and Creator himself, as he also did in the previous chapter where he said “No one is good except God.”

20:26 whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant – This brings the entire portion full circle. It looked like there was no “extra” reward at all for having a life of Torah observance, but here Yeshua reveals there are indeed different spiritual positions in the heavenly realms. They do not work like the political positions in this world; it is not about how many years you have been Torah observant, nor about how much knowledge you think to have, nor about your many possessions. The reward is built upon the principle of loving your neighbour and self-nullifying your ego for the sake of others. Rabbi Tarfon taught: “If you learn much Torah [and put it into practice in the right way], you are given much reward, and your Employer is trusted to pay you for your labor. But know that the reward for the righteous is in the world to come” (*Pirquei Avot 2:16*).

—relevant quotes—

“If a man wants to taste from the good that is reserved for him in the world to come, and asks God to show him his place, then he must be clean. Then if God shows him that he is smaller in stature than someone whom it seemed to him that he was greater than in this world, (if he is clean) it will not distress him.” (*Mordehai Leiner, Mei haShiloah, Vol. 1, Leviticus, Tzav #3*)

²⁷and whoever wants to be first must be your servant—²⁸just as the son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a redemption for many.

commentary

20:26 and to give his life as a redemption for many – The cosmic son of man who in Daniel (*Dan. 7:13*) is elevated to the level of Atiq Yomim [the highest level in the sefirotic tree] reaches such elevation due to submission and suffering, as Daniel later says: “I looked and this horn [from my first dream] waged war with the holy ones and overwhelmed them” (*Dan. 7:21*). The “holy ones,” as explained by the angel, are what Daniel saw as “something like a son of man” in the vision. This “son of man” is “the holy ones who will inherit the kingdom forever” (*Dan. 7:18*). Hence Hanokh says, “The son of man... will be a light to the nations and the hope of those who are troubled... for they [the kings of the earth] have denied the Lord of the spirits and his anointed” (*Enoch 48:2-10*). This is a remez on the suffering servant in Isaiah. The suffering servant is portrayed as exalted above all kings in Isaiah 52, but then in Isaiah 53 it is explain that before such elevated state he suffered for the sake of his people. It says: “Behold, my servant will be... exalted (*Isaiah 52:13*)... He came up like a sapling before it [before his greatness]... despised and rejected by men... he bore our illnesses and our pains he carried them, yet we accounted him as plagued, smitten by God and oppressed... with his wounds we were healed... for he was cut off from the land of the living, because of the transgressions of my people to whom the stroke was due” (*Isaiah 53:2-8*). This suffering servant is identified in the plain meaning of the text as Israel, as it is written: “Yaaqov my servant, Israel whom I have chosen” (*Isaiah 44:1*), but in a deeper level this especially applies to the tzaddiqim of each generation who suffer for the sake of their people, to the martyrs of Israel, and ultimately to Messiah himself, for he is the head of Israel. All of them are indeed the cosmic “son of man” that Daniel saw in the vision. The sages therefore say about the sons of Israel, “When there are tzaddiqim in a generation, they are seized for the sake of the generation” (*Shabbat 33b*). About the martyrs of Lod the sages said that “no man can stand in their barriers” (*Pesakhim 50a*). And about Messiah they say that he is “sitting among other paupers, all of them afflicted with disease. Yet, while all the rest of them tie and untie their bandages all at once, the Messiah changes his bandages one at a time, lest he is summoned for the redemption at a moment’s notice” (*Sanhedrin 98a*).

relevant quotes

“Suffering and pain may be imposed on a tzaddiq as an atonement for his entire generation. This tzaddiq must then accept this suffering with love for the benefit of his generation, just as he accepts the suffering imposed upon him for his own sake. In doing so, he benefits his generation by atoning for it, and at the same time is himself elevated to a very great degree ... Such suffering also includes cases where a tzaddiq suffers because his entire generation deserves great punishments, bordering annihilation, but is spread via the tzaddiq’s suffering... There is a special, higher type of suffering that comes to a tzaddiq who is even greater and more highly perfected than the ones discussed above. This suffering comes to provide the help necessary to bring about the chain of events leading to the ultimate perfection of mankind as a whole” (***Ramhal, Derekh HaShem 2:3:8***)

²⁹As Yeshua and his disciples were leaving Yericho, a large crowd followed him. ³⁰Two blind men were sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Yeshua was going by, they shouted, Our master, son of David, have mercy on us! ³¹The crowd rebuked them and told them to be quiet, but they shouted all the louder, Our master, son of David, have mercy on us! ³²Yeshua stopped and called them. What do you want me to do for you? he asked. ³³Master, they answered, that our eyes may be opened. ³⁴And having compassion on them, he touched their eyes. Immediately their eyes were open and they followed him.

—textual variants—

20:29 leaving Yericho – While the author mentioned the journey to Judea through the other side of the Yarden (cf. *Matt. 19:1*), he did not indicate that Yeshua had ever entered or arrived to Yericho, which suggests there might be a missing passage. Mark, however, specifically says that they had entered Yericho, so the incident took place when they were leaving (*Mark 10:46*). Luke, on the other hand, says the incident happened when they were entering the city (*Luke 18:35*). Additionally, Mattai mentions two blind men, whereas the Markan version speaks of only one; a blind man called ‘the son of Timeus’ (*ibid.*). Something similar happened in our previous chapter, where the synoptics speak of a young rich man, whereas the gospel according to the Hebrews mentions two rich men. It is undeniable that harmonization scholars – those who believe the four gospels are divinely inspired and have no contradictions – cannot solve these inaccuracies without resorting to complex creative answers. However, an easier explanation will suffice: Such evident divergencies are product of oral transmission, for when stories circulate in oral form the details are easily misremembered. Ultimately, these variances testify to the fact that each gospel was composed independently. In the Talmud, when the final editor is aware of two variances in an oral tradition he mentions the two of them together. For example, there is a story about a miracle that Rabbi Eliezer performed in which a carob tree was uprooted from its place. First the Gemara says “the tree was uprooted one hundred cubits” but it then adds “but some say it was four hundred cubits” (*Bava Metzia 59b*). In *Pirquei Avot* it says, “Ten things were created on the eve of Shabbat,” and after enumerating the ten things, the text adds, “and some say...” then adding four more things to the list (cf. *Avot 5:6*).

—commentary—

20:30 Our master, son of David, have mercy on us – This passage immediately follows Yeshua’s words that the son of man did not come to be served but to serve. Here we have a final picture of what working in the kingdom looks like. In form of allegory, this also teaches about Torah enlightenment, as it is written about Adam in Eden: “and the eyes of both of them were opened” which the midrash says it refers to “wisdom and not actual vision” (*Rashi on Genesis 3:7; cf. Bereshit Rabbah 19:7*). They now saw and understood. It is our mission to hear those who are not walking in the way, but merely standing on the roadside, because life has put an impediment on them. They cannot see the way but they want to. No matter the social status of those people, no matter what life has put them under, if they want to see, we are here to be a light for them.

—relevant quotes—

“When Rabbi Bon ben Hiya died, Rabbi Zeira came to eulogize him... To what shall Rabbi Bon be compared to? To a king who had a vineyard and hired workers for it. And one of the workers was more industrious than anybody else. When the king saw that this man excelled in his work, he grasped his hand and began taking long and short strolls with him. At evening time all the workers came to collect their salary. The good worker also came and received the same salary as the other workers. The workers began complaining, saying, Our master the king! We worked hard all day and that one only worked for two or three hours, yet he is receiving the same payment as us? The king responded, Why are you complaining? This one accomplished in two or three hours of the day what you did not accomplish in the entire day.” (*Shir HaShirim Rabbah 6:2*)