

## **The Role of Language and Community in Spiritual Formation, in Plato and Jesus**

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### **Introduction: Similarities in Plato and Jesus**

To both Plato and Jesus, community is important to the cultivation of the human person's ability to perceive God. Both envisioned communities in which some people taught and others learned. There is no way to avoid the need to be shaped in a concrete human community. However, both Plato and Jesus faced other communities which opposed their understandings of a person's ascent to God. They needed to diagnose and interpret why this occurred, to equip their disciples to both spread their teachings but also handle rejection. To apprehend the spiritual world, share the inner life of the soul, engage with outsiders, and interpret rejection, they pushed human language to its limits.

### **The Community of Plato**

Pierre Hadot, in his study *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, explains how the Greek philosophical schools were really therapeutic centers to learn how to master 'the passions.' He says:

'In the view of all philosophical schools, mankind's principal cause of suffering, disorder, and unconsciousness were the passions: that is, unregulated desires and exaggerated fears. People are prevented from truly living, it was taught, because they are dominated by worries. Philosophy thus appears, in the first place, as a therapeutic of the passions. Each school had its own therapeutic method, but all of them linked their therapeutics to a profound transformation of the individual's mode of seeing and being. The object of spiritual exercises is precisely to bring about this transformation.'<sup>1</sup>

Hadot's study sets the tone for appreciating what Plato was doing, and how to read his writings in context. His school, the Academy, was a community that had a spirituality and a theology. Plato, in *Epistle 7*, says that the vision of God, as well as the nature of God, are impossible to put into words. Nevertheless, in communities whose purpose was to cultivate that vision, our soul's intuition can be trained, degree by degree, to perceive God:

'There neither is nor ever will be a treatise of mine on the subject. For it does not admit of exposition like other branches of knowledge; but after much converse about the matter itself and a life lived together, suddenly a light, as it were, is kindled in one soul by a flame that leaps to it from another, and thereafter sustains itself.'<sup>2</sup>

Plato affirms the role of the community in providing both proper discourse and a model or models of virtuous life, shown most of all by the character Socrates. The metaphor of light and fire provide Plato with a way, on the one hand, of anchoring our imagination in a sense perception experience shareable by multiple people because it is objectively true. On the other hand, Plato can use light and fire as metaphors to suggest the impact of the divine vision on us. Plato makes the divine inviting and by implying the effects of light and fire: beautiful illumination and warmth. Plato also implies dynamics of reproduction: light by reflection and fire by combustion. Plato uses this metaphor to describe the activation of our soul's intuition and inherent capacity to apprehend God.

However, Socrates' fate posed a logical, and deeply personal, question for Plato. Namely, why did Athens put him to death? Socrates did find notable success as a teacher; he gathered pupils, including Plato himself. But if what Socrates said was true, or as true as we can put into human words, then how did Plato explain the rejection of Socrates? This has personal ramifications for Plato as founder of the Academy. What were its prospects? How much could Plato hope to see a virtuous Republic?

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Hadot, edited by Arnold I. Davidson, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (English edition: Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1995) p.83 (French edition 1987)

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Epistle 7*

The duality of soul and body provides Plato with an explanation. In order to pursue the divine, Plato must use human language, using a form of double-entendre where words, for example 'light' and 'fire,' have a spiritual meaning in addition to an earthly meaning. This double-entendre provokes a crisis of understanding in the listener. It provides the opportunity to accept or reject what Plato envisions.

The body-soul duality comes from creation. In *Timaeus*, Plato gives an account of God as Creator and why God created that bears a remarkable similarity to the creation account of Genesis 1.

'Let me tell you then why the creator made this world of generation. He was good, and the good can never have any jealousy of anything. And being free from jealousy, he desired that all things should be as like himself as they could be. This is in the truest sense the origin of creation and of the world, as we shall do well in believing on the testimony of wise men: God desired that all things should be good and nothing bad, so far as this was attainable.'<sup>3</sup>

Plato's *Timaeus* provides an account of the creation of women that is notably different than the Genesis account. Of that first generation of men, those who were cowardly or unrighteous were turned into women. Nevertheless, Plato has in a place a basic framework of God creating human beings and calling us all to return to God through the intuitive, noetic, or knowing, faculty of the soul. This calling can be perceived through the anatomical structure of the human body:

'God gave the sovereign part of the human soul to be the divinity of each one, being that part which, as we say, dwells at the top of the body, inasmuch as we are a plant not of an earthly but of a heavenly growth, raises us from earth to our kindred who are in heaven. And in this we say truly; for the divine power suspended the head and root of us from that place where the generation of the soul first began, and thus made the whole body upright.'<sup>4</sup>

From the human physical body, Plato argues, we direct ourselves either upwards beyond the head into the heavens, or downwards through the body to that which is material:

'When a man is always occupied with the cravings of desire and ambition, and is eagerly striving to satisfy them, all his thoughts must be mortal, and, as far as it is possible altogether to become such, he must be mortal every whit, because he has cherished his mortal part. But he who has been earnest in the love of knowledge and of true wisdom, and has exercised his intellect more than any other part of him, must have thoughts immortal and divine, if he attain truth, and in so far as human nature is capable of sharing in immortality, he must altogether be immortal; and since he is ever cherishing the divine power, and has the divinity within him in perfect order, he will be perfectly happy.'<sup>5</sup>

Because we are creations of the God who is the Good, True, and Beautiful, we already participate in the good, true, and beautiful by *methexis*. For Plato, God provides us with the power to return to God, and stirs in us the desire to do so. Plato, in his allegory of the cave, describes the ascent of the soul thus:

'If you take the upward journey of the soul to the intelligible realm... Only God knows, I suppose, if this is entirely true, but this is how these things appear to me: In the knowable region the form of the Good is last among the things perceived and is seen with difficulty, but once seen, then this is to be reckoned as the origin of all that is right and good for everyone. It gives birth to light and the source of light in the visible world, in the world of the intelligible it is the very thing which gives truth and understanding, and he who is going to act with good sense in private or public life must see this.'<sup>6</sup>

Plato describes that ultimate beauty, our source, using language in a very specific way. He first establishes points of connection between ordinary, kataphatic language with sense perception and a feeling within ourselves, which is important because language is social and must be used consistently to properly identify common experiences. In

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<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*

<sup>5</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*

<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Republic* 7, page 117

*Symposium*, Plato charts a path for a person to grow in their knowing of God. Through the voice of Socrates, he speaks of loving the beauty of one body, by which he means one unique person, through either erotic desire for that person, or admiration for physical strength, and so on. We see a person's face or body, and feel appreciation or desire stirring in ourselves. We call that face or body 'beautiful.' From that point, from our first contact with an instantiation of beauty, we can grow to know the higher form of beauty, which resides in all, and from there to the cause of all beautiful things, the one God who is beauty. Plato insists, however, that we must train ourselves in the proper community to see the beauty of all bodies, to perceive that which we have in common.

From the beauty of bodies, we perceive the beauty of the soul, and of all souls. By perceiving the soul and its beauty, Plato implies, we begin or resume our perception of that which is immortal. While there is beauty in every soul by nature, we can grow in appreciation of how people cultivate the beauty of their own souls. In other words, we concern ourselves with the practice of virtue, which is how the soul's beauty may be enhanced and cultivated and developed. Plato says that we will then care for the development of our young people, which moves us to reflect on 'our observances and laws' by which we develop the young. From these observances, we move to consider the various branches of knowledge, and from there to philosophy, and from philosophy to a 'single knowledge connected with a beauty which has yet to be told.'<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, in his *Epistle 7*, Plato says that one must study 'the Four': name, definition, image, knowledge. Name and definition are understood through verbal description. Image and knowledge are acquired through sense perception. The Fifth, which is 'the thing itself which is known and truly exists.' A quite ordinary example would be a circle (name). A circle is defined by a center point from which a fixed distance, or radius, is extended in every direction (definition). One may draw a circle (image). Then one comes to know the circle (knowledge). One can then contemplate the 'form' of the circle, which was considered to have some spiritual significance. But as one ascends the ladder of being into that which is either abstract or those things by which involves great feeling, like beauty, further instruction is needed.

Two further key elements in Plato's program of spiritual formation include (1) a tempering of all bodily desires including abstention from sex, and (2) an apophatic approach to language. The two elements are related to each other. In *Phaedrus*, Plato envisions the human soul as a charioteer pulled by two winged horses: one dark and one white. The charioteer is his reason, or love of wisdom. The dark horse represents his appetites, or love of gain. The white horse is his *thymos*, or spiritedness, or love of honor. Using this allegory of the chariot, Plato says:

'Now when the charioteer beholds the vision of love, and has his whole soul warmed through sense, and is full of the prickings and ticklings of desire, the obedient steed, then as always under the government of shame, refrains from leaping on the beloved.'<sup>8</sup>

The phrase 'leaping on the beloved' refers to sex. This teaching is complemented by the portrait of Socrates refraining from sex with Alcibiades, despite the latter's obvious love for the former.<sup>9</sup> This program for the cultivation of virtue is rooted in Plato's vision that the soul master the body, that the mind stay fixed in its orientation towards the heavens, not the material body or earth.

'Nor again will our initiate find the beautiful presented to him in the guise of a face or of hands or any other portion of the body, nor as a particular description or piece of knowledge, nor as existing somewhere in another substance, such as an animal or the earth or sky or any other things; but existing ever in singularity of form independent by itself, while all the multitude of beautiful things partake of it in such wise that, though all of them are coming to be and perishing, it grows neither greater nor less, and is affected by nothing.'<sup>10</sup>

To perceive this transcendent beauty, Plato then proposes that we use a disciplined process of apophatic theology coupled with kataphatic theology. Albeit distantly and in fragments, God is perceptible in the world of sense perception. In fact, we must begin there, recognizing in ourselves the manner in which we are drawn to beauty,

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<sup>7</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, p.203 – 205

<sup>8</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*

<sup>9</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, p.241

<sup>10</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, p.205

goodness, and love. So even in the realm of sense perception, we are accessing the divine and participating in it. But we are not to stop there, or be content, lest we enlist those insights – or harness those energies – to orient ourselves downward, further into matter. We must instead orient ourselves upwards, towards the heavens, and the heavenly.

‘Beginning from obvious beauties he must for the sake of that highest beauty be ever climbing aloft, as on the rungs of a ladder... at last to that particular study which is concerned with the beautiful itself and that alone, so that in the end he comes to know the very essence of beauty.’<sup>11</sup> ‘A man finds it truly worth while to live, as he contemplates essential beauty.’<sup>12</sup>

The further Plato wishes to emphasize ‘the very essence of beauty,’ the more he must contrast the sheer separation and distance between that which is beauty instantiated and beauty essential, beauty created and beauty uncreated. In other words, Plato must use denigrating language for the body or the material world:

‘But tell me, what would happen if one of you had the fortune to look upon essential beauty entire, pure and unalloyed; not infected with the flesh and colour of humanity, and ever so much more of mortal trash... divine beauty in its unique form.’<sup>13</sup>

Statements like this have led to the impression that Plato denigrates the body completely and categorically. Granted, there is some kind of dualistic ontological superiority of the soul over the body in Plato’s thought. But Plato did not view the body as worthless, and suicide was not virtuous. When Socrates said, on the eve of his death, ‘The body is the prison of the soul,’<sup>14</sup> he was speaking of how the body with its sense perception must be properly understood, interpreted, and then transcended, not simply in a purely rationalistic mode of analytics, but by our divine mind, or noetic intuition, and in the mode of lived virtue. The soul contemplating the Beautiful, Good, and True must master the body. And correspondingly, kataphatic language must be paired with apophatic language. This is why Plato insists:

‘There neither is nor ever will be a treatise of mine on the subject. For it does not admit of exposition like other branches of knowledge; but after much converse about the matter itself and a life lived together, suddenly a light, as it were, is kindled in one soul by a flame that leaps to it from another, and thereafter sustains itself. Yet this much I know – that if the things were written or put into words, it would be done best by me, and that, if they were written badly, I should be the person most pained. Again, if they had appeared to me to admit adequately of writing and exposition, what task in life could I have performed nobler than this, to write what is of great service to mankind and to bring the nature of things into the light for all to see?’<sup>15</sup>

For Plato, the virtuous community is vital in the process of soul formation and therapeutics. There must be agreement in the community about how to use language. And there must be agreement about the shape of the ‘life lived together’ (*synousia*).

Perhaps, one wonders, when at death the soul leaves the body behind, might language too be left behind? Can knowing of others be instantaneous and purely intuitive? Or will our individuality be swallowed up and lost when our souls are reabsorbed by the divine, as in various gnostic Christian teachings? Or will our souls be reincarnated into other bodies, as Plato’s *Timaeus* suggests? One cannot be too sure of such things on this side of that threshold. But as far as this embodied life is concerned, it would seem that kataphatic language must be constantly ‘paired’ with apophatic language, because of the nature of human community: we must always refer to common sense perception experiences, and experiences within ourselves, in some agreed-upon way.

I doubt Plato would have said, ‘After much converse about the matter itself and a life lived together, suddenly maggots erupt in one soul, as it were, maturing quickly to lay eggs in others.’ This would be a most disagreeable

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<sup>11</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, p.207

<sup>12</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, p.207

<sup>13</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, p.207

<sup>14</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus* 250c, *Georgias* 493a, *Republic* IX 586a

<sup>15</sup> Plato, *Epistle* 7

use of language. For the reason we use words like ‘fire’ and ‘light’ to describe sensory world experiences is also to describe the positive impact *on ourselves*; we *feel* warmth and illumination. When we enlist sense perception language drawn from the physical world to describe the noetic realm of the soul – via metaphor, analogy, and allegory – we would not use words with only or mostly negative associations, which produce feelings of revulsion and disgust. Even if the functional description of spreading quickly is adequately conveyed by the notion of flies reproducing, this is not enough, not to mention emotionally misleading. For when we are no longer talking about sensory experiences, but emotional, intuitive, and spiritual ones, like the virtues we seek to cultivate, we must attend to the pre-existing emotional connotations already connected to those sensory experiences.

In addition, as Plato indicates, we must always seek to assist others along, in the soul’s ascending journey, through conversation. And this requires that we maintain semantic and conceptual points of contact with others. We cannot fall into silence, or gibberish, or complete equivocation. We do not talk about the pursuit of Evil. Because the highest Good as well as the virtues are more abstract, and because we must always resort to metaphor when describing their impact on the soul – for example, using ‘fire’ to connote warmth in us, ‘light’ to connote illumination and understanding in us, ‘good’ to connote our moral admiration, ‘beauty’ to connote our yearning and longing – language has the property of double-entendre when used for this purpose. So Alcibiades says that discussion about spiritual things always has an ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ form:

‘If you chose to listen to Socrates’ discourses you would feel them at first to be quite ridiculous; *on the outside* they are clothed with such absurd words and phrases – all, of course, the hide of a mocking satyr. His talk is of pack-asses, smiths, cobblers, and tanners, and he seems always to be using the same terms for the same things; so that anyone inexpert and thoughtless might laugh his speeches to scorn. But when these are *opened*, and you obtain a fresh view of them by *getting inside*, first of all you will discover that they are the only speeches which have any sense in them; and secondly, that none are so divine, so rich in images of virtue, so largely – nay, so completely – intent on all things proper for the study of such as would attain both grace and worth.’<sup>16</sup>

Alcibiades’ discourse serves as Plato’s explanation for why people rejected Socrates. While some people take care to ‘open’ the language of double entendre, and ‘get inside’ the experience of Socrates, others stay ‘on the outside,’ and continue to feel that his talk is ‘quite ridiculous.’ Those who stay ‘on the outside’ orient themselves downward, through the materiality of the body, deeper into the disordered passions, towards the earth and the desire for acquisition.

There is, then, no real way to avoid the risk of the outside community turning on the Academy, like it did with Socrates. For the possibility of freeing more people – and carefully, with discernment – from the shadowy life of the cave and into the light of the sun involves discourse, challenge, and provocation. True, the eyes of their souls might hurt from the pain of the sun’s brightness and the imminent realization that the shadows they saw before were masquerade objects pulled over their eyes. And because of that pain, some people might turn away angrily. But some might open up the language, and come inside.

### **Jesus’ Community of Disciples**

Jesus’ arresting statement, which is both invitation and warning, ‘He who has ears let him hear,’ (Mt.13:9) parallels Plato’s and Socrates’ use of language. In Jesus’ case, one might say that he was specifically addressing the step which Plato identified as the challenge of broadening one’s love from the one to the many, or the particular community to universal humanity. Jesus was quoting from Isaiah 6:9, which he himself identifies in Matthew 13:14 – 15 as he gives his seven kingdom parables. Isaiah and Jesus were concerned about God’s love for all the nations (universal humanity), and the challenge this will pose to Israel (particular community), because of their exile and oppression at the hands of the Gentiles. Many Israelites will resist the messianic mission to the whole world, and will therefore act against the Messiah, just as Athens acted against Socrates.

Jesus delivered a short, pithy story which functioned to remind his audience of Isaiah’s poetic prophecy. In the parable of the four soils, he challenged people to diagnose themselves by the categories he described. Mention of seed, soil, rain, harvest, and thorns, in a context where Jesus was training his disciples to love their enemies (e.g. Mt.5:38 – 48; Lk.4:14 – 30; 6:20 – 38), to minister in Gentile lands and receive responsive Gentiles (Mt.8:18 – 28;

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<sup>16</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, p.239 emphasis mine

Lk.8:22 – 39), evoked Isaiah 55:1 – 13 in particular. Central to that Isaianic passage is God saying to Israel, ‘You will call a nation you do not know, and a nation which knows you not will run to you’ (Isa.55:5). By doing this, Jesus recalled Isaiah’s vision and turned it into a challenge with a powerful emotional punch and a searching question by which one’s soul was revealed:

| Jesus’ Parable of the Soils   | Jesus’ Explanation  | Isaiah’s Vision of Restoration Available to All   |
|---|---|---|
| <p><sup>13:3</sup> ‘Behold, the <b>sower</b> went out to sow; <sup>4</sup> and as he sowed, some <b>seeds</b> fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up.</p> <p><sup>5</sup> Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. <sup>6</sup> But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away.</p> <p><sup>7</sup> Others fell among the <b>thorns</b>, and the thorns came up and choked them out.</p> <p><sup>8</sup> And others fell on the good soil and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty.</p> <p><sup>9</sup> He who has ears, let him hear.’ <sup>10</sup> And the disciples came and said to him, ‘Why do you speak to them in parables?’ <sup>11</sup> Jesus answered them, ‘To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. <sup>12</sup> For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. <sup>13</sup> Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. <sup>14</sup> In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, ‘You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive; <sup>15</sup> for the heart of this people has become dull, with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes, otherwise they would see with their eyes, hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and return, and I would heal them.’ [Isa.6:9]</p> | <p><sup>16</sup> But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. <sup>17</sup> For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.</p> <p><sup>18</sup> Hear then the parable of the <b>sower</b>. <sup>19</sup> When anyone hears the <b>word</b> of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom <b>seed</b> was sown beside the road.</p> <p><sup>20</sup> The one on whom <b>seed</b> was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the <b>word</b> and immediately receives it with joy; <sup>21</sup> yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away.</p> <p><sup>22</sup> And the one on whom <b>seed</b> was sown among the <b>thorns</b>, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.</p> <p><sup>23</sup> And the one on whom <b>seed</b> was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed <b>bears fruit</b> and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty.’</p> | <p><sup>55:1</sup> ‘Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; And you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk Without money and without cost. <sup>2</sup> Why do you spend money for what is not bread, And your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, And delight yourself in abundance. <sup>3</sup> Incline your ear and come to Me. Listen, that you may live; And I will make an everlasting covenant with you, According to the faithful mercies shown to David. <sup>4</sup> ‘Behold, I have made him a witness to the peoples, A leader and commander for the peoples. <sup>5</sup> ‘Behold, you will call a nation you do not know, And a nation which knows you not will run to you, Because of the LORD your God, even the Holy One of Israel; for He has glorified you.’ <sup>6</sup> Seek the LORD while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near. <sup>7</sup> Let the wicked forsake his way And the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the LORD, And He will have compassion on him, And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon. <sup>8</sup> ‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways,’ declares the LORD. <sup>9</sup> ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts. <sup>10</sup> For as the <b>rain</b> and the snow come down from heaven, And do not return there without watering the earth And making it <b>bear</b> and sprout, And furnishing <b>seed</b> to the <b>sower</b> and bread to the eater; <sup>11</sup> So will My <b>word</b> be which goes forth from My mouth; It will not return to Me empty, Without accomplishing what I desire, And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it. <sup>12</sup> For you will go out with joy And be led forth with peace; The mountains and the hills will break forth into shouts of joy before you, And all the trees of the field will clap their hands. <sup>13</sup> Instead of the <b>thorn</b> bush the cypress will come up, And instead of the nettle the myrtle will come up, And it will be a memorial to the LORD, For an everlasting sign which will not be cut off.’</p> |

Positive response to Jesus’ word made one ‘good soil.’ Negative response made a person one of the other three types of ‘bad soil.’ This means another similarity between Jesus and Plato emerges: hearing is a sense perception; but what we as listeners are to ‘hear’ goes beyond what is on the surface. There is a state of the soul being

diagnosed even as we listen. This is true to Isaiah's own use of sense perception language, rooted in hearing. His use of metaphor involving seed, soil, rain, the bearing of harvest, and thorns is itself a portrait of the effects of God's word being received by Israel. Thus, Jesus is being true to Isaiah's meaning, even as he compresses and redeploys Isaiah's poetry.

In fact, Matthew's literary arrangement highlights the 'outsider' versus 'insider' dynamic emerging in Jesus' ministry. 'Outsiders' are those who respond poorly. 'Insiders' are those who respond well, with more questions of their own, perhaps, and they become Jesus' disciples. The 'outsider-insider' dynamic is even portrayed physically by the 'house' and 'household' motifs running through the entirety of Matthew 13. The literary structure of Matthew 12:46 – 13:58 is as follows:

Frame: Mother and Brothers Outside the House, Whoever Does the Will of My Father is Family (12:46 – 50)

Jesus Steps Out of the House (13:1)

Parable 1: Parable of the Four Soils, Given and Explained (13:2 – 23)

Parable 2: Parable of the Wheat and Tares, Given (13:24 – 30)

Parable 3: Parable of the Mustard Seed (13:31 – 32)

Parable 4: Parable of the Woman and Leaven (13:33)

Jesus Explains the Purpose of Parables: To Reveal the Hidden Truths (13:34 – 35)

Jesus Goes Into the House (13:36)

Parable 2: Parable of the Wheat and Tares, Explained (13:37 – 43)

Parable 5: Parable of the Treasure in the Field (13:44 – 45)

Parable 6: Parable of the Pearl of Great Price (13:46)

Parable 7: Parable of the Dragnet: To Reveal the Hidden Choices (13:47 – 50)

Frame: Every Scribe-Disciple is a Head of a Household; Jesus Accused of No Honor in His Household (13:51 – 58)

The literary structure is a dynamic parallelism. The first half of the section is marked off by Jesus stepping out of the house (Mt.13:1). The second half is marked off by Jesus going into the house (Mt.13:36). Those who resisted Jesus remained outside the house, but inside the house, Jesus explained the parables to his disciples and gave them more illumination. In Plato's terms, through the mouth of Alcibiades, some people remained 'on the outside' of Jesus' parables, but others 'opened' the language and were 'getting inside.'

Like Plato, Jesus uses language as a litmus test for the soul, even to the point of being provocative and jarring. To a Jewish audience, Jesus' parables are certainly layered, in that he points to sources in sacred texts and narrative that require further discussion with Jesus himself. Thus, in Jesus' ministry, the insider-outsider dynamic concerns an intuitive, noetic perception of spiritual truth, as it does in Plato, but the dynamic is oriented differently. Some parables press the audience to not only receive Jesus' ethical teaching and join Jesus' praxis of community, but also to receive Jesus' claim to fulfill the hopes of the Hebrew prophets, grounded in a historical narrative that concerns the whole world, including its raw physicality which God declared 'good.' Jesus' explicit quotation of Isaiah, 'He who has ears, let him hear,' is both invitation and command to enter the narrative world of the Hebrew Scriptures with Jesus himself, and the community that Jesus is forming around himself, which lives out the text according to Jesus' word and praxis.

Moreover, just as Plato recognized that being 'outsiders' to the language made people 'outsiders' to the Academy, Jesus deployed some parables with the concern of diagnosing the 'outsiders' to his movement. The parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the woman and leaven have this jarring quality, because they reverse expectations of the kingdom. The Israelites looked forward to the kingdom with great hope and expectation. But Jesus, by using these two parables, says that some of them will despise the kingdom because of who it would require them to associate with.

In the parable of the mustard seed (Mt.13:31 – 32), the kingdom requires giving hospitality that one does not wish to give. The mustard plant, which is a wild, unruly bush or tree, was considered to be an unholy weed. It was typically planted in wild areas, and not inside one's own garden, on principle, but also for pragmatic reasons. In the parable, the mustard grows so large that it attracts 'birds of the air.' In an everyday, ordinary sense, one typically does not want birds to roost in one's own garden, because they eat the fruit growing there. But there is an additional, literary allusion woven into the parable. In Ezekiel, 'birds of the air' nesting in branches represented Gentile nations who

became part of a larger empire (Ezk.31:16). Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God, contrary to Jewish expectation, involves such radical hospitality to others that they will dislike it.

In the parable of the woman and leaven (Mt.13:33), the kingdom requires receiving hospitality that is suspect. Leaven was a symbol of pride and sin, which were unholy. Jews removed leaven from their houses during Passover and Yom Kippur to symbolize cleansing one's self of unholiness. No one 'hides' leaven in flour, because it will soon be discovered as soon as the flour is baked, and the bread unexpectedly rises. Three measures of flour was about sixty pounds, which is a very large amount. Curiously, the matriarch Sarah took this same amount of flour to offer hospitality to the Lord and two angels (Gen.18:6). So the parable implies a large celebration or community event, and the woman is introducing an unholy and unexpected element into the meal, which people will have to eat. Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God involves receiving hospitality from others who one questions, and suspects of flaunting Jewish scruples.

These two parables demonstrate what God's kingdom will feel like to 'outsiders,' especially to those who simply expected that they would be the 'insiders' to the kingdom. After all, the context in which Jesus delivers these parables is fundamentally a Jewish one, with positive expectations of the kingdom because of biblical texts which do speak of the kingdom as profound peace and joy for Israel. The shock value of the parables rests on Jesus' seeming placement of some of his fellow Israelites outside of Israel. He does this sometimes by placing them into the same category as the unbelieving and unrighteous Gentiles. He also does this by recovering biblical themes like those of Isaiah displaying Israel's negative reactions to Gentiles, or Jeremiah and Ezekiel displaying Israel's idolatry of the Jerusalem temple.

Jesus contrasts the 'outsider's' view of the kingdom with the 'insider's' view. The parables of buying the treasure in the field (Mt.13:44 – 45) and the pearl of great price (Mt.13:46) involve a buyer paying rather absurd prices for what he values. Yet the buyer does not seem to mind the price he pays; rather, he rejoices. The disciples, if they were puzzled about this dynamic, may have had further questions for Jesus about this. Why does the buyer feel such joy? Certainly, though, these two parables contrast with the repulsion, distaste, and suspicion implicit in the two previous parables. These parables, then, are perspectival, reflecting back to the audience their own perspective, either as a warning or as a wonder. Community for its own sake, or for one's selfish purpose, becomes a barrier to Jesus' mission, and his person. But a community willing to risk even its own survival – selling all – for the sake of communicating Jesus to others may find a peculiar joy hinted at in the fifth and sixth kingdom parables.

Jesus' effort in this regard corresponds with Plato's call to love all bodies and not just one body, but on a communal level. Jesus called his Jewish community to love not just Jewish bodies – in which male circumcision, female childbearing, kosher laws, and sacred spaces governed the norms and symbolic world of that community and gave it meaning – but Gentile bodies as well. This would have required a simultaneous perception of the souls of others (receptive or not), as well as a conscious orientation towards the text of Scripture to see the relationship between Israel and all humanity in the way Jesus read it. Jesus saw the particularity of Israel in a garden land, not as a replacement of Adam and Eve in the original garden, and an equivalent displacement of Gentiles, but as a foretaste of God's restoration of full humanity to all humanity in himself. Jesus had a view of Israel's vocation, and made it his own vocation because the Hebrew Scriptures saw the messiah as Israel's representative. He did what Israel was called to do, circumcise their own hearts (Dt.10:16) by receiving the commandments of God and internalizing them so deeply that the corruption of the fall would be undone. But they could not do it. Therefore, Jesus alone undid the original damage inflicted upon human nature in that original garden. He circumcised the human heart in his own human nature (Dt.10:16; 30:6; Jer.4:4; Rom.2:28 – 29; Col.2:12) and brought about a union of Holy Spirit and humanity in such a way that human nature was, at long last, corrected and healed (Jer.31:31 – 34; Ezk.11:18; 36:26 – 36; Rom.6:6; 8:3). In Jesus, a human being invested his own particular human body with the Spirit of God, for the sake of others.

Discussion of the Holy Spirit brings me to Jesus' use of double entendre in John's Gospel, which he used to communicate the presence of the Holy Spirit and the pattern of the Spirit indwelling the human. The Gospel of John, in particular, draws attention to this mode of Jesus' communication, because of the content John chooses to emphasize: indwelling. In John, there are many misunderstandings about Jesus' metaphors, or double entendres. Jesus refers to himself or the Spirit as food and water which, in sense perception terms, are substances we depend on physically for nourishment; or to the Jerusalem temple as a spatial metaphor for himself indwelled by the Spirit, or to birth or liberation as the effects of the Spirit.



- The Jewish leaders: ‘This temple has been under construction for forty six years, and are you going to raise it up in three days?’ (Jn.2:21)
- Nicodemus: ‘Can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter his mother’s womb and be born a second time, can he?’ (Jn.3:4)
- The Samaritan woman: ‘Sir, give me this water.’ (Jn.4:15)
- The multitude: ‘Sir, give us this bread all the time!’ (Jn.6:34)
- The Jews: ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’ (Jn.6:52)
- The Jews: ‘Where does this man intend to go that we will not find him? He is not intending to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks, and teach the Greeks, is he?’ (Jn.7:35)
- The Pharisees: ‘We are descendants of Abraham and have never been anyone’s slaves! How can you say, ‘You will become free?’’ (Jn.8:33)
- Martha: ‘I know that he will come back to life again in the resurrection at the last day.’ (Jn.11:24)

In each of these pericopes, people who interact with Jesus have a choice when Jesus speaks to them using language with metaphorical meaning, or double entendre. They can scoff at Jesus, by denying that his words have a spiritual meaning beyond the world of sense perception. This is the response of Nicodemus, who turns aside the invitation to ‘be born from above’ by asking how he, an old man, might enter into his mother’s womb again. In effect, like Alcibiades in his early encounter with Socrates, Nicodemus might have said of Jesus’ words, ‘on the outside they are clothed with such absurd words and phrases.’ These misunderstandings of Jesus’ language, whether from innocent misunderstanding or willful ignorance, become tied to further misinterpretations of Jesus’ miraculous signs: the multitude who was fed with the bread Jesus multiplied simply wanted to be fed with bread again, not to consider Jesus as ‘bread of life’ (Jn.6:35); the Pharisees and Jewish leaders in Jerusalem who asked Jesus for a second testimony (Jn.8:13 – 19), received one in the form of the blind man receiving sight (Jn.9:40 – 41), yet dismissed the testimony and the miracle. Etc.

Alternatively, people can receive Jesus’ words open to the spiritual meaning he intends. The Samaritan woman, for example, initially engages with Jesus as if he were another man expressing romantic interest in her. She probably interpreted his ‘living water’ offer as if Jesus owned a plot of land with a well of water. But after being further drawn into the conversation, and hearing Jesus associate the ‘living water’ with not thirsting and ‘eternal life,’ the woman asks for it (Jn.4:15). After also accepting Jesus’ prophetic insight into her relational history and not denying her story, the woman makes the connection between her cyclical daily life, her cyclical lifestyle with men, and how she needs God as a source of living water within her to break her out of the cycles. She believes in Jesus, ‘in spirit and in truth’ (Jn.4:24), becomes a witness to him, and leaves behind her waterpot, which is a symbolic act that she herself has become a source of Jesus’ ‘living water,’ not simply an empty container (Jn.4:28 – 29). This portrayed the effect of the Spirit who Jesus would send into his followers after his death and resurrection (Jn.7:38 – 39; 20:22). The language of double entendre, like the parables, becomes one of Jesus’ tools for separating people based on their responsiveness to him.

There are kataphatic and apophatic elements to Jesus’ language. However, two differences from Plato seem significant. First, Jesus tends to stay verbally rooted in the raw physicality of sense perceptions: food, drink, freedom from bondage, etc. This has to do with the physicality of Israel’s exodus liberation, the physical imagery used by Israel’s Scriptures, and the insistence by the Hebrew prophetic writers on history and this physical world as the theater of divine interventions. But it is also based on the concrete Jewish symbol that dominates the theological landscape which expresses the downward movement of God from heaven to earth: temple. The temple motif – present in the burning bush, the descent of God onto Mount Sinai, the indwelling of God in the tabernacle, the descent of God into the temple of Solomon – is a downward motif. It reflects the movement of God from heaven to earth, to reestablish His presence in a particular location. Therefore, second, on this theme, Jesus uses sense-perception language of non-human elements and objects to orient people towards his humanity, and interpret *his own incarnate self*. This is both surprising and jarring.

John’s Gospel is replete with motifs portraying Jesus as the ‘new temple.’ The Jerusalem temple is no longer the dwelling place of God. The physical body of Jesus is, and subsequently, all of his followers who share in Jesus’ Spirit make up the physical corporate temple in Christ. John begins his prologue by saying, ‘The Word became flesh, and pitched his tent in/among us’ (Jn.1:14). This incarnation of the divine Word into human flesh is portrayed

in terms reminiscent of God pitching his tabernacle tent among the Israelites. The result is a revelation of divine glory, apprehended by Jesus' disciples, 'full of grace and truth' (Jn.1:14), which echoes the phrase, 'full of lovingkindness and truth' (Ex.34:6) which was God's self-revelation of glory to Moses on Sinai. John continues to compare Moses to Jesus, saying the law was surpassed by the 'grace and truth... realized through Jesus Christ' (Jn.1:18).

Jesus constantly positioned himself against the physical temple building as a comparison point. The name 'Cephas' or Peter, means 'stone,' most likely in connection with the new temple building of the community of Jesus' followers. Jesus invoked the vision of Jacob's ladder, which had angels ascending and descending (Jn.1:51), was an early temple motif, which involved another stone under the head of Jacob (Gen.28:18), with the name 'Bethel,' which means 'house of God.' Jesus claimed that 'temple' role for himself, since the Holy Spirit had already descended and remained upon him (Jn.1:33).

Jesus then utilized six stone water jars of purification at the wedding at Cana (Jn.2:1 – 12), which bears direct resemblance to the stone temple in Jerusalem, which was also for purification (Jn.2:13 – 25). When Jesus compared his body to the temple, speaking of 'the temple of his body,' the disciples understood later what he meant (Jn.2:21). Because of the juxtaposition of periscopes, we can now see the 'good wine' of the Spirit, which was saved for later (Jn.2:10), flowing out from him, like a new epicenter. Jesus takes over the temple as a source of life-giving liquid, initially blood, but also portrayed in Scripture with water (Ezk.47), in multiple places in John's narrative: he is the source of the 'living water' with the Samaritan woman, who touchingly thinks she has to go to a temple (important for my point) to find God instead of to Jesus himself (Jn.4:20 – 24). He is the true 'water which heals' (Jn.5:1 – 15). He is the source of the 'living water' of the Spirit he pre-announces (Jn.7:38 – 39).

Jesus used the bread miracle to compare himself with David's incident in the sanctuary – David took five of the twelve pieces of bread from the tabernacle in 1 Samuel 21, but Jesus took five pieces of bread and restored twelve basketfuls of bread – identifying himself as a greater king than David, but also a new dwelling place of God where the holy bread is not only placed, but multiplied endlessly for all, pointing to the nourishment of the Spirit he will give (Jn.6:1 – 15). This was a physical enactment of the endless spiritual nourishment and spaciousness inside of Jesus. Indeed, Jesus is the servant who cleanses with water in the Upper Room Discourse so his followers can properly enter the house of the Father (Jn.13), which is Jesus himself, in whom the Father lives (Jn.14 – 17). When Jesus died and the Roman soldier speared his side, a flow of blood and water come forth (Jn.19:34 – 35) to which John calls our sharp attention because Jesus' physical body was the source of physical fluids associated with life; how much more the life of the Spirit itself. When Jesus rises again, two angels flank his tomb just like the two cherubim flanked the glory-pillar of God upon the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant (Jn.20:12; Ex.25:17 – 22); Jesus therefore is the glory-pillar of God who became incarnate in human flesh, revealed his glory (Jn.1:14), and is now the particular, personal source of a purified, healed humanity fully joined with the Spirit of God.

God's downward descent present in John's Gospel through the temple motif contrasts with the upward ascent of the soul in Plato. But in Christian thought overall, the former does not negate the latter. In fact, the former descent of God makes the latter ascent of humanity possible, but in a particular, Christ-centered way. Our prayers, our vision, our inspiration, and our praises are directed heavenward; our growth is spoken of as following an imitation of Christ as he looked to his Father and undertook his earthly journey heavenward; when we die, our souls go heavenward. But the Christian celebration of the prior downward movement of God, from heaven to earth, in both the Son and the Spirit, means that ultimately, the personal decision is always one of reception before it is one of assisted ascent.

Like with Plato, with Jesus the community of those who are seeking to experience the divine plays an important role in the spiritual formation of every individual. The community plays a role in stabilizing the use of language, as in Plato. Christians require the additional stability of historical narrative, because certain linguistic terms were stabilized by God's long dialogue with Israel in the Old Testament, and given fresh meaning with Jesus. Temple language, for instance, is one area in which we see this. In the Ancient Near Eastern, and ancient Greco-Roman worlds, temple practices involved visual representations of the deity, and sacrifices for the purpose of appeasing that deity, often for purpose of achieving fertility, harvest, or victory in war, as Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter to Poseidon in Homer's *Iliad*. But in Israel, temple practices denied visual representation of God, and were akin to the modern dialysis machine, which was an inversion of temple practices in the world beyond Israel. Through God's selection of animals within His selection of Israel, God used parts of the created world which were unblemished.

The animal bodies presented by Israel to God transferred impurity into God; the animal blood presented by God to Israel purified the people and land of Israel.

Framed within *Jewish* temple language, the downward movement of God into a particular instantiation of humanity in the incarnate Son who took body and soul, means something about the human problem which needed to be healed personally by God. Incidentally, the Lutheran and Calvinist doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement, by contrast, reflects a decision to frame Jesus' incarnation, death, and resurrection in the framework of *pagan* temple practices, where the key dynamic is appeasement of divine retribution upon the human, rather than the actual biblical and Hebraic one, where the key dynamic is the divine drawing sin from the human into itself to cleanse the human.<sup>17</sup> The departure of many Protestants away from the Orthodox and Catholic understanding of temple language reflects Luther's and Calvin's willingness to destabilize the meaning of biblical language.

The human problem, then, is that human beings are inhibited from full ascent because of the corruption or disorder of sin entangled in both body and soul. The incarnate Son needed to treat his human nature as a body-soul unity because God was determined to save each of us as a unified personal whole, respecting our will. Plato's ascent of the soul implies an anthropology where the soul takes ontological superiority over the body. Jesus' incarnation and recovery of a true human soul and body implies an anthropology where the soul takes functional leadership over the body at critical times, but not ontological superiority.

As a corollary, Jesus prepared his disciples to understand rejection and resistance as a personal refusal to receive the cleansing love of God in Christ and His presence by the Spirit. It is a determination to remain ill. Also, a personal refusal to show one's enemies the enemy-love of Christ, or to receive hospitality from others who are under suspicion, becomes synonymous with refusing to receive God in Christ by the Spirit. If the community of believers is a 'new temple' in which believers love one another with the love by which the Father loves the Son, and the Son loves us (Jn.15:9, 12 – 17; 17:20 – 26), this is because God's movement downward demands our corresponding movement outward towards other human beings. Therefore, Christians ought to be just as bold and risk-taking as Platonists, if not more so, in the way they speak to others about truth claims. We would especially expect that Christians will be proactive in addressing conflict situations.

Finally, the downward movement of God in Christ means there will be a fuller reunion of heaven and earth in future downward movement, as Jesus will reappear one day on earth in bodily form, and share his resurrection power with human beings in the resurrection of human bodies, a reunification of our bodies with our souls, while maintaining our particulars and distinctives, such as ethnic backgrounds and languages, 'tribe and tongue' (Rev.5:9). Christian hope, therefore, draws upon the Jewish hope of bodily resurrection but places Jesus' resurrection at the center as its foundation and guarantee (1 Cor.15). The emphasis in Scripture seems to be found, once again, in the prior directional movement of a relational God, who condescends to us not only to reveal Himself, but to recover the physical creation and physical human bodies of which He originally said, 'It is good.' Affirming Jesus' bodily resurrection leads Christian faith to the hope that God will transfigure the whole creation – damaged as it is – when He makes it His new temple dwelling place.

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<sup>17</sup> Peter Paul Waldenstrom, *The Reconciliation: Who Was to Be Reconciled? God or Man? Or God and Man?; Some Chapters on the Biblical View of the Atonement* (Forgotten Books, 2018 reprint edition; original 1963) is an example from among Protestants who recognized this; Waldenstrom was one of the founders of the Evangelical Covenant Church denomination