

The "Two Ways" Research into the origin and meaning of a parable of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount

Harry J. Sinnaghel

This article is a summary of my master's thesis submitted for completion of the degree of Master in Protestant Theology.

Problem statement

The starting point for my research is the following parable of Jesus in the "*Gospel of Matthew*" (Matthew 7: 13-14):

¹³ *"Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.*

¹⁴ *For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.*

The Sermon on the Mount in the "*Gospel of Matthew*" ends with several warnings; every warning is clarified using a parable. In the first warning, the evangelist uses a dualistic image of the "Two Ways" to indicate:

- The life choice that should be made;
- The way of life that should be performed;
- The life destination that should be expected.

The parable is very clear regarding the life destination, but the parable does not provide any information about the life choice that should be made and the way of life that should be performed.

Based on the parable of the "Two Ways", the questions I have tried to answer are: on what basis can we make this life choice, and what way of life should be performed.

Method

To answer these questions I have analyzed parallels: I have analyzed texts that use the same image of two ways, texts that use the image of only one way, and texts that also use dualistic images to describe the life choice and the way of life. Remark that only texts are selected where "the way" is used as a metaphor and not as a physical road.

I have only analyzed Jewish and Jewish-Christian texts. An exception is made for the Quran, because Islam, together with Judaism and Christianity, belongs to the Abrahamic religions. It is interesting to investigate whether this Jewish image of the "Two Ways" has also entered Islam.

Parallels in the First Testament

The quoted texts are ordered according to the Tanakh: Torah, Prophets, and Writings.

What the texts in the Torah are concerned, the following texts have been analyzed:

- For the usage of the image of only one way:
 - Genesis 18: 19
 - Deuteronomy 8: 5-6
 - Deuteronomy 11: 22-23
 - Deuteronomy 26: 17
- For the usage of dualistic images in the Torah:
 - Deuteronomy 11: 26-29
 - Deuteronomy 30: 15-20

What the texts in the Prophets are concerned, the following texts have been analyzed:

- For the usage of the image of only one way:
 - Jeremiah 5: 4-5
 - Hosea 14: 10
 - Micah 4: 2a

What the texts in the Writings are concerned, the following texts have been analyzed:

- For the usage of the image of two ways:
 - Psalm 1

- For the usage of the image of only one way:
 - Psalm 25: 4-5
 - Proverbs 14: 12 (repeated in Proverbs 16: 25)
 - Proverbs 15: 24
 - Psalm 119: 105

The First Testament uses already the image of two ways: the way of life (with blessing and salvation) and the way of death (with curse and evil). The way of life is obtained by keeping God's commandments, doing justice, and being righteous. The Torah also calls the way of life the "way of the Lord". On the other hand, one obtains the way of death when not following God's commandments.

In the books of the Prophets and in the Scriptures, the image of two ways from the Torah is further elaborated and interpreted. Psalm 1 gives a very clear vision of the metaphor of the two ways: the way of life is like a tree planted by the water, and the way of death is like chaff blowing in the wind.

Parallels in Jewish texts from the Second Temple period

I focus on the Deuterocanonical Books and on the Dead Sea Scrolls.

What the texts in the Deuterocanonical Books are concerned, the following text has been analyzed:

- For the usage of dualistic images:
 - The Book of Sirach (also called Ecclesiasticus): 15: 11-17

What the texts in the Dead Sea Scrolls are concerned, the following texts have been analyzed:

- For the usage of the image of two ways:
 - The fragment 4Q473
- For the usage of dualistic images:
 - The scroll 1QS

Dualisms are also used in the Jewish texts from the second temple period.

The fragment 4Q473 is very interesting, because it is possibly a precursor to the parable of the "Two Ways". It indicates which life choice one must make, and which life destination one gets through this choice.

The tractate of the two spirits in 1QS uses also the image of two ways, but the intention is completely different. It is used to strengthen the group feeling, and to make a clear difference between "us" and "them". This exclusive thinking contradicts the theology that Jesus preached and that works inclusive. Jesus made the salvation of the kingdom of God visible by including people in the community.

Parallels in the Second Testament

The following texts have been analyzed:

- For the usage of dualistic images:
 - Matthew 7: 16-20
 - Matthew 7: 21-23
 - Matthew 7: 24-27
 - Matthew 25: 31-36, 46
- For the usage of the image of only one way:
 - Matthew 22: 16
 - Acts 18: 26
 - 2 Peter 2: 15

Aside from the "*Gospel of Matthew*", the image of "the way" is hardly used. This was probably a typical Jewish image that was perhaps not used by pagan Christians.

"The way of the Lord" in the Second Testament has the same meaning as in the First Testament: keep God's commandments, do justice, and be righteous.

Parallels in early Christian texts

The following texts have been analyzed:

- For the usage of the image of two ways:
 - Didache 1-6
 - The Epistle of Barnabas 18-20
 - The Shepherd of Hermas 35-39
 - The Apostolic Constitution: 1-32
- For the usage of the image of only one way:
 - 4 Ezra 7: 1-14

In early Christianity, believers needed a guideline to understand what it meant to be a follower of Jesus and the way of life one had to fulfill to be a Christian.

The author of the Didache has published an instruction booklet using the image of the "Two Ways" to indicate that believing is not only a sense of spirituality, but it is also based on deeds and acts. The author of the "Apostolic Constitutions" has elaborated this further.

The "Epistle of Barnabas" and the "Shepherd of Hermas" are probably linked to another tradition, a tradition close to the tract of the two spirits in 1QS.

The image of two ways, an easy one and a difficult one, is also reflected in the text of "4 Ezra".

All texts are concerned about morality.

Parallels in Jewish texts after the Second Temple Period

The following texts have been analyzed:

- For the usage of the image of two ways:
 - Pirkei Avot 2: 9
 - The Testament of Asher
- For the usage of the image of only one way:
 - Pirkei Avot 2: 1
 - 2 Baruch 85: 12-15

These Jewish texts from after the Second Temple period leave behind the concept of the tract of the two spirits in 1QS. There are no more fighting spirits or angels. The image of the "Two Ways" is used to indicate the way of life that God expects, it is used as an ethical instruction. The responsibility is directed towards the person with the focus on the neighbor who becomes important.

Parallels in Islam

For the usage of the image of two ways, the following text has been analyzed:

- Sura 90, "The Town": 10-20

For the usage of dualistic images, the following texts have been analyzed:

- Sura 80, "He Frowned": 38-42
- Sura 82, "The Cleaving": 13-14

The Quran uses the image of two ways as in the "*Gospel of Matthew*", but it adds typical Islamic accents such as the importance of believing, motivating and admonishing each other.

It is also interesting to remark the similarities between the analyzed texts from the Quran and Matthew 25: 31-36, 46.

Conclusion

My research shows that there are connections between these texts. There was probably a Jewish tract of the "Two Ways", of which the fragment 4Q473 may be a part. This tract was well known and well established in pre-Christian Judaism. It is not surprising that these images and concepts were introduced in the Second Testament and in other early Christian texts.

By "way" is here meant figuratively the "way of life" or the "lifestyle". The way of life is the way in which people organize their lives. The way one speaks, thinks, and does. This way is the practice of the heart. It is what lives at the inside, and somehow comes out again and again. By the "way" is meant the guiding principle of what life is all about, and what shapes life. It is a matter of ethics.

The parable of the "Two Ways" in the "*Gospel of Matthew*" along with the other analyzed texts represent two ways of life, two lifestyles. Using the image of Psalm 1, we see the perspective associated with these two lifestyles:

- A life that detaches itself from its Creator is likely to blow away like chaff in the wind.
- But whoever faithfully and persistently chooses to listen every day to the voice of God as a dedicated person, not for the form but with all his heart, this person is given the promise that everything he does will succeed and will develop. It grows and develops emerging from the hidden source of life. Not that everything will go smoothly, but that one can develop through everything to the human being as God intended.

The choice between the two lifestyles implies the freedom to choose, but the person who chooses the path of God discovers that the roots of his behavior are in his spirituality. This demanding vision of a living God dealing with human diversity and conflicts will enable men and women to overcome prejudices and insecurities. Those who walk the "way of the Lord" will find a balance between self-centeredness and the ability to love neighbors and even enemies.

Without using these words, the image of the "Two Ways" presents us with the radical alternative of heaven or hell. This is not a question of successful attempts to follow the lifestyle of the kingdom of heaven, but being saved or lost, being inside or outside.

The tract of the two spirits in 1QS, and also the "Epistle of Barnabas" and the "Shepherd of Hermas", belong to a different tradition. This tradition uses the images of two ways as a kind of "team building" to make a difference between "us" and "them".

But the parable represents a strange point of view. It seems to indicate that we have only one choice: the "wide gate" or the "narrow gate". Once a person has made that choice, the person is on a certain road towards a certain destination.

I believe that we are constantly jumping from the narrow way to the wide way, and back. We often realize that we have arrived on the wide way, and then we must take the necessary actions to return to the narrow way. We must constantly make choices, and we must constantly have God's word in our hearts to make the right ethical choices. Making these choices is often not easy, because there is always a whole context involved. We must make sure that we realize that we are on the wide way, and then take the necessary actions to get back on the narrow way. The parable of the "Two Ways" reflects a continuous ethical consciousness process.

References:

The following internet sources have been used:

- The books of Enoch (10-Apr-2019, All books of Enoch, <http://www.markfoster.net/rn/texts/AllBooksOfEnoch.pdf>)
- The Dead Sea Scrolls (16-Apr-2019, the Leon Levy Dead Sea Scrolls Digital Library, <https://www.deadseascrolls.org.il/home>)
- The writings of the Church Fathers (15-Apr-2019, New Advent, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/>)
- The translation of 4Q473 (11-Apr-2019, Moellerhaus Publishers, <http://moellerhaus.com/Dead%20Sea%20Scrs/dss2ways.htm>)
- The Bible in the English Standard Version (ESV) (21-Jun-2019, Bible Study Tools, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/esv/>)

The following books were consulted:

- Aune D.E. (Editor) (1972), *Studies in New Testament and Early Christian Literature*. Leiden: E.J. Brill
- Davies W.D. & Allison D.C. (2004), *Matthew 1-7*. New York: T&T Clark Ltd
- De Heer J. (1991), *Zangbundel*. Hilversum: Universal Songs.
- France R.T. (2007), *The Gospel of Matthew*. Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing
- Garcia Martinez, A. & van der Woude A. (1994-1995), *De rollen van de Dode Zee, Ingeleid en in het Nederlands vertaald, 2 delen*. Kampen: Kok
- De Goeij, M. (1980), *De Pseudepigraphen*. Kampen: Kok
- Green J.B. (1997), *The Gospel of Luke*. Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing
- Keur J. & Keur P. (1987), *Apocriefen van het Oude Testament*. Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschappij J.H. Kok
- De Kok, A. (2014), *De Didachè*. Gorinchem: Stad op een berg
- Lim T.H. & Collins J.J. (2010), *The Oxford Handbook of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Niederwimmer K. (1998), *The Didache*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press
- Nijs, J. (zonder jaartal). *Perikopen van (de) Vaders*. Oplabbeek: Drukkerij Paesen
- Terrien S. (2003). *The Psalms, Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary, Volume 1 and 2*. Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company
- Van de Sandt H. & Flusser D. (2002), *The Didachè, Its Jewish Sources and its Place in Early Judaism and Christianity*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press
- Vermes G. (2004), *The Authentic Gospel of Jesus*. London: Pinguin Books
- *De Koran* (Leemhuis F., vert.) (2014). Houten-Antwerpen: Het Spectrum bv.