

Theology on *the Web.org.uk*

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes.
Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit
or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the
copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the
ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the
links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbadshaw>

A table of contents for *Journal of Biblical Literature* can be found
here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jbl-01.php

JOURNAL OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE

Volume XXV

Part II

1906

The Sayings of Jesus about the First and the Last

FRANK C. PORTER

TAYLOR UNIVERSITY

THREE are attributed to Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels various sayings about the first and the last which fall into two groups, one having an eschatological and the other an ethical meaning. The eschatological saying, "The first shall be last and the last first," means that there will be a reversal of lot in the world to come, a humbling of the high and an exaltation of the low. The ethical saying, "If any one wishes to be first, let him be last of all and servant of all," means that true greatness consists in self-renunciation and ministering love. It points out a path to primacy which leads in the opposite direction to that which men naturally take. Indeed, it so defines the way in which ambition is to reach its goal as in effect to oppose the spirit of ambition. Although there is obviously a wide difference between the two sayings, one of which deals with outward conditions, the other with the inner motive and spirit, nevertheless one form of words may possibly express either meaning. "If any one wishes to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all" (Mk. 9:35); that is, either as a punishment for his wish, or as the way in which he may gratify his wish, according as one takes ἔσται in the future or in the impera-

tive sense. In one case we have a simple prediction, in the other a rather subtle paradox, which, under the form of instruction as to how one may best assert himself, in reality aims to uproot the spirit of self-assertion. It is the aim of this paper to show that Jesus probably did not utter the prediction, but only the paradox.

The prediction is a good expression of a hope widely current among the Jews of Christ's time. The paradox contains that which was perhaps newest and most distinctive in Christ's view of the world. If Jesus uttered only one of the two sayings, it must have been the paradox. But may he not have uttered the prediction as well? The two are not entirely inconsistent with each other, but there is a presumption against his having expressed two such different ideas in proverbial forms so nearly identical. There is also a fair presumption against his having expressed his belief in future recompense in the form of this gnome, which might claim to be an even better motto for the apocalyptic literature of Judaism than Gunkel's Ἰδοὺ ποιῶ τὰ ἔσχατα ὡς τὰ πρώτα (Barn. 6 13), or Bousset's *Non fecit altissimus unum seculum sed duo* (4 Ezra 7 50). We have not, so far as I know, in Jewish writings any occurrence of the exact sentence, "The first shall be last and the last first"; but the familiar Old Testament phrase about the future humbling of the proud and exaltation of the lowly frequently recurs as an expression of the hope that in the Day of Yahweh the dominating heathen power, or the heathen-minded Jewish party, would be overthrown, and that Israel, the subject people, or the righteous kernel of Israel, now oppressed, would be exalted to glory and dominion. In the sense in which the saying embodied national or sectarian pride and ambition, Jesus could not have uttered it. Nor should we expect him to describe the results of the Day of Judgment simply as a reversal of the outward fortunes and ranks of men. It is true, however, that Jesus looked forward to the humbling of those whose present exaltation was due to pride and selfishness, and to the future blessedness of those whose lowly lives were the cause or the effect of lowly

minds and self-denying service. The thought that the worldly and self-centered rich would be poor in the world to come, and the righteous poor rich, or that the publican and sinner would precede the Pharisee in the kingdom of God, he might have expressed by the words, "Many first shall be last and the last first." The question is one of evidence, not of presupposition. If it is even now true that those who are first in self-assertion and the desire to dominate are really last, and that those who seem to be last because they are servants of all are really first, then the future world must bring this reality to evidence. God's present reversal of human judgments will be vindicated by his future reversal of those human conditions on which false judgments rest. Yet in spite of this relation of the two sayings to each other, a difference remains, and must show itself in the temper and conduct of men, between the hope or the fear that present fortunes are to be reversed, and the conviction that those are really first in God's sight in whom the desire to be first has been overmastered by the spirit of love.

The following table presents the passages in the Synoptic Gospels in the order in which they will be discussed :—

MARK	MATTHEW	LUKE
10 43-44 9 25 —	20 26-27 cf. 18 1-4 23 11	22 26 cf. 9 46b —
—	23 12	—
—	—	18 14b 14 11
—	[20 26 D. cur. Syr.]	—
10 31 — —	19 20 20 18 —	[not 18 20] — 13 20

The passage in which the saying has the best attestation, the clearest setting, and most unmistakably the new ethical meaning is Mk. 10 43-44. The original identity of Luke's apparently independent account with that of Mark and

Matthew can hardly be questioned. Whether the words were spoken on the way to Jerusalem (Mk., Mt.), or after the Last Supper (Lk.), or on neither occasion, cannot be determined. A more important question is whether we are to accept Mark's introductory incident, the ambitious request of James and John, and the response of Jesus to it. Luke's account substitutes for this the general statement that there was rivalry among them as to which of them was to be accounted greater (22 24). It would seem easier to account for the omission of an incident derogatory to two of the foremost apostles than to account for its invention. Matthew already lessens the offense by ascribing the request to their mother. Further, Jesus' disavowal of authority to determine the rank of his disciples in the coming kingdom would seem to meet the test of originality which Schmiedel formulates: like Mk. 13 32, it is not what we should expect the worship of Jesus to produce. On the other hand, account must be taken of the argument of Wellhausen, J. Weiss, and Schwartz that the incident could hardly have maintained itself in its present form in the gospel tradition unless John as well as James had actually suffered martyrdom in the early apostolic age (Mk. 10 38-39). And then, if these were in fact the first martyrs among the Twelve, the question arises how far the event may have shaped the narrative.

Luke, it would seem, passed by the incident (Mk. 10 38-45) would fall between Lk. 18 34 and 38) because he preferred to give the sayings which form its climax in the place and in the shorter form which they had in another source (22 24-27). Here it follows the account of the Last Supper, and has a striking relationship, in vss. 28-27, to the account in John 13 of Jesus' ministering to his disciples. Luke may have preferred this account because it did not contain the request of James and John, or because the position, after the Supper, seemed to him preferable, or because he valued the form in which the Passion history lay before him too highly to alter it, and so cut out the passage in the Mark form to avoid repetition. But fortunately the

meaning of the saying does not depend on the incident that occasioned it, but is fixed by the sentences which in both sources lead up to it (Mk. 10 *42* Lk. 22 *25*). Jesus rebukes the spirit of rivalry and personal ambition by saying that this belongs to heathen rulers, but should not exist among his disciples. "It is not [Mt. *shall not be*] so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be [*εσται*] your servant, and whoever of you wishes to become first shall be slave of all." In this report of the saying (Mk., Mt.), the future is certainly used in the imperative sense. "*Εσται* and *εστω*, forms easily interchangeable in texts, both translate the same Hebrew or Aramaic; and the imperative sense of the future, usually but not always in the second person, had become familiar through the Septuagint; so that usage allows what the connection demands, the imperative, not the future, meaning, the paradox, not the prediction. Being a servant, slave of all, is not a result and penalty of ambition, but expresses the ideal of the disciples' conduct.

Luke's source reads: "He that is greater among you let him become as the younger, and he that is chief as he that serves." Here the sense is somewhat altered. We seem to be in the time, which is after that of Jesus' life, when there were in fact greater and less, rulers and servants, in the Christian community; and the admonition is that the great should be humble, the leaders should be in their spirit *as* servants.

The passage most like this is Mk. 9 *33*, but the section in which it occurs is quite differently given in the three gospels (Mk. 9 *33-37* Mt. 18 *1-5* Lk. 9 *46-48*). The three accounts agree in stating that there was a discussion among the disciples as to which is greater [Mt. adds "in the Kingdom of Heaven"], and that Jesus set a child in their midst and said that one who receives a little child receives him. Before introducing the child, Mark inserts our saying. In the midst of the incident Matthew has a saying about child-likeness (18 *3-4*), and at the end of the incident Luke adds, "for he that is less among you is great" (9 *48b*). Now

the connection between the saying, "He who receives one of these little children . . . receives me," and the dispute of the disciples as to the first place is certainly not clear. We should expect rather to find Jesus pointing to the example of the child and urging child-likeness, as he does on another occasion (Mk. 10 13-16). Indeed, the words of Jesus on these two occasions would read more naturally if we changed them about, and put the charge to become childlike in Mk. 9 37, and the charge to receive children in Mk. 10 15. Matthew seems to have felt this, for he takes Mk. 10 15 out of the second incident and inserts it in amplified form in the first (Mt. 18 3-4, between Mk. 9 36 and 37).

It seems therefore that each of the evangelists felt that the occasion, the dispute about primacy, and the saying about receiving children, did not fit together, and each has tried in his own way to connect the two, or to bring in somewhere the answer of Jesus which the disciples' rivalry called for. Now if in the Mark source, which Matthew and Luke used, vs. 35 already stood, it does not seem likely that they would have made a different attempt to solve the difficulty, for this solution is as good as any other. I am inclined therefore to say that vs. 35 did not stand in the Mark source. Codex D, in fact, omits the saying, though on this not much stress can be put. We are not, then, I think, to regard this as another use of the saying by Jesus, but as borrowed by some editor from the similar incident already considered.

Perhaps the evangelists did not follow the original tradition in attempting an adjustment between the two parts of this section. Wellhausen infers from the fact that in vs. 33 the disciples are with Jesus in the house, while in vs. 35 he calls them to him, that the two parts did not belong together in the original form of the tradition. Yet a connection is not inconceivable. Jesus may possibly have meant: You seek greatness for yourselves, but you ought rather to recognize greatness in the least of your fellowmen, and treat them with such respect and render them such services as are due to the greatest.

It is probably more natural to suppose that the connection is due to the evangelist, and is not historical; and in that case J. Weiss's understanding of Mark's application of the section deserves to be considered. The evangelist wishes, he thinks, to rebuke the ambition of the Twelve for rank and authority. It is not the Twelve only who represent Christ, so that men's attitude toward them is their attitude toward Christ (cf. Mt. 10 *40*); but even the child, the least member of the Christian community, is equally Christ's representative, and one who receives him receives Christ. In this case our saying, in vs. 35, may have a threatening tone. The ambition of those who are seeking places of rulership in the community, even if they belong to the Twelve, will be rebuked and punished at the last day.

In Mt. 23 *11* our saying occurs again, and, in view of what precedes it, in the ethical rather than in the eschatological sense. Here the conduct of the Christian community is contrasted not, as in Mk. 10 *43 f.*, with that of the heathen, but with that of the Pharisees, who made a display of their piety and loved to be conspicuous and admired. The passage breathes the spirit of Jesus, but in its present form, especially in vs. 10, it betrays the apostolic age. It is not quite clear whether the evangelist uses the sentence (vs. 11) here in the sense that the choice of the servant's place is the way to gain true greatness (Mk. 10 *43 f.*), or in the sense that he who is in fact the greatest in the circle of disciples, either in rank or repute, should use his greatness for the service of the community, in a spirit of humility, recognizing the sole headship of Christ (cf. Lk. 22 *28*).

Immediately after this verse Matthew has the eschatological saying: "Whoever shall exalt himself shall be humbled, and whoever shall humble himself shall be exalted." This is a familiar Old Testament and Jewish sentence and sentiment. The thought is central in Isaiah's teaching, and has a large place in the Old Testament.¹ In the case of a saying so familiar as this it is especially hard to decide whether

¹ See, for example, Isa. 2 1 Sam. 2 1-10 Ezek. 17 *24* 21 *21* (*26*) Ps. 75 147 *6* Prov. 3 *24* 29 *22* Job 22 *22* Ecclus. 10 7-12 Ps. Sol. 2 *22* (*21*) 17 *6* (*7*).

Jesus used it and on what occasions. It could too easily come to the mind of a Jewish writer and be supplied where it seemed appropriate. In Jewish writings the saying is often used to express the thought that Yahweh cannot endure rivalry, but asserts himself by virtue of the very exclusiveness of his nature against everything that is high and lifted up. The humbling of the proud and the elevation of the lowly is a demonstration of the sovereignty of God. In this sense we should not expect Jesus to use it. But did he cite the saying at all in his denunciation of the Pharisees?

The saying occurs twice in Luke. One instance is at the end of the parable of the Pharisee and Publican (Lk. 18 14b), where, however, it is hardly needed. The sentence, "This man went down to his house justified rather than the other," forms a fitting close, and has a sufficient ground in the story itself. It does not need to be further grounded by appeal to this Biblical principle.² My impression is that it would not have occurred to Jesus here so naturally as it would to some of his reporters, for his purpose in the parable was to picture the repulsive nature of pride and the beauty of humility, rather than to predict the humbling of the proud and the elevation of the humble.

The saying is found again at the end of the parable against choosing the chief seats at feasts (Lk. 14 11). Though Luke calls this a parable, he seems to take it literally. Jesus is sitting at a Pharisee's table; seeing the guests press forward he gives counsel as to the proper conduct of guests, and then as to the duty of hosts (vss. 12-14). The familiar quotation with which the section, vss. 7-11, ends is of course appropriate. Yet even here there is reason to doubt whether Jesus uttered the eschatological sentence. In the important parallel to this section given after Mt. 20 28 in D, Cur. Syr., and some old Latin texts, this saying (Lk. 14 11) is wanting, and its place is taken by the agraphon with which the passage is introduced: ὑμεῖς δὲ ξητεῖτε ἐκ μικροῦ αὐξῆσαι, καὶ [Syr. Cur. Κ]αὶ μὴ] ἐκ μελέζοντος ἀλλαττοντείναι. The saying is so difficult as to make a strong claim to origi-

² See Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu*, p. 607.



nality. The reading of Syr. Cur. is quite certainly an effort to make a hard saying easy. Perhaps Luke's text represents the substitution of a familiar and easy sentence for this hard one; the substitution of the easy eschatology of Judaism for one of the hard ethical paradoxes of Jesus. In the light of the other paradox, "Whoever would be first among you let him be last of all," may we not well suppose Jesus to have said: "Seek ye from the little to increase and from the greater to be less"; and to have meant: Seek to excel by seeking to serve; be ambitious to be great, and, to that end, be ambitious to be servant of all. The two pursuits, apparently contradictory, are really harmonious. Then would follow a proper parable, in which Jesus shows that even in everyday life it is sometimes true that the best way to seek to be greater is to seek to be less.

With these passages ought to be cited again Mt. 18:4, already referred to as a part of Matthew's link between the incident of the disciples' dispute about primacy and the saying about receiving children. "Whoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, he is the greater in the Kingdom of Heaven." This is the only other passage in the Synoptists where *ταπεινώω* is used in this sense. Comparing the passage with Mk. 10:13-16 and parallels, it seems certain that Jesus said that to such as the little children the Kingdom of God belongs, that is, to such belongs primacy, God-likeness, sonship, and the son's inheritance. It seems to me characteristic of the mind of Jesus that he should change the proud Jewish maxim, The exalted shall be humbled and the humble exalted; God will cast down the mighty from their seats and exalt those of low degree; into the rebuke of Jewish and human pride, Except ye humble yourselves as this little child ye shall not enter into the Kingdom of God. He brought not the comforting assurance that the lowly were to be set on high, but the severe charge that only lowliness is pleasing to God.

The question now remains whether Jesus expressed this Jewish expectation of the future humbling of the great and exalting of the lowly by the phrase, The first shall be last,

and the last first. The words occur in this eschatological sense in Mk. 10:31 and in the parallel in Matthew, but not in Luke. According to Luke, whose form is the simplest, to Peter's words, Behold we have left our possessions and followed thee, Jesus replied, There is no one who has left house, or wife, or brothers, or parents, or children, for the Kingdom of God, who shall not receive manifold more in this time, and in the world to come life eternal. Mark and Matthew add: But many first shall be last, and the last first. Luke's omission of the sentence may be due to its absence from his Mark source; or to his having already used it in an eschatological sense in 18:30, where it is applied to the rejection of the Jews and the calling of the heathen; or to his wish to avoid what might seem to be a warning over against the promise of eternal life to those who renounce their earthly possessions. For if stress be put on the adversative, δέ, the sentence seems to warn the disciples against too great confidence. Eternal life is promised to those who renounce all, *but* the divine judgment will surprise many human anticipations, therefore beware! It is, however, more natural to suppose that the two evangelists regard the future reward of the disciples as an illustration of the principle, not as rendered uncertain by it. This seems entirely certain in the case of Matthew on account of his insertion of vs. 28 (Lk. 22:28-30), with its definite promise of literal royalty to the Twelve.

That Jesus in fact set before his disciples in this bold way the future advantages of present self-denial is not quite easy to believe; and especially unnatural would it seem for him to use, in making this appeal to self-interest, just the phrase in which he most strikingly expressed his opposition to self-interest and his criticism of the ambition for high places in his kingdom. The significant thing in Jesus' reply to Peter's claim for reward for his self-sacrifice is his declaration that renunciation is abundantly rewarded in this present world, as well as in that which is to come. This is like him. The contrast in his mind was not between present sacrifice and future compensation, but between the lesser

good that is renounced and the greater good that is even now gained. Outward wealth is given up, but a spiritual wealth more than takes its place. It is more blessed to give than to receive. Jesus may well have run through the list again, as Mark makes him do, in promising the hundred-fold reward now in this world (vs. 30); and it illustrates the constant pressure of the eschatological interest, pushing aside the spiritual meaning of Jesus, that Matthew omits the enumeration in this verse, which secures for it a figurative and spiritual meaning, and inserts vs. 28, which demands the future and the external. Luke's omission of this part of Mark's vs. 30 may have been independent of Matthew's, and for similar reasons. Matthew, however, goes further than Luke, for he omits even the phrase "in this time," and leaves the reward solely future. The future is of course not to be omitted from Jesus' promise of reward. The world to come will confirm the reality and eternal quality of the gain that even now offsets earthly loss, and will justify the wisdom of the man who sells all he has to buy the pearl or the field that is worth more than all he has. But the striking thing in the thought of Jesus about reward is the interblending of present and future by which the eschatology is essentially spiritualized; and this is quite lost when Mark and Matthew add: Many first shall be last and the last first; for this seems to mean simply that those who now become poor, as the rich man had just refused to do, will be rich in the coming world, and those who are now rich will be poor. My impression is, then, that we are nearer the original reply of Jesus to Peter in Mark's form of vss. 29-30, but with Luke's omission of Mark's vs. 31.

It is not surprising to find so confirmed an eschatologist as J. Weiss reversing this criticism, and casting doubt on vss. 29-30, with their thought of a present reward, an inner gain through outer loss; while he says of vs. 30 that "it is a key-note of the preaching of Jesus that in the [future] Kingdom of God the relations of rank will be reversed, and that those who are first here will stand lowest there."

Directly after this sentence Matthew inserts the parable

of equal wages for unequal toil; and we may suppose that the occasion for its insertion just here lay in the fact that it ended, in Matthew's source, with a very similar sentence, which the parable was supposed to illustrate, "Thus (*οὕτως*) the last shall be first and the first last" (Mt. 20 16). The sentence differs from 19 30 in the omission of *πολλοί*, and in reversing the order of the clauses. If we accept the sentence as the original end of the parable, the meaning must be not, as in 19 30, the reversal of the present lots of the righteous and the unrighteous, of believers and unbelievers, but the obliteration of present distinctions among the righteous themselves in the coming day of judgment. There will be no first and last so far as reward is concerned. The last will receive as much as the first, and the first no more than the last, so that it can be said that the last become first and the first last (B. Weiss). The parable and the proverb might then have been understood as a rebuke of the claims and assumptions of the Twelve. We have seen, however, that Matthew can hardly have taken 19 30 in that sense on account of his insertion of vs. 28.

The parable must be studied by itself, since its connection either with Peter's claim (19 27) or with the saying in 19 30 is shown by Mark and Luke to be due solely to Matthew. It must, I think, be confessed that the parable, read by itself, does not appear to offer an illustration of the principle expressed in vs. 16. The parable is one of the most striking of Jesus' criticisms of legalistic religion. It is a justification of his own attitude toward sinners, which was an offense to Pharisaic ideals. Its teaching is parallel to that of the Prodigal Son. Now the saying about first and last does not naturally express the thought that the principle of desert does not give adequate account of God's dealings with men. I am inclined to think therefore that here again the eschatological saying proves to be unauthentic, and that we should probably accept Jülicher's understanding of the evangelist's course of thought. The Twelve, Matthew thinks, are to be exalted to thrones of rulership over Israel (19 27 f.); while those who believe that they are called to

first places in God's kingdom, the Jewish Scribes and Pharisees, will for the most part be shamefully rejected (19 30). Then Matthew inserts the parable, with its similar end, understanding it to mean the rebuke and rejection by God of the Jews, those who seemed to have the first place; that is, Matthew interprets the parable in the sense of the parables of the Wicked Husbandmen and the Marriage Feast. He may have understood that those who were first hired at fixed wages, the law-community, incurred the anger of their master and were sent away from his presence (vss. 14-15). Vs. 16 would fit this application of the parable to the rejection of Israel, but would not fit its original meaning.

The saying before us was thus probably understood by Matthew in 20 16, and perhaps in 19 30, as referring to the rejection of the Jews, or of the Pharisees; and this is clearly Luke's application of it in 13 30. The section 13 23-30 is put together out of originally diverse materials. The theme is perhaps throughout that few will be saved (vs. 23; cf. Mk. 10 26 = Lk. 18 26). The beginning of the section seems to deal with a sifting of the Christian community; but even in the suggestion of the parable of the Virgins, in vss. 25-27, it is the Jewish people who are rejected (vss. 28-29 = Mt. 7 22-23), and it is to these that vss. 28-29 (= Mt. 8 11-12) relate. The Jewish people then are those to whom vs. 30 is applied, those who were first in privilege and opportunity, but have made themselves last by their rejection of Christ. We are forbidden by the fragmentary character of the materials here put together to make any inference as to the use of our gnome by Jesus in this threatening sense.

The saying occurs, evidently in the eschatological sense, in the Oxyrhynchus Sayings of 1904. It appears to be the only answer granted to the question that a man shall not hesitate to ask concerning the place of the future consummation, or his place in it. No analogies, canonical or uncanonical, have enabled editors to get beyond pure conjecture as to the missing half lines, and so to give us our familiar saying in a new setting.

The saying of Jesus about first and last, in its best attested

form and connection, is a paradoxical expression of an ethical truth, but already within the gospel tradition it has been carried over into the region of eschatology. The evidence that Jesus used it in the eschatological sense is at no point convincing. This of course does not mean that eschatology had no place in the teaching of Jesus, but only that there was a tendency in the gospel tradition to give it a larger place than it really had. Jesus certainly put much stress on the promise and threat of future reward, and even on occasion pointed to a reversal of the present lot of men in the world to come, as in the picture of the Rich Man and Lazarus. But his most characteristic teachings were in the region of the inner life; and the tradition of the saying about the first and last is an illustration of the early preponderance of the eschatological interest, and of the way in which some of the hard sayings of Jesus were made easy by transferring them from the inner life to the outer, and from the present to the future. Our study concerns but a small detail, and involves in itself, however it may issue, no change in our conception of the teaching of Jesus. But a small thing can show the drift of the current; and now that it has become a fad of critical scholarship to magnify the eschatological factor in the thought of Jesus, it is worth while to note evidences, be they great or small, that the earliest tradition tended to enlarge that factor, and to lose for its sake some of the subtler meanings of the Master.