“And so both are preserved” (Matt 9:17e):

A Fresh Look at the Wineskins Image in Matthew.

Brendan Byrne, SJ

University of Divinity (Melbourne)

ABSTRACT

The phrase “And both are preserved” at the conclusion of Matthew’s version of the fasting controversy (Matt 9:14-17) with the disciples of John the Baptist is normally taken in the sense that both the new and the old wineskins are preserved, thereby confirming a sense of continuity rather than rupture with Judaism. This article argues that both the immediate syntax and the role of the image within the context of the controversy stories as a whole requires that the reference be to the new wine and the new wineskins. John’s disciples must adjust to the new way of thinking and imagining required by the kingdom.

This paper focuses on a small phrase peculiar to Matthew’s version of the Synoptic Fasting controversy. In all three Synoptic accounts this controversy occurs early in the Galilean ministry of Jesus. It is the third of a series of controversy stories that begins with the cure and forgiveness of the paralyzed man (Matt 9:1-8; Mark 2:1-12; Luke 5:17-26), continues with the call of Levi/ Matthew (Matt 9:9-13; Mark 2:13-17; Luke
5:27-32) and continues further with a question as to why Jesus and his disciples, in contrast to the disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees, do not fast (Matt 9:14-17; Mark 2:18-22; Luke 5:33-39). Jesus responds to the question with a series of three images: one about a wedding (v. 15), one about a patch sewn on a garment (v. 16), one about wine and wineskins (v. 17).

The three Synoptic accounts of the fasting controversy cohere fairly closely—though with sufficient “minor agreements” between Matthew and Luke to cause some discomfort to the Two Source theory.¹ My focus here is upon Matthew, especially on the final phrase that he, uniquely, adds after the third image (wine and wineskins): “And both are preserved.” For comparison’s sake I shall keep an eye on Mark, whose earlier version I am presuming Matthew read, and leave Luke aside.

In regard to Matthew my fine point of focus is the content of the first word of that added sentence: “Both …” Both what? Certainly one element must be the “new wine.” But what is the other that is to be preserved? The new wineskins or the old wineskins? Granted that the phrase immediately preceding speaks of “new wine” and “new wineskins”, the most obvious reference on syntactical grounds is that “both” refers to those two items: “new wine” and “new wineskins.” There is, however, a widespread tendency among Matthean scholars to find in the second element a reference to the old wineskins. What leads them to adopt this view, in the face of the what the syntax would seem to require, is appreciation of a wider concern on Matthew’s part to portray Jesus as “fulfilling” rather than doing away with the old dispensation and, on a wider level still, to see Matthew in broad continuity rather than

¹ See Ulrich Luz, Matthew: A Commentary (3 vols; Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001-7) 2.36, n. 4.
rupture with Judaism. So, e.g., Davies and Allison in their monumental ICC commentary on Matthew:

The concern expressed in Mt 9:17 would seem to be the same as that expressed in 5:17-20: Jesus does not destroy the old but fulfils it (cf. 13:52).²

There are certainly places in the gospel where a sense of continuity with the old is apparent: notably, 5:17-20 and 13:52 (though the order, in the latter case, of what the “scribe” discipled for the kingdom of heaven draws out of his store runs: “things new and old”, not “old and new”). An overall understanding of the gospel can certainly shed light on details in a particular context. And the degree of continuity between Matthew and Judaism remains a significant discussion point in Matthean studies.³ However, it is hardly exegetical best practice to allow impressions derived from an


overall sense of the gospel to override what the more immediate context would seem to require.

So let us go back and take a run at this final comment of Matthew at the end of his version of the fasting controversy. As I pointed out earlier, this is the third of a series of controversy stories. In the first, the paralyzed man, some scribes protest at Jesus’ declaration of forgiveness. In the call of Matthew, those who criticize Jesus’ celebration of God’s mercy in “bad company” are Pharisees. The third challenge comes from the disciples of John the Baptist—not normally associated with groups hostile to Jesus such as the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus, of course, speaks positively of John (11:7-11). He does, however, relegate him to an era prior to the onset of the kingdom: John proclaims the nearness of the kingdom and calls for repentance in view of it (3:2), but “the least in the kingdom of heaven” is greater than he (11:11). Hence, although not hostile to Jesus like the scribes and Pharisees, John and his disciples belong with them in an era being outdated by the advent of the kingdom.

Here John’s disciples approach Jesus and, associating themselves with the Pharisees at least in the matter of fasting, ask why his disciples do not fast (v. 14). As so often, Jesus responds with an image. The bridegroom’s attendants cannot mourn as long the bridegroom is with them (v. 15a). The phrase, Hoi huioi tou nymphōnos, literally, “sons of the wedding-hall”, is usually translated simply as “guests” (so the NRSV). This translation is too vague. The reference is not to guests in general but to a number of men who are particularly attached to the bridegroom—a reference that fits the disciples of Jesus perfectly.4

4 See BAGD 681 (s.v. nymphōn); see J. Nolland, The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005) 390.
We should not perhaps interpret the image immediately in an allegorical sense. However, its role in the context inevitably implies that the disciples of Jesus are not fasting because there is a wedding in place in which they involved as attendants upon the bridegroom. While there is no evidence that the Messiah was understood as a bridegroom in pre-Christian Judaism, there is ample evidence from the biblical and post-biblical tradition of the messianic age pictured as a great banquet (Isa 25:6-10). This, together with the image of God as Israel’s Bridegroom and Israel as Bride (Isa 54:5-6; 62:4-5; Jer 2:2; Ezek 16:8; 23:4; Hos 2:16-20), further designates the messianic age or the kingdom itself as a wedding celebration (as in the parable of the Wedding Banquet in Matt 22:1-14). Thus Jesus’ use of the “bridegroom” image here suggests the presence of the messianic age, with the implication that the Bridegroom upon whom the disciples are attendant is none other than himself, an understanding of him found elsewhere in the New Testament (2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:22-27; Rev 19:7), especially in early chapters of the Fourth Gospel (2:1-11; 3:25-30; see also 4:3-30).

We should also note the verb “mourn” (pentheō), peculiar to Matthew, in place of “fast” (nēsteuō) appearing in the two synoptic parallels. This is a first hint that Matthew isn’t particularly interested in the issue of fasting as such. I shall return to “mourn” shortly.

Following the statement of the Bridegroom image, we have the quasi corrective second half of v. 15, referring to days that are coming when the Bridegroom will be “taken away” from them, and then they will fast. There is universal agreement that “taken away” here refers to the violent death of Jesus (see

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Isa 53:8). But what is the time subsequent to this when the disciples will fast? Does this refer to the period between the death of Jesus and his return as Son of Man at the end of the age: that is, to the time of the church? But Matthew’s gospel ends with a solemn assurance from the risen Lord that, far from being absent, he will be “with” the disciples all days, even to the end of the age (28:20).

Many scholars see this statement as a corrective to the image in order to defend the early church’s practice of fasting, something that a mention of fasting in the Sermon on the Mount (6:16-18) seems to presuppose. However, this makes the comment in v. 15b intrusive to the flow of thought in the passage as a whole.

It seems far more appropriate to relate the distinction between the time of the presence of the Bridegroom and the time after his being “taken away” to a time of opportunity to join him in the celebration of the messianic era and a time, after his “taking away”, when that opportunity will no longer be open. To change the metaphor: for those who do not get on board, so to speak, like the Pharisees and the disciples of John, that will indeed be a time of “mourning/fasting” because they will have missed out. Not to respond positively to the proclamation of the kingdom now is to lose both the Bridegroom and the kingdom (see 21:43).

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6 See Davies and Allison, Matthew 2.111; Robert H. Gundry, Matthew: A Commentary on his Literary and Theological Art (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982) 169; Luz, Matthew 2.37; contra, Nolland, Matthew 392.

7 Note a further instance of “mourn” later in the gospel in an eschatological context when the “tribes of the earth” “mourn” at the advent of the Son of Man in judgment (24:30). If this later instance of “mourning” expresses regret at lost opportunity rather than conversion and repentance, as I believe to be the case, then it could have some
This brings us to the final two images: first that of the patch on a garment (v. 16):

No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away, from the cloak, and a worse tear is made.

So much for what one should not do. It is left to our imagination as to what one should do. Presumably two courses of action are envisaged: put an unshrunk patch on a new cloak or, more likely, patch an old cloak with a patch that has already been shrunk. What is clear is the incompatibility of matching together the old and the new.

When we take up at last the final, “wine/wineskins” image in (v. 17), comparing Matthew’s version with that of Mark (2:22), it becomes clear that Matthew has reworded Mark in order to place more emphasis on the wineskins than on the wine. Where Mark makes the (new) wine the subject of bursting and refers then to its being lost, Matthew makes the skins the subject (“the skins burst”). Where Mark says the wine is lost and then adds, as a bit of an afterthought, “and also the skins”,

connection with the appearance of “mourn” in place of “fast” in 9:15. Of course, “mourn” has a positive sense in the second Beatitude (5:4).

Along these lines, see John A. Ziesler, “The Removal of the Bridegroom: A note on Mark 2:18-22 and Parallels,” NTS 19 (1972-73) 190-94. It is interesting in this connection to note what seems to be a development of this tradition in a slightly different direction in the Fourth Gospel. Towards the end of chapter 3, John the Baptist, speaking of Christ as “Bridegroom” more or less tells his disciples, who are concerned that more people are going to Jesus than to John himself, that this is what they also should be doing (3:25-30); it is time for Jesus to “increase” and for him to “decrease” (3:30).
Matthew says that the wine is spilled and then gives a full phrase to the loss of the skins, making them again the subject: “and the skins are destroyed. Hence the wineskins are very significant for Matthew.

If, as we are surely meant to do, we now understand the image in its immediate context, the “new wine” is the proclamation of the kingdom—or in fact the kingdom itself. The wineskins, the element of the image stressed by Matthew, would then be the recipients of the proclamation. The old wineskins that the new wine tends to “burst” would be old, outdated ways of thinking and imagining that are simply inadequate to grasp, understand and appropriate the kingdom. The new wineskins, on the contrary, would be the new way of thinking and imagining adequate to the task.\(^9\)

This is what John’s disciples need to understand. Their question about fasting shows that they just haven’t caught on. “The times they are a’changin…” New wine needs new capacity, and both are preserved.

Hence I conclude that the two items (“both”) that are said to be “preserved” in the final clause of v. 17 refer not to the new wine and the old wineskins but to the new wine and the new wineskins.\(^{10}\)

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In this sense, both images—the patch and the wineskins—most likely relate not only to the fasting controversy but to the sequence of the three controversies as a whole, with each of the parties (scribes, Pharisees, and disciples of John the Baptist) in view.\footnote{See Luz, \textit{Matthew} 2.38; Evans, \textit{Matthew} 205.} A new age is dawning, no compromise is possible. Get with it or be caught out!