Which Son Did the Father's Will?

The Textual Problem of Matthew 21:28–32

Three Versions of One Parable in the Greek Manuscript Tradition, and Five Centuries of Editorial Reversal

Principal witnesses: Codex Sinaiticus (01, ℵ) · Codex Vaticanus (03, B) · Codex Bezae (05, D)
Critical text of reference: Nestle-Aland 28 / UBS5, with SBLGNT and THGNT collated
English versions collated: LSB, NIV, NRSVue, ESV, CSB, NET, KJV

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Abstract

Matthew 21:28–32 is transmitted in the Greek manuscript tradition in three distinct versions which reach three different conclusions about which son obeyed his father. This is not a matter of orthography or word order; it is a case in which the surviving witnesses disagree about the verdict a parable delivers. In Codex Sinaiticus and the Byzantine majority, the first son refuses and then goes, the second agrees and does not go, and the answer given is ὁ πρῶτος — "the first," the one who worked. In Codex Vaticanus the two sons are reversed and the answer is ὁ ὕστερος — "the latter," again the one who worked. In Codex Bezae the sons stand in the Sinaiticus order but the answer given is ὁ ἔσχατος — "the last," which names the son who agreed and did nothing. Bezae, in other words, has Jesus' opponents commend the son who did no work, and Jesus proceed as though they had answered correctly.

This paper sets out the three versions in full, analyses every variant unit in the pericope, surveys the external and internal evidence, and reconstructs the five-hundred-year history of editorial decision from the Complutensian Polyglot and Erasmus through Lachmann, Tregelles, Tischendorf, Westcott-Hort, and the Nestle-Aland series to NA28, the SBLGNT, and the Tyndale House edition. It shows that the printed Greek New Testament has, at different times, printed all three versions as the text; that the reversal at NA26 in 1979 — from the Vaticanus form to the Sinaiticus form — was decided largely on a single intrinsic-probability argument; and that the patristic evidence indicates all three forms were in circulation by the fourth century and probably by the second.

It then takes account of the most recent full-scale treatment, Tyler Gregory Culp's Vanderbilt dissertation *Matthew's Parable of the Two Sons: Textual Confusion in the Manuscript Tradition* (2025, supervised by Amy-Jill Levine with Michael Holmes on the committee), which applies pregenealogical coherence from the Coherence-Based Genealogical Method and argues — against the current consensus — that the Bezaean narrative sequence has the strongest claim to being the initial text, and that the Vaticanus form should be rejected outright.

The conclusion offered here is deliberately restrained. The Sinaiticus form remains the best-supported reading externally and is rightly printed in NA28. But the arguments that have carried it since 1979 are weaker than their canonical status suggests, the Vaticanus form shows clear signs of multiple independent emergence, and the Bezaean form is old, versionally supported, and defensible on internal grounds. This is a case where the apparatus should be read as reporting a genuinely open question rather than a settled one — and where every English Bible in print conceals that fact from its readers.

1. The Problem

1.1 What is at issue

Textual variation in the Gospels is usually a matter of small things: a particle, a preposition, a harmonisation, a pious expansion. Even the famous long variants — the ending of Mark, the *pericope adulterae*, the Johannine Comma — involve the presence or absence of material rather than a contradiction within it. Matthew 21:28–32 is different in kind. Here the manuscripts do not merely differ about wording; they transmit a story whose moral verdict is reversed depending on which witness one follows.

A father asks each of two sons to work in his vineyard. One says no and then goes. One says yes and then does not go. Jesus asks his opponents which of the two did the father's will. In our earliest and best witnesses, they give three different answers.

In plain terms: this is not a case where we are unsure of a word. It is a case where we are unsure whether the punchline of one of Jesus' parables is a straightforward moral verdict or an act of deliberate obstinacy by his opponents — and the manuscripts will support either.

1.2 The Matthean setting

The pericope stands in Jesus' final week, in the Temple, immediately after the challenge to his authority (21:23–27) and immediately before the Wicked Tenants (21:33–46) and the Wedding Banquet (22:1–14). Matthew has arranged three parables in sequence against the same audience, and 21:45 describes them collectively as τὰς παραβολὰς αὐτοῦ — which is the only reason we are entitled to call the Two Sons a parable at all, since the pericope itself is not so labelled and does not open with a kingdom formula.

Two lexical details of the frame deserve note. First, Matthew writes τέκνα δύο, not υἱοὺς δύο; Jan Lambrecht argued that τέκνον carries a warmer and more intimate connotation than υἱός. Second, the audience is identified twice and differently: chief priests and elders at 21:23 and 21:31, chief priests and Pharisees at 21:45. Both identifications are of leadership groups, not of the Jewish populace — a point that becomes decisive in §11 below, since the whole later allegorical tradition depends on extending the parable's reference from the opponents to the Jewish people as such.

1.3 Method and scope

This paper does not address whether the parable goes back to the historical Jesus. That question, on which Jeremias, Meier, and the Jesus Seminar reached sharply different conclusions, is separable from the question of what Matthew wrote, and the latter is the question here. Nor does it attempt a full commentary. It treats the pericope as a text-critical problem with exegetical, historical, and theological consequences, in that order.

A terminological note. Following current practice, this paper speaks of the **initial text** (*Ausgangstext*) — Gerd Mink's term for the text from which the surviving witnesses descend — rather than the "original text." The two are not identical, and the distance between them is unmeasurable, but the Editio Critica Maior's working assumption that the initial text is a hypothesis for the author's text is adopted here.

2. The Three Versions Set Out

2.1 The narrative sequences compared

Before the Greek, the shape of the disagreement:

Witness	First son agrees?	Second son agrees?	Who actually worked?	Answer given at 21:31
Sinaiticus (ℵ) + Byz	No	Yes	First son	The first (ὁ πρῶτος) — correct
Vaticanus (B)	Yes	No	Second son	The latter (ὁ ὕστερος) — correct
Bezae (D)	No	Yes	First son	The last (ὁ ἔσχατος) — names the son who did nothing

Table 1. The three narrative sequences. Note carefully that Bezae shares its narrative order with Sinaiticus and the Byzantine majority; it differs only — but decisively — in the answer the opponents give. This is frequently misstated in secondary literature, where Bezae is wrongly described as reversing the sons.

2.2 The Greek text of the three witnesses

The following gives the pericope in parallel, following the transcriptions collated in Reuben Swanson's horizontal-line edition of Matthew and in Read-Heimerdinger and Rius-Camps' Bezae/Vaticanus synopsis, with intra-manuscript corrections set aside.

Verse 28

Sinaiticus (ℵ)	Vaticanus (B)	Bezae (D)
Τί δὲ ὑμῖν δοκεῖ; ἄνθρωπος εἶχεν τέκνα δύο. καὶ προσελθὼν τῷ πρώτῳ εἶπεν, Τέκνον, ὕπαγε σήμερον ἐργάζου ἐν τῷ ἀμπελῶνι.	Τί δὲ ὑμῖν δοκεῖ; ἄνθρωπος εἶχεν δύο τέκνα. καὶ προσελθὼν τῷ πρώτῳ εἶπεν, Τέκνον, ὕπαγε σήμερον ἐργάζου ἐν τῷ ἀμπελῶνί μου.	Τί δὲ ὑμῖν δοκεῖ; ἄνθρωπος εἶχεν τέκνα δύο. καὶ προσελθὼν τῷ πρώτῳ εἶπεν, Τέκνον, ὕπαγε σήμερον ἐργάζου εἰς τὸν ἀμπελῶνα.

Verses 29–30

Sinaiticus (ℵ)	Vaticanus (B)	Bezae (D)
(29) ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν, Οὐ θέλω, ὕστερον δὲ μεταμεληθεὶς ἀπῆλθεν. (30) προσελθὼν δὲ τῷ ἑτέρῳ εἶπεν ὡσαύτως· ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν, Ἐγώ, κύριε· καὶ οὐκ ἀπῆλθεν.	(29) ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν, Ἐγώ, κύριε· καὶ οὐκ ἀπῆλθεν. (30) προσελθὼν δὲ τῷ δευτέρῳ εἶπεν ὡσαύτως· ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν, Οὐ θέλω, ὕστερον μεταμεληθεὶς ἀπῆλθεν.	(29) ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν, Οὐ θέλω, ὕστερον δὲ μεταμεληθεὶς ἀπῆλθεν εἰς τὸν ἀμπελῶνα. (30) προσελθὼν δὲ τῷ ἑτέρῳ εἶπεν ὡσαύτως· ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν, Ἐγώ, κύριε, ὑπάγω· καὶ οὐκ ἀπῆλθεν.

Verse 31 (the crux)

Sinaiticus (ℵ)	Vaticanus (B)	Bezae (D)
τίς ἐκ τῶν δύο ἐποίησεν τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρός; λέγουσιν, Ὁ πρῶτος.	τίς ἐκ τῶν δύο ἐποίησεν τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρός; λέγουσιν, Ὁ ὕστερος.	τίς ἐκ τῶν δύο τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς ἐποίησεν; λέγουσιν, Ὁ ἔσχατος.
"Which of the two did the will of the father?" They say, "The first."	"Which of the two did the will of the father?" They say, "The latter."	"Which of the two did the will of the father?" They say, "The last."

Verse 32

Sinaiticus (ℵ)	Vaticanus (B)	Bezae (D)
… ὑμεῖς δὲ ἰδόντες οὐ μετεμελήθητε ὕστερον τοῦ πιστεῦσαι αὐτῷ. "… and you, having seen, did not later repent to believe him."	… ὑμεῖς δὲ ἰδόντες οὐδὲ μετεμελήθητε ὕστερον τοῦ πιστεῦσαι αὐτῷ. "… and you, having seen, did not even later repent to believe him."	… ὑμεῖς δὲ ἰδόντες μετεμελήθητε ὕστερον τοῦ πιστεῦσαι αὐτῷ. "… and you, having seen, later repented to believe him."

Table 2. Verse 32 is rarely discussed but is remarkable: Bezae omits the negative, so that the opponents are said to have repented and believed. Whether this is a scribal accident, a deliberate softening, or a further reflex of Bezae's distinctive handling of the pericope is disputed.

3. The Variant Units in Detail

Ten variation-units in five verses are worth setting out individually. They are numbered here for reference.

3.1 v. 28 — word order of τέκνα δύο

τέκνα δύο (א D, most) against δύο τέκνα (B). Exegetically inert, but useful as a control: it shows that B's divergence in this pericope is not confined to the substantive matter, and it is one of the small indicators that B's exemplar here was a genuinely distinct textual stream rather than a one-off correction.

3.2 v. 28 — ἀμπελῶνι / ἀμπελῶνι μου / εἰς τὸν ἀμπελῶνα

B adds the possessive μου ("my vineyard"); D substitutes the accusative of motion εἰς τὸν ἀμπελῶνα for the locative ἐν τῷ ἀμπελῶνι, producing the awkward "work into the vineyard." The KJV's "my vineyard" reflects the Textus Receptus following the possessive; every modern English version reflects the shorter reading. D's εἰς is characteristic of Bezae's free handling of prepositions and is one of many reasons its *wording* is not a serious candidate for the initial text even where its *sequence* may be.

3.3 vv. 29–30 — the order of the two responses

The substantive variant. Either the first son says Οὐ θέλω and the second Ἐγώ, κύριε (א D Byz), or the reverse (B). The Alands' published argument for the former is an intrinsic-probability one: since the father proceeds to the second son at all, the first must have refused. Set out plainly, this reasoning does not survive scrutiny — a father whose first son says "yes, sir" would have every reason to ask the second son as well, since the vineyard needs more than one worker and the request in v. 28 is not framed as a search for a single volunteer. The argument that carried the day at NA26 is the weakest link in the current consensus.

3.4 v. 30 — τῷ ἑτέρῳ against τῷ δευτέρῳ

א and D read τῷ ἑτέρῳ ("the other"); B reads τῷ δευτέρῳ ("the second"). This is not trivial: ἕτερος is Matthean and unemphatic, while δεύτερος sets up an ordinal series that the answer at v. 31 must then match. B's reading is internally consistent with its own answer; the question is whether that consistency is authorial or editorial.

3.5 v. 30 — D's ὑπάγω

D expands the second son's reply from Ἐγώ, κύριε to Ἐγώ, κύριε, ὑπάγω — "I, lord, I go." This sharpens the hypocrisy: the son does not merely assent, he announces departure and then does not depart. It is a small but telling piece of evidence that whoever produced the Bezaean form was reading the pericope as being about the *verbal claim* rather than about the work.

3.6 v. 31 — the answer: ὁ πρῶτος / ὁ ὕστερος / ὁ ἔσχατος / ὁ δεύτερος

This is the heart of the problem, and it repays close attention that it rarely receives. The witnesses that reverse the sons do **not agree with one another** about how to name the obedient son. Some read ὁ

ὕστερος (B), some ὁ ἔσχατος, some ὁ δεύτερος. Three different words for the same referent, distributed unpredictably across the supporting witnesses.

Why this matters enormously. A stable variant inherited from a common exemplar should be stable in its wording. Instability of exactly this kind is the classic signature of *multiple emergence* — a reading independently produced more than once by different scribes solving the same perceived problem in their own words. If the Vaticanus form arose because scribes independently reordered the sons to make the parable's chronology match its application, each such scribe would have had to invent his own term for "the second one," and that is precisely the pattern we observe. Culp presses this argument to the conclusion that the Vaticanus form should be rejected outright — and on this specific point the argument seems to me very strong.

The consequence, if accepted, is that the real contest is between ℵ and D, which share a narrative sequence and differ only in the answer. That is a much narrower question than the standard three-way presentation suggests, and it is a question about *one word*.

3.7 v. 31 — word order in the question

D transposes to τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς ἐποίησεν, fronting the object. Stylistic; no exegetical weight.

3.8 v. 31 — τοῦ θεοῦ

All three read εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ — "kingdom of God," not Matthew's customary "kingdom of heaven." The retention of the divine name here against Matthean habit is itself an argument for the antiquity of the whole unit, and it is stable across all three versions.

3.9 v. 32 — οὐ / οὐδὲ / omission

As Table 2 shows: ℵ reads οὐ μετεμελήθητε, B intensifies to οὐδὲ μετεμελήθητε ("did not even repent"), and D drops the negative altogether. D's reading reverses the sense of Jesus' charge. It is almost certainly secondary — the omission of a short negative is among the commonest of scribal accidents — but it is worth registering because it means Bezae's pericope, taken as a whole and as it stands, is not merely difficult but internally incoherent, and that is a substantial argument against adopting Bezae's wording even for those who favour its sequence.

3.10 v. 32 — Ἰωάννης / Ἰωάνης

Orthographic (single or double nu); B has the single-nu spelling throughout. Of no exegetical consequence but a standard indicator of B's scribal habits.

4. External Evidence

4.1 The witness groups

The attestation is set out below in the conventional sigla. Versional and patristic support is summarised rather than exhaustive; where the distribution of a versional family is disputed the entry is qualified.

Version	Greek majuscules	Minuscules	Versions	Fathers
Type I — Sinaiticus form (no → works; yes → idle; answer "the first")	ℵ C* L W Δ	f^{1} 33, the Byzantine majority	Vulgate; much of the Old Latin; Syriac Peshitta and Harclean; Bohairic (part)	Irenaeus (possibly), Jerome (in his received text), Chrysostom, most Byzantine commentators
Type II — Vaticanus form (yes → idle; no → works; answer "the latter")	B Θ	f^{13} 700 and scattered allies	Sahidic; some Bohairic; some Old Latin	Ephrem (in the Diatessaron commentary)
Type III — Bezae form (no → works; yes → idle; answer "the last")	D (singular among Greek majuscules)	— (no Greek minuscule support)	Several Old Latin witnesses; Sinaitic and Curetonian Syriac; some Armenian and Georgian	Hilary of Poitiers; Irenaeus (per Minns); possibly Jerome's "other manuscripts"

Table 3. External attestation. The single most important observation is the asymmetry: Type III has no Greek support outside Codex Bezae, but has substantial and geographically dispersed versional and patristic support. That combination — versionally old, Greek-poor — is a recurring signature of readings that were early and were subsequently corrected out of the Greek tradition.

4.2 What the external evidence does and does not establish

- **Type I is externally strongest.** It has the earliest surviving majuscule support in ℵ, the whole Byzantine tradition, the Vulgate, and the Peshitta. On any weight-of-witnesses account it wins.
- **Type II is externally narrow and internally unstable.** B is by common consent the best-transcribed of the three codices — it has markedly fewer singular readings than ℵ or D — which gives its testimony real weight. But its allies cannot agree on the wording of the crucial answer (§3.6), which is the signature of independent emergence rather than shared descent.
- **Type III is Greek-poor but old.** The versional distribution — Old Latin, Old Syriac, Armenian, Georgian — spans regions that did not share a Greek exemplar, which pushes the reading back well before the date of D itself (c. 400) and plausibly into the second century.

A methodological caution. Counting witnesses is not the same as weighing them, and both are downstream of the question of how those witnesses are genealogically related. That is precisely the problem the Coherence-Based Genealogical Method was designed to address, and §7 returns to it.

5. Internal Evidence

5.1 Transcriptional probability: which reading explains the others?

The governing question is which form, if original, best explains the rise of the other two.

- **If Type I is original:** Type II arises from scribes reordering the sons so that the disobedient son comes first, matching the application in v. 31b–32 where the chief priests (who come first in salvation history) are the disobedient party. Type III arises from — what, exactly? A scribe would have to have changed the answer from "the first" to "the last" while leaving the narrative untouched, producing nonsense. This is the weak point of the consensus: Type I explains Type II easily but Type III not at all.
- **If Type II is original:** Type I arises from reordering in the opposite direction, and Type III again is unexplained. Type II has the additional burden of its own internal instability.
- **If Type III is original:** both others follow naturally. Faced with opponents who give an obviously wrong answer, one class of scribe corrects the answer (→ Type I); another class, taking the answer as fixed, reorders the sons so that "the last" becomes the correct answer (→ Type II). This is the classic *lectio difficilior* argument, and on transcriptional grounds alone Type III is the strongest of the three. Westcott and Hort said as much explicitly, and then declined to print it on the ground that it was too difficult.

In plain terms: the hardest reading is usually the earliest one, because scribes fix problems rather than create them. Bezae's version is far and away the hardest. The reason nobody prints it is not that the evidence is against it but that editors have judged the resulting text to be nonsense — and that judgment, as §5.3 shows, is culturally loaded.

5.2 Intrinsic probability: what would Matthew have written?

Four lines of argument are in play.

5.2.1 The Aland argument (for Type I)

Kurt and Barbara Aland reasoned that because the father goes on to ask the second son, the first must have refused; on this basis they judged that only Type I could stand at the head of the developing sequence. This is the argument that produced the reversal at NA26 in 1979 and it has been repeated widely since. It is, as noted at §3.3, not a strong argument: nothing in the narrative implies that one worker suffices, and a father might reasonably ask both sons regardless of the first one's answer.

5.2.2 The salvation-history sequence argument (for Type II)

J. Duncan M. Derrett (1971), Paul Foster (2001), and Wesley Olmstead (2003) argued from Matthean structure that the disobedient son should come first, so that the parable's internal chronology matches its application: the chief priests and elders, who stand in continuity with Israel's leadership, correspond to the first son; the tax collectors and prostitutes, who come later, to the second. Olmstead added that this maximises the synergy of the three-parable sequence in 21:28–22:14, since all three would then announce the replacement of the unfaithful. Foster proposed that Matthew himself altered an earlier form of the parable to serve this scheme, with the pre-Matthean form surviving in ℵ and the Byzantine tradition.

Assessment. The argument is elegant but it proves too much. If Type II fits Matthew's scheme so neatly, that neatness is itself suspicious — exactly what a scribe attuned to the same scheme would produce. Daniel Wallace makes this point: the reading "certainly doubtful because of how neatly it fits."

5.2.3 The narrative-structure argument (for Type I)

Mary Ann Tolbert (1979) analysed the parable as belonging to a "parallel plot" type and argued on structural grounds — an alternating pattern of narrated and direct discourse — that v. 29 is the structural centre and the turning point, which requires that the son who repents be the first. Daniel Patte (1987) followed her. The argument is real but underdetermines the case: as Culp observes, Tolbert treats only the parable proper (vv. 28–30) and excludes the frame, and her analysis therefore supports Type I and Type III equally, since those two share the narrative order.

5.2.4 The Matthean-themes argument (for Type III)

Matthew's Gospel is preoccupied with the gap between profession and practice: "not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord" (7:21); "whoever does the will of my Father" (12:50); "they say and do not do" (23:3); and the whole of the woes in ch. 23. If Matthew wished to depict opponents so committed to the primacy of verbal assent that they would defend it even when trapped, Type III gives him exactly that — opponents who answer that the son who *said yes* did the father's will, thereby convicting themselves twice over. On this reading Jesus' reply in v. 31b does not accept their answer at all; it is the *refutation* of it, and the ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν introduces a correction rather than a confirmation.

5.3 The honour–shame reading and the limits of "nonsensical"

Editors from Westcott and Hort onward have dismissed Type III as too difficult, meaning: no plausible hearer would give that answer. Three lines of evidence complicate that judgment.

- **Jerome** suggested that Jesus' interlocutors answered wrongly on purpose, to blunt the force of his point. Julius Wellhausen (1904) endorsed this and argued that Type III is the initial form precisely because the answer is an evasion.
- **J. Alexander Findlay (1950)** reported that when a missionary told this parable to a group of Palestinian villagers, they answered unanimously that the son who said "yes" had honoured his father more — reasoning that a day's labour is a small thing beside publicly refusing one's father to his face. Whatever the evidentiary weight of one anecdote, it establishes that the answer is not self-evidently absurd in an honour-based culture.
- **Bernard Brandon Scott (1989)** developed the point systematically: the request occurs in public and the work in private, so one son publicly honoured and privately shamed his father while the other did the reverse. Matthew clearly favours the second; a first-century Mediterranean audience might reasonably not. Scott concluded that the parable "provokes" a response without compelling one, and that the manuscript tradition has preserved both possible answers.

The methodological point. A reading judged "impossible" on the basis of what a modern Western editor finds sensible is not thereby judged on the evidence. This is not a licence to prefer difficulty for its own sake, but it is a reason to reopen a case that was closed on grounds that are, at bottom, cultural rather than text-critical.

5.4 Two attempts to dissolve the problem

J. Ramsey Michaels ("The Parable of the Regretful Son," *Harvard Theological Review* 61 [1968]: 15–26) proposed that ἀπῆλθεν describes movement *away from* the vineyard rather than toward it, and that μεταμέλομαι means futile regret rather than repentance. On that construal the first son refuses and departs in regret, the second accepts and stays at work, and the Bezaean answer becomes correct. The reading is ingenious and rescues Type III entirely, but it requires an unparalleled sense for two common words and a combination of variants attested in no single manuscript.

Wendell Langley ("The Parable of the Two Sons (Matthew 21:28–32) Against Its Semitic and Rabbinic Backdrop," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 58 [1996]: 228–243) argued that the parable functions as a *qal wa-ḥomer* argument: each son is partly obedient and partly disobedient, no fully obedient option is offered, and therefore whichever son the opponents name, Jesus can reply that they themselves — who neither said yes nor did the work — are worse. On Langley's account the textual confusion arises because both answers are genuinely available, and the variant does not affect the parable's point at all.

Assessment. Langley's reading is the most economical explanation on offer for *why* the tradition fragmented, and it deserves more attention than it has had. It does not, however, tell us what Matthew wrote.

6. Five Centuries of Editorial Reversal

The printed Greek New Testament has, at one time or another, printed all three versions as its text. The following table traces the sequence, which is unmatched by any other variation-unit of comparable exegetical weight.

Edition	Date	Version printed	Basis of the decision
Complutensian Polyglot (Ximénez de Cisneros)	1514/1522	Type I	Byzantine manuscripts available in Spain, plus the Vulgate
Erasmus, Novum Instrumentum Omne	1516	Type I	Byzantine manuscripts; Vulgate agreement
Stephanus (Estienne)	1550	Type I	Follows Erasmus; 3rd ed. apparatus records Bezae's divergence
Elzevir ("Textus Receptus")	1633	Type I	Follows Erasmus/Stephanus
Lachmann, Novum Testamentum Graece	1831	**Type III**	First edition to break with the TR; Old Latin and Western support plus lectio difficilior
Tregelles	1857–72	**Type III**	Extensive patristic notes; observes that Jerome abandoned his best manuscripts here
Tischendorf, Editio Octava Critica Maior	1869–72	Type I	Heavy reliance on his own discovery, Codex Sinaiticus
Westcott–Hort, The New Testament in the Original Greek	1881	**Type II**	The "Neutral Text" theory: B is of far higher authority. They concede Type III has the best transcriptional claim but dismiss it as too difficult
Nestle (1st ed.) through NA25	1898–1963	**Type II**	Majority agreement of Tischendorf and Westcott–Hort, resolved toward WH
NA26 / UBS3	1979	Type I	Reversal. Local-genealogical method; the Alands' intrinsic argument that the first son must have refused
NA27, NA28 / UBS4, UBS5	1993–2012	Type I	Unchanged
SBLGNT (Holmes)	2010	Type I	Independent editorial judgment, same result
THGNT (Jongkind & Williams)	2017	Type I	Documentary approach; same result

Table 4. The printed tradition. Three centuries of Type I (via the Textus Receptus), then Type III for half a century (Lachmann, Tregelles), then Type II for a century (Westcott–Hort through NA25), then Type I again from 1979 to the present. No English translation in general use has ever been made from Type II or Type III.

The point to draw from this. It is easy to read the current apparatus as though the question were settled and the alternatives were curiosities. The publication history says otherwise: the reading printed in NA28 is the reading of the Textus Receptus, displaced for a century by the most influential critical edition ever produced, and restored on the strength of an argument about paternal behaviour that would not survive a seminar.

7. The Patristic Evidence

Patristic citations are textual witnesses in their own right, and for this pericope they are unusually informative, because a father's interpretation frequently reveals which version he had in front of him even when he does not quote the answer.

7.1 Irenaeus (c. 130–202)

Irenaeus treats the Two Sons in *Adversus Haereses* 4.36 as one member of a sequence of parables — with the Tenants, the Wedding Banquet, the Labourers in the Vineyard, the Prodigal Son, the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, the Barren Fig Tree, and the Weeds — all read to a single anti-Marcionite end: the movement from the Mosaic covenant to the new, under one and the same God.

He is sometimes cited (e.g. in UBS3) as a witness to Type I. Denis Minns ("The Parable of the Two Sons (Matt. 21:28–32) in Irenaeus and Codex Bezae," in Parvis and Foster, eds., *Irenaeus: Life, Scripture, Legacy*, Fortress, 2012, 55–63) makes a strong case that Irenaeus in fact knew the Bezaean form. Irenaeus's sympathies lie with the *second* son: he says the first son, who refused and then worked, repented too late, while the second desired to do the work and failed through weakness of will — language reminiscent of Romans 7 and Matt 26:41. That distribution of sympathy makes little sense unless Irenaeus's text approved the second son, which is Bezae's answer.

If Minns is right, Type III is attested around 180 CE, more than two centuries before Codex Bezae was copied. That single datum does more to make the Bezaean sequence viable than all the internal arguments combined. It should be said clearly that Minns's case is inferential — Irenaeus does not quote v. 31 — and that Irenaeus survives here mainly in Latin translation.

7.2 Origen (c. 185–253)

In *Commentary on Matthew* 17.4–5 Origen reads the parable allegorically: the son who said yes and did nothing represents Israel's faithlessness toward God, and the son who said no and then worked represents the nations who would come to believe. This is the earliest surviving statement of the Jew/Gentile allegory that would dominate for the next fifteen centuries. Origen's text appears to be of the Type I or Type III sequence; his interpretation does not require the answer to be specified.

7.3 Jerome (c. 342–420)

Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew* bk. III, develops Origen's allegory in the opposite direction: the first son represents the Gentiles, who reject the natural law and afterwards follow Christ; the second represents the Jews, who received the Law at Sinai and were disobedient. This is the form the allegory took in the Latin West.

Jerome is doubly valuable here. First, he preserves the tradition that the opponents answered wrongly on purpose. Second — and this is a remark of Tregelles worth quoting for its evidential value — Tregelles observed that Jerome, who normally followed his best manuscripts, abandoned them at this point in favour of the reading he regarded as true: *Hieronymus ipse in versione codices secutus est qui legunt ὕστερος, etsi hic ad alios quos veros vocat confugit.* If Tregelles read Jerome correctly, then the manuscripts Jerome considered best in the late fourth century read ὕστερος — which means Type II or Type III — and he departed from them for the reading now printed in NA28.

7.4 Hilary of Poitiers (c. 310–367)

Hilary's *Commentary on Matthew* plainly reflects the Bezaean form, and his struggle with it is the best surviving evidence of how an ancient reader handled the difficulty. He attempts the Israel/Gentiles allegory and then confronts the answer directly, reasoning that it is better to break a promise made than to fulfil an obligation without having promised — an argument that presupposes an audience for whom the verbal undertaking has independent moral weight. Hilary also recognises the immediate literary sense, identifying the two sons with the Pharisees and with the crowd of tax collectors and sinners.

Hilary is decisive for one thing at least: the Bezaean form was current in the Latin West in the mid-fourth century, half a century before Codex Bezae, and a serious commentator took it seriously rather than emending it away.

7.5 Ephrem the Syrian (306–373)

Ephrem's *Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron* — surviving in Syriac (Chester Beatty Syriac MS 709, c. 500) and in Armenian — interprets the pericope strictly from its literary context in Matthew 21, without the Jew/Gentile allegory that dominates the Latin and Alexandrian traditions. His text appears to be of the Vaticanus type. Ephrem is thus a double witness: to Type II in fourth-century Syria, and to the existence of a non-allegorical patristic reading that the later tradition did not follow.

7.6 What the fathers establish

Father	Date	Version implied	Interpretation
Irenaeus	c. 180	Type III (per Minns); Type I or III possible	Anti-Marcionite: one God across both covenants; sympathy with the second son
Origen	c. 240	Type I or III sequence	Jew/Gentile allegory (first attestation)
Hilary of Poitiers	c. 355	**Type III**	Struggles with the answer; argues for the weight of the promise; also reads the immediate sense
Ephrem	c. 365	**Type II**	Strictly contextual; no Jew/Gentile allegory
Jerome	c. 398	Received Type I; knew ὕστερος in his best MSS	Gentiles/Jews allegory; opponents answered wrongly on purpose

Table 5. Patristic distribution. All three versions are attested in the fourth century across three linguistic traditions (Latin, Greek, Syriac), and at least two of them very probably in the second. The fragmentation of this pericope is therefore early — earlier than any surviving Greek manuscript of it.

8. The Coherence-Based Genealogical Method and This Variant

8.1 What the method does

The Coherence-Based Genealogical Method (CBGM), developed by Gerd Mink at the Institut für neutestamentliche Textforschung in Münster, replaces the older practice of sorting manuscripts into text-types with a computed analysis of the relationships among *texts* (not physical manuscripts) across the whole tradition. It has two stages. **Pregenealogical coherence** measures raw statistical agreement between witnesses — how often two texts agree overall, and whether the witnesses supporting a given reading are ones that generally agree elsewhere. **Genealogical coherence** adds directionality, using the editors' local decisions about which reading gave rise to which to build a hypothesised flow of textual influence.

In plain terms: the older method asked "which manuscripts are good?" The CBGM asks "do the witnesses that support this reading generally belong together?" A reading supported by witnesses that otherwise have nothing to do with each other is suspicious: it suggests the reading was invented more than once rather than inherited.

Two limits should be stated. The CBGM is not a machine for producing answers; its genealogical stage takes the editors' own judgments as input, so it can amplify a decision as easily as test it. And the ECM has not yet reached Matthew, so full CBGM data for this pericope are not available in published form. Pregenealogical coherence, however, can be computed from existing collations, and it is the more useful stage here.

8.2 What coherence shows for the three versions

- **Type I (Sinaiticus):** strong pregenealogical coherence. Its supporting witnesses are ones that agree with each other extensively elsewhere — the Byzantine tradition is by nature highly coherent, and ℵ C L W Δ f^1 33 form a plausible descent group. This is a reading that behaves like an inherited one.
- **Type II (Vaticanus):** weak pregenealogical coherence, and the instability of the answer-word (ὕστερος / δεύτερος / ἔσχατος) is the diagnostic. Culp additionally examines and rejects the suggestion that B and Codex Koridethi (Θ) represent two distinct traditions supporting the same sequence, since both show the same susceptibility and the same variability. His conclusion is that Type II is a case of multiple emergence and should be rejected outright.
- **Type III (Bezae):** inconclusive, because coherence cannot be computed for a reading with no Greek allies. D is a singular Greek witness here. The versional and patristic evidence is what carries the reading, and that evidence is precisely the kind the CBGM is least equipped to handle, since versions cannot be collated at the level of Greek variation-units.

The honest summary. Coherence analysis strengthens the case against Type II, confirms that Type I behaves as an inherited reading, and is simply silent on Type III. It does not settle the question; it narrows it. That is a real gain, and it is also a good illustration of what the CBGM can and cannot do.

9. Modern Scholarship: A Century of Divided Opinion

Scholar	Date	Favours	Argument
Julius Wellhausen	1904	III	The answer must originally have been "the latter"; scribes removed the apparent contradiction. Follows Jerome on deliberate misanswering
W. M. MacGregor	1927	(structural)	Observes the gospel-parable pattern in which the ostensibly respectable character gives way to the disreputable protagonist
J. Alexander Findlay	1950	III	Palestinian villagers unanimously judged the "yes"-son to have honoured his father more; the answer is not absurd in an honour culture
J. Ramsey Michaels	1968	III (reconstructed)	Redefines ἀπῆλθεν and μεταμέλομαι so the Bezaean answer is correct; requires a combination attested in no manuscript
J. Duncan M. Derrett	1971	II	Psychological and sociological plausibility of elder/younger son behaviour; sequence matches the application
Kurt & Barbara Aland	1979–89	I	Local-genealogical method; only Type I can head the developing sequence, since the father would not approach the second son otherwise
Mary Ann Tolbert	1979	I	Parallel-plot structure makes v. 29 the pivot, requiring the repenting son to be first
Bruce Metzger / UBS committee	1975–94	I	External weight plus the Aland intrinsic argument
Daniel Patte	1987	I / II	Type I is the pre-Matthean parable; Matthew composed with Type II to fit his discursive organisation
B. B. Scott	1989	(indeterminate)	Both answers are culturally available; the tradition preserved both. The parable provokes rather than compels
Jan Lambrecht	1992	II	External evidence for the "yes"-first witnesses is somewhat better; but thinks little turns on it
Wendell Langley	1996	(indeterminate)	Qal wa-ḥomer: whichever son is named, Jesus' charge stands. Variants arose because both answers are viable
Paul Foster	2001	II (Matthean) / I (pre-Matthean)	Matthew altered the parable to build the triadic sequence 21:28–22:14
Wesley Olmstead	2003	II	Maximises the synergy of the three-parable trilogy, all announcing replacement of the unfaithful
Daniel Wallace	2004	I	Type II fits too neatly to be original; Type III flattens the mystery and makes the opponents blithering idiots
Klyne Snodgrass	2008/2018	I	Follows the critical consensus; treats the variant as settled
James Barker	2018	(pedagogical)	Uses the variant as a teaching case for textual criticism
Tyler Culp	2025	**III (sequence)**	Rejects II on coherence grounds; argues III is the harder reading, versionally old, and coheres with Matthew's depiction of the opponents and of hypocrisy

Table 6. Positions since 1904. Note that the divide does not track confessional or methodological lines: Wellhausen and Culp reach the same conclusion from opposite ends of a century, and Wallace and Culp read the same evidence to opposite effect.

10. The Theological Stakes: Allegory and Anti-Judaism

10.1 The allegorical chain

The interpretive history of this parable runs on a single track from Origen to the Reformation. Origen (c. 240) identifies the disobedient son with Israel's faithlessness and the obedient son with the believing nations. Jerome (c. 398) fixes the identification in the Latin West. Rabanus Maurus (780–856) transmits it, reading the non-working son as the Jews who fail to grasp "the way of Justice, that being Christ." Thomas Aquinas's Catena Aurea gathers Origen, Jerome, Rabanus, and Pseudo-Chrysostom and thereby cements the reading into the Western commentary tradition. Luther states it without qualification. Only Calvin breaks the chain, restricting the two sons to the Jewish opponents on one side and the tax collectors and prostitutes on the other, and reading the parable as an unmasking of hypocrites rather than a rejection of a people.

The textual dimension of this. The Jew/Gentile allegory requires the disobedient son to come first, so that the covenant-people correspond to the elder and the nations to the later. Type II supplies that order directly. Type I supplies it only by inverting the narrative order against the sequence of the story. This is the mechanism that generated the variant in the first place — and it means that the Vaticanus reading and the supersessionist allegory are, historically, two aspects of one phenomenon.

10.2 Matthew's own frame

Whether the allegory is warranted turns on how far the parable's reference extends. Matthew's frame is explicit and narrow: the addressees are the chief priests and elders (21:23, 31) and the chief priests and Pharisees (21:45), and 21:45 states that these opponents understood the parables to be about *them*. The contrast drawn in 21:31–32 is between two **Jewish** groups — the leadership on one side, and Jewish tax collectors and prostitutes on the other. Gentiles are not in view. The extension of the parable to Jews-versus-Gentiles is an interpretive move made against the frame, and it is anachronistic for a first-century audience.

Culp's dissertation, written under Amy-Jill Levine, argues the further point that the three versions are not equally exposed to the supersessionist reading. Type II is the most exposed, because its sequence invites the salvation-history mapping. Type I is partially exposed. Type III is, paradoxically, the *least* exposed, because in it the interpretive weight falls on the *answer* rather than on the identification of the sons: the reader's attention is drawn to what the opponents *say*, which is a critique of a specific group's hypocrisy, rather than to whom the sons *represent*, which is what generates the ethnic allegory. Type III is harsher toward the opponents and gentler toward everyone else.

A caution about this line of argument. Assessing a variant partly by its later interpretive consequences is methodologically delicate. The initial text is what Matthew wrote, not what would have been least misused. The argument is legitimate only in the indirect form Culp gives it — that Matthew's demonstrable attitude toward Jewish disciples and the Jewish populace is evidence about what he was likely to have composed — and it should not be pressed further than that.

11. The English Versions

Every English translation in general use renders Type I. The versions differ only in whether they tell the reader that anything is at issue.

Version	v. 31 answer	Footnote on the variant?	Note
KJV (1611)	"The first."	No	Textus Receptus; also reads "my vineyard" at v. 28
LSB (2021–23)	"The first."	No	NA27/28 base
NIV (2011)	"The first."	No	—
ESV (2016)	"The first."	Brief textual note in some editions	—
CSB (2017)	"The first."	No	—
NRSVue (2021)	"The first."	Yes — notes that other ancient authorities reverse the order of the sons	The fullest disclosure among the standard versions
NET (2nd ed.)	"The first."	Yes — extended translators' note setting out all three families	The only English Bible that explains the problem

Table 7. English disclosure. A reader of the LSB, NIV, CSB, or KJV has no way of knowing that Codex Vaticanus tells this story the other way round, or that Codex Bezae has the opponents name the son who did nothing.

One translational point independent of the variant. At v. 31, προάγουσιν ὑμᾶς εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ is rendered "are entering the kingdom of God before you" (LSB), "are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you" (NIV, CSB, ESV). προάγω means to go before or lead the way, and the temporal-priority rendering is the natural one; some interpreters have pressed it toward exclusion ("instead of you"), which the verb does not require and which the parable's own logic — the first son does eventually go — arguably tells against. Note also v. 29's μεταμεληθείς, which is μεταμέλομαι (regret, change of feeling) and not μετανοέω (repent, change of mind) — a distinction the LSB's "regretted" preserves and the NIV's "changed his mind" partly obscures, and one on which Michaels's whole reconstruction depends.

12. Assessment

12.1 What can be established

- All three versions existed by the fourth century, attested across Latin, Greek, and Syriac commentators. Two of the three were very probably in circulation in the second.
- Type I has the strongest external attestation and the strongest pregenealogical coherence. It is rightly the printed text.
- Type II shows the diagnostic signature of multiple emergence: its supporting witnesses cannot agree on the wording of the very phrase that constitutes the variant (ὕστερος / δεύτερος / ἔσχατος). This is the most secure negative conclusion available on this pericope, and it substantially narrows the field.
- Type III has the strongest claim on transcriptional grounds and real versional and patristic support, but no Greek ally, and its own wording at v. 32 (the omitted negative) is incoherent.
- The argument that carried the 1979 reversal — that the father would not have approached the second son had the first agreed — does not withstand examination and should not continue to be repeated as though it were decisive.

12.2 What cannot be established

Whether Matthew wrote ὁ πρῶτος or ὁ ἔσχατος at v. 31 cannot, on present evidence, be determined. The external evidence favours the former decisively; the internal evidence favours the latter substantially; and the two do not resolve against each other. A reasoned-eclectic method will normally break such a tie toward the external evidence, which is what NA28 does, and that is a defensible decision. It is not a demonstration.

12.3 A proposal about how this should be reported

Three practical recommendations follow.

- **The apparatus should be read as open.** NA28's printed text at 21:29–31 rests on a balance of judgments, not on a settled result, and commentary that treats it as settled is overstating the state of the question.
- **English versions should footnote it.** This is a variant that changes what a parable concludes. The NRSVue and NET practice is right and the others' silence is not defensible on any principle that would also justify their existing footnotes elsewhere.
- **The Matthew volume of the ECM is the thing to wait for.** Full genealogical coherence data for Matthew will not settle the ℵ-versus-D question — D is singular in Greek — but it should settle the status of Type II definitively, and it will put the reasoning at Matt 21:29 on a footing that the older text-type language cannot provide.

13. Conclusion

Matthew 21:28–32 is a small pericope carrying an unusual load. It is one of the very few places in the New Testament where the manuscript tradition transmits not a difference of wording but a difference of verdict; it is the only variation-unit of comparable weight for which the printed Greek New Testament has, over five centuries, adopted every available option in turn; and it is a case in which the interpretive history and the textual history are entangled, since the allegorical reading that dominated from Origen to Luther supplies exactly the motive a scribe would need to produce the Vaticanus form.

The most defensible position is this. Type II should be set aside — not because Vaticanus is a poor manuscript, which it emphatically is not, but because the pattern of variation among its allies betrays independent invention. That leaves Sinaiticus and Bezae, which agree entirely on the story and differ on one word: whether the opponents named the son who worked or the son who talked. Sinaiticus's answer has overwhelming external support and gives a clean, coherent parable. Bezae's answer is far harder, is attested early and widely in the versions, may be known to Irenaeus, was taken seriously by Hilary, and turns the pericope into something more characteristically Matthean than the received text: a trap in which the opponents, invited to judge, convict themselves by preferring the word to the deed.

The received text is probably right. But the reasons usually given for it are not the reasons that make it right, and the alternative is not the absurdity that a century of editors has assumed. That is worth saying plainly, because the confidence with which this text is printed and translated is not proportionate to the confidence the evidence supports.

Appendix A: The Variation Units at a Glance

Unit	Verse	א	B	D
1	28	τέκνα δύο	δύο τέκνα	τέκνα δύο
2	28	ἐν τῷ ἀμπελῶνι	ἐν τῷ ἀμπελῶνι μου	εἰς τὸν ἀμπελῶνα
3	29	Οὐ θέλω … ἀπῆλθεν	Ἐγώ, κύριε … οὐκ ἀπῆλθεν	Οὐ θέλω … ἀπῆλθεν εἰς τὸν ἀμπελῶνα
4	30	τῷ ἑτέρῳ	τῷ δευτέρῳ	τῷ ἑτέρῳ
5	30	Ἐγώ, κύριε	Οὐ θέλω … ἀπῆλθεν	Ἐγώ, κύριε, ὑπάγω
6	**31**	**Ὁ πρῶτος**	**Ὁ ὕστερος**	**Ὁ ἔσχατος**
7	31	ἐποίησεν τὸ θέλημα	ἐποίησεν τὸ θέλημα	τὸ θέλημα … ἐποίησεν
8	32	οὐ μετεμελήθητε	οὐδὲ μετεμελήθητε	μετεμελήθητε (no negative)
9	32	Ἰωάννης	Ἰωάνης	Ἰωάννης (transposed)

Table 8. Unit 6 is the variant; the rest are the texture around it. Note that units 1, 4, and 7 show א and D agreeing against B, which is one more indication that the real contest is א versus D on unit 6 alone.

Appendix B: Digital Facsimiles of the Three Codices

All three principal witnesses are available in high-resolution facsimile and can be checked directly at this pericope.

Codex Sinaiticus (01, ℵ), 4th c. Full digital edition with transcription: codexsinaiticus.org

Codex Vaticanus (03, B), 4th c. Vatican Digital Library, Vat.gr.1209: digi.vatlib.it

Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis (05, D), c. 400. Cambridge University Digital Library, MS Nn.2.41: cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk

Erasmus, Novum Instrumentum Omne, 3rd ed. Cambridge Digital Library: cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk

New Testament Virtual Manuscript Room (INTF Münster), for transcriptions, images, and CBGM tools: ntvmr.uni-muenster.de

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