

THE KINGDOM POSTPONED

Upon the final rejection of the kingdom offer when Israel's leadership commits the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, Jesus withdraws His offer and postpones the kingdom to a future day. No such postponement had ever been expressed in clear terms prior to Matthew 12, though details such as the depictions of a suffering Messiah and a conquering Messiah could be clues that the Old Testament prophets only see the hills while a potential valley between the two remains unseen.¹ The grammatical-historical reading of the parables in Matthew 13 keeps in mind that God has obligated Himself to the promise of a future kingdom, so the consistent dispensationalist brings out of the treasure both old and new and sees these parables as descriptive of the kingdom postponement. Michael Vlach gives an overview of the issues:

In the aftermath of rebuking Israel's religious leaders for their unbelief, Jesus presented eight parables in Matthew 13 regarding the kingdom of heaven. Interpreters have differed greatly in their understandings of these kingdom parables. Some believe Jesus introduces a transformed and more spiritualized view of the kingdom than what the OT prophets predicted. Some hold Jesus is introducing a "mystery form" of the kingdom, which is Christendom or the believing church. Still others hold that Jesus is offering new truths about the kingdom while still maintaining the expectation of the earthly kingdom foretold by the OT prophets. This latter view is preferred. The kingdom Jesus proclaims in Matthew 13 is the same kingdom predicted by the OT prophets, but Jesus now offers new truths about it.²

Granted, there are variations within dispensationalist interpretations of these parables and there is room for internal dispute, but the views to be rejected are those that turn the postponement parables into inauguration parables that fundamentally redefine the terms of the Messianic Kingdom. Discussion on two points of acceptable variation ensues below, but first is due an

¹ Indeed, the false theory that a suffering Messiah ben Joseph is distinct from the victorious Messiah ben David is a demonstration of an attempt to reconcile the hills without proper New Testament revelation of the valleys.

² Michael Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever*, 325.

exposition of the postponement parables of Matt 13 in which Christ first explains the postponement of the kingdom.

The Postponement Parables of Matt 13

As with any text, understanding the context is key to understanding the postponement parables in Matthew 13. The entire book of Matthew can be read as a chiasm with the parables of chapter 13 at the center. Derickson analyzes the middle of the book:

Matthew 11–12 is parallel to chapters 14–17. These sections seem to have the most points of contact. John the Baptist was imprisoned (chap. 11) and executed (chap. 14). The conflicts Jesus faced with the Jews in the grain field and synagogue (12:1–14) are parallel to the Jews’ objections to Jesus’ disciples transgressing Jewish traditions (15:1–20). In both sections Jesus healed many people (12:15–32 and 15:29–31), and in both sections the Pharisees/rulers asked for a sign, and each time Jesus mentioned only the sign of Jonah (12:38–42 and 16:1–4). Most significantly the first section ends with Jesus rejecting His family, representative of the nation (12:46–49), and the second section begins with Jesus’ hometown rejecting Him (13:53–58). At the center of the parallel sections are the parables of the kingdom (chap. 13), which may themselves be arranged as a chiasm.³

Jesus tells His disciples that He spoke in parables because it is given to His disciples γινῶναι τὰ μυστήρια τῆς βασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν “to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 13:11). In short, these mysteries do no *redefine* any previous revelation; instead, they reveal information concerning a previously unrevealed interim period that takes place before the establishment of the Messianic Kingdom. To support this claim, a study of the word, *mystery*, is in order.

The purpose of the parables is to “utter things kept secret from the foundation of the world” (Matt 13:35). The English word, *mystery*, comes from the Greek cognate, μυστήριον, meaning something that was previously undisclosed, but now revealed. An example of a biblical

³ Gary W. Derickson, “Matthew’s Chiasmic Structure and Its Dispensational Implications,” 428.

mystery, which doesn't happen to be discussed in Matt 13, but is beneficial for word study nonetheless, is the Church. Paul uses the word, *mystery*, to describe this previously unknown entity:

But we speak the *wisdom* of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (1 Cor 2:7)

by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: (Eph 3:3–5)

and to make all see what *is* the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; (Eph 3:9)

Paul also uses the cognate verb, *μυέω*, which means “to initiate into the mysteries, to instruct,”⁴ that is, to bring into knowledge of that which was previously unknown. The NKJV⁵ properly translates this word as “learned” in its only NT occurrence: “I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned [*μεμύημαι*] both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need” (Phil 4:12). Jesus Himself describes the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven in the same way when He tells His disciples, “many prophets and righteous *men* desired to see what you see, and did not see *it*, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear *it*” (Matt 13:17).

English words that have roots similar to *μυστήριον* and *μυέω* include *mystic*, *mysticism*, *mysterious*, *mystical*, and *mystify*, but these all have a different connotation. These words seem to have a connotation of magic or deception, but these connotations must be shaken from the

⁴ Strong's Concordance, *μυέω*.

⁵ As well as the NIV, NLT, ESV, BLB, NASB, KJV, CSB, HCSB, ISV, NET, NAS1977, and ASV.

contemporary English mind and replaced with the first century Jewish intentions when reading about a “mystery” in the New Testament. As Robert Thomas has said, “Neither the culture of the interpreter nor the culture of the person to whom the interpreter communicates has anything in the world to do with the meaning of the biblical text. The meaning of the biblical text is fixed and unchanging.”⁶ When Jesus talks about “the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven,” a careless English reader might miss that a mystery is simply that which was previously unknown and instead load the word, *mysterries*, with connotations of mysticism, which inconveniently has pervaded Church history for centuries. The result of this transfer of meaning is ultimately a shift from “previously unknown information about the kingdom,” namely that there is an interim period between the service of the suffering Messiah and His glorious conquering, to “mysterious information about the kingdom being a spiritual reality now.” Such a reading undermines the previous revelation.

Another grammatical error to which English-speakers are susceptible is a misattribution of an attributive noun. The English attributive noun occurs where other languages might have attributive genitives or even adjectives. In English, “a game of baseball” is called, “a baseball game,” and “a soup of chicken” is called, “chicken soup.” Maintaining the proper order is important when forming English attributive nouns, lest “a game of baseball” become “a game baseball,” which would be “a baseball of a game,” perhaps one of the balls that the batter drove out of the park. Applying this concept to the term, “the mysteries of the kingdom,” the proper Anglicism would be “kingdom mysteries,” not “mystery kingdom.”⁷ The former, “kingdom

⁶ Robert Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 145.

⁷ Perhaps the reduction of the plural in “mysterries of the kingdom” to the singular in “mystery kingdom” is related to a phenomenon that is explored in the research of Buck-Gengler et al. “In an experiment eliciting noun-noun compounds, participants were more likely to produce plural nouns in the first position (e.g., *mice trap*) when presented with an irregular plural in the stimulus (e.g., *a trap for catching mice* is a _____) than when presented

mysteries” would mean “mysteries about the kingdom” while the term “mystery kingdom” would imply “a kingdom that is a mystery.”

George Eldon Ladd reads the parables with the understanding that “the mysteries of the kingdom” are not “kingdom mysteries,” but “a mystery kingdom” when he writes:

Each of the parables in Matthew 13 illustrates this mystery of the Kingdom, that the Kingdom of God which is yet to come in power and great glory is actually present among men in advance in an unexpected form to bring to men in the present evil Age the blessings of the Age to Come.⁸

In Ladd’s already/not yet framework, the kingdom itself is the mystery, present in a mysterious, spiritual form. Ladd supposes that “The parables of the Kingdom make it clear that in some sense, the Kingdom is present and at work in the world. The Kingdom of God *is* like a tiny seed which becomes a great tree; it *is* like leaven which will one day have permeated the entire bowl of dough (Luke 13:18–21).”⁹ This approach to the parables abandons the intended grammatical-historical interpretation and misses clear Jewish references in order to justify fundamental changes to the nature of the Messianic kingdom.

Michael Vlach summarizes a plain interpretation of postponement parables in his introduction to his chapter on the mysteries of the kingdom in Matthew 13:

The purpose of Matthew 13 is to offer new truths about the kingdom program in light of Israel’s rejection of Jesus. The kingdom will not be established with Jesus’ first coming. Instead, an inter-advent age will occur where the kingdom program proceeds as the message of the kingdom and the growth of kingdom citizens occurs alongside the work of the devil. But when Jesus returns a second time in judgment, He will separate the sons of the kingdom from the sons of the evil one and then the sons of the kingdom will partake in Jesus’ kingdom. With

with stimuli containing regular plurals (e.g., *a trap for catching rats is a _____*). When they did produce a normatively correct singular (e.g., *mouse trap*) in response to a stimulus with an irregular plural, response time was longer than it was for producing a singular response to stimuli containing singulars or regular plurals. This finding suggests a priming-based processing problem in producing the singulars of irregular plurals in this paradigm.” Carolyn J. Buck-Gengler, Lise Menn, Alice F. Healy, “Mice Trap: A New Explanation for Irregular Plurals in Noun-Noun Compounds,” 140.

⁸ George Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, 55.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

Matthew 13 we see clearly for the first time that the kingdom program involves two comings of Jesus and what this means for the period between these two comings.¹⁰

The context and the meaning of “mysteries of the kingdom” are key to properly interpreting the parables of Matt 13, so with these details in mind, exposition may ensue.

Parable of the Sower

Then He spoke many things to them in parables, saying: “Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some *seed* fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”

... “Therefore hear the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand *it*, then the wicked *one* comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside. But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles. Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful. But he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands *it*, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.” (Matt 13:3–9, 18–23)

The first parable is unique. It does not begin, as the following parables do, with likening the kingdom to something else, as it lacks the introduction Ὁμοιώθη ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν... “The kingdom of heaven bears similarity to...” or the synonymous Ὁμοία ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν “Similar is the kingdom of heaven...” In Mark’s account, Jesus begins His explanation of the parable with, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the

¹⁰ Michael Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever*, 325. Original paragraph is in italics.

parables?” (Mark 4:13). “Actually, this parable serves as an introduction to the remainder of the parables and does not really give any new revelation of the kingdom of heaven.”¹¹

The Parable of the Sower is public. “Many of the people congregating on the shore were undeniably there only to witness His miraculous power. Regardless of individual motives, to the compassionate eyes and heart of the One who came to seek and to save the lost, they were like sheep without a shepherd, weary and scattered.”¹² Jesus tells His disciples that He gives parables to them while withholding them from others, “Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given” (Matt 13:11); indeed, the seed itself that is being thrown in the parable is ὁ λόγος “the word of the kingdom” (Matt 13:19 NKJV), or perhaps more relevantly, “the doctrine of the kingdom.”

Thus, upon fruitful soil, it is not the actual kingdom that enters the hearts and minds of people. If this were so, Matthew 13:19 would merely employ the term the “kingdom” rather than the mere “word of the kingdom” in order to show what was interjected into the soil in order to make it fruitful. Rather, it is the message of the kingdom’s values and future certainty that is what enters the hearts and minds of individuals. This message of the kingdom, in turn, produces “sons” or inheritors (Gal. 4:7) of the kingdom (Matt. 13:38). Just as the message of how to gain heaven can produce an inheritor of heaven, the same is true regarding the “message of the kingdom.”¹³

The doctrine of the kingdom is typically thought of as eschatology, but this does not necessarily mean that it excludes other doctrines. In other words, “the word of the kingdom” is not restricted to information that describes God’s future millennial kingdom, but also includes, for example, the soteriological gospel of salvation, which people must believe in order to be brought into the

¹¹ Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 177.

¹² Clarence Johnson, “God’s Parables of the Kingdom” in *Thy Kingdom Come*, Jim Showers and Chris Katulka, eds., 88.

¹³ Andrew Woods, *The Coming Kingdom*, 111.

millennium. About the interconnectedness of categories in systematic theology, specifically eschatology and soteriology, David Anderson says:

Perhaps in our high tech world another way to describe “Systematic” Theology is “Spread Sheet” Theology. When one changes one item in a spread sheet, all the other items change as well. Coherence requires it. That is why when Augustine became amillennial (a change in the eschatological column), it changed his view of justification (a change in the soteriological column).¹⁴

The good soil is the believer who hears the doctrine of the kingdom, “understands *it*” (Matt 13:23) then goes on to bear more seeds as he increases his understanding of the all-inclusive doctrine of the kingdom. The good soil is exemplified in the lives of Jesus’ disciples who were present for the explanation. They remained with Jesus even through tribulation, and so it was given to them “to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” and they continued to grow in knowledge to the point that the Holy Spirit even coauthored the New Testament with such men from among his disciples.

Two less successful receptions of doctrine are when someone hears the word and sprouts with joy before tribulation causes him to stumble (the stony ground, Matt 13:5–6, 20–21) or he who hears the word, but is choked out by “the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches” (the thorny ground, 13:7, 22). These grounds are exemplified in the lives of those who seem to have responded positively to Christ’s miracles that provided free food and physical healing but did not persevere. This is not to say that they *never* believed; John gives an example when he writes, “Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess *Him*, lest they should be put out of the synagogue” (John 12:42).

¹⁴ David R. Anderson, “Regeneration: A Crux Interpretum,” 45.

The wayside soil, properly understood as “the path through the field,”¹⁵ is deserving of special attention. On this soil the seed does not even sprout because birds snatch it away; these birds are representative of “the wicked *one*,” Satan (Matt 13:4, 19). Because the gospel of salvation is an integral part of the doctrine of the kingdom,¹⁶ it is no surprise that Luke includes that “the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved” (Luke 8:12). This soil is exemplified in the case of Israel’s leadership in the previous chapter, who are deceived and reject entirely the notion that Jesus is the Messiah, proving to have been entirely devoured by Satan by attributing Messiah-authenticating miracles to Beelzebub. An important element to extract from this parable for application later in the chapter is that τὰ πετεινὰ “the birds” (Matt 13:4) are to be identified with ὁ πονηρὸς “the wicked *one*” (13:19), that is, “the devil” (Luke 8:12).

This parable is not a previously unknown truth related to the kingdom, but rather an explanation of human nature. Some are receptive with varying degrees of fruitfulness and others are unreceptive. The relevance to the kingdom context of Matthew is that Israel as a whole is unreceptive to the kingdom offer. Matthew cites Isaiah 6:9–10 verbatim from the LXX, καὶ τῆ καρδία συνῶσιν καὶ ἐπιστρέψωσιν, καὶ ἰάσομαι αὐτούς “Lest they should understand with *their* hearts and turn, So that I should heal them” (Matt 13:15b NKJV). The Hebrew is וְלָבָבוּ יָבִין וְנִשְׁבַּח לִי, “And understand with their heart, And return and be healed” (Isaiah 6:10b NKJV).¹⁷ This

¹⁵ Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, I.136.

¹⁶ This is not to say that the gospel of salvation *is* the gospel of the kingdom. Many Christians equate to offer of the kingdom with the offer of eternal life, but by now it should be abundantly clear that there is a distinction between the call to repentance in light of the kingdom’s availability and faith in light of Christ’s work on the cross.

¹⁷ This includes a claim to deity that the original Jewish audience would have recognized from their familiarity with the Hebrew and LXX of Isaiah 6:10. The NKJV does justice to the terms, וְנִשְׁבַּח לִי “and be healed” and ἰάσομαι αὐτούς “I should heal them” as the 3rd person qal with 3rd person suffixed preposition, וְנִשְׁבַּח לִי, implies passivity while the 1st person middle with 3rd person singular accusative, ἰάσομαι αὐτούς, implies activity, which is undoubtably an act of God Himself. This was understood by the Jewish translators of the LXX and endorsed by the Holy Spirit in the NT here as well as John’s words (John 12:40) and Paul’s cited by Luke (Acts 28:27). The

is an echo of the previous call, שׁוּבוּ אֵלַי וְאֶשׁוּבָה אֲלֵיכֶם “Return to Me and I will return to you” (Mal 3:7b NKJV), but this time it has been negated, for Israel has failed to repent in accordance with Malachi and thereby fulfills instead Isaiah’s prophecy that their hearts would be dull. In the context of the passage that Jesus cites to explain the need for parables, Isaiah explains the need for an apocalypse, “Then I said, ‘Lord, how long?’ And He answered: ‘Until the cities are laid waste and without inhabitant, The houses are without a man, The land is utterly desolate’” (Isaiah 6:11). Israel’s need for desolation to bring her to repentance sets the stage for the next parable.

Parable of the Tares

Another parable He put forth to them, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way. But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. So the servants of the owner came and said to him, ‘Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?’ He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The servants said to him, ‘Do you want us then to go and gather them up?’ But he said, ‘No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, “First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn.” ’ ’ ”

...Then Jesus sent the multitude away and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field.”

He answered and said to them: “He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked *one*. The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will

Johanine usage is especially potent, as MacArthur explains: In John 12:36–41, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, John quoted Isaiah 53:1 and Isaiah 6:10 as reasons why the Jews “did not believe in” Jesus... The antecedent of “his” and “him” in [John 12:41] is the “he” of verse 37, which refers to “Jesus” in verse 36. Thus, John identifies Jesus as the “Lord” (Heb. *Adonai*) of Isaiah 6:1, whom Isaiah saw “sitting upon a throne,” and the “LORD [Yahweh] of hosts” of Isaiah 6:3, whose “glory” fills “the whole earth.” So Jesus is the “Lord” and “LORD” of Isaiah 6:1–3. John MacArthur, Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine*, 204.

be at the end of this age. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear! (Matt 13:24–30, 36–43)

The consensus basically agrees that the Parable of the Tares speaks of a period that features believers and unbelievers together until the end. “The parable of the wheat and tares showed that the sons of the kingdom and the sons of the Devil would coexist in this age and would only be separated when Jesus returned at the end of the age with his angels.”¹⁸ George Peters comments on the general area of agreement among interpreters:

Every commentator, with sufficient candor, whatever his views may be, will acknowledge that such is its *definite* meaning. Jesus, thus adopting the Jewish phraseology, points *unerringly* to a future age to be introduced, after this one is closed, connecting with it the Kingdom of the Son of man precisely as the Jews *were accustomed* to regard the matter.¹⁹

William Pettingill offers an application of the parable to dispensational, premillennial, pretribulational, eschatology:

It ought to be noted here that the Church is not in view in all this, nor is the Church Dispensation the “Age” so often referred to. It is the Jewish Age, which has been interrupted by the parenthetical Church Dispensation. The Jewish Age is not yet finished, nor will it be until the Church is removed from the earth. Then the Jewish Dispensation of Daniel's time will be completed with the final seven years of Daniel's seventy “weeks.” The end of the seven-years period is the End of the Age spoken of in these parables. The End of the world is not mentioned at all, our English translations to the contrary notwithstanding.²⁰

Pettingill puts the wheat and tares in the tribulation period, which is a topic of controversy among dispensationalists. A similar controversy in this passage and others is the identification of the “sons of the kingdom” (Mat 13:38), specifically whether these are all who will eventually

¹⁸ John MacArthur, Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine*, 854.

¹⁹ George Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, 2:142.

²⁰ William Pettingill, *Simple Studies in Matthew*, 158–159.

enter the kingdom to include Gentiles and the Church or if the term, “the sons of the kingdom,” is restricted to Israel. It seems here that “the sons of the kingdom” is a reference to saved Israel in the tribulation because the only other occurrence of the term is Matthew 8:12, where “sons of the kingdom” are contrasted to the many Gentiles who “will come from east and west” (Matt 8:11). The sons in the Matthew 8 context includes unbelieving Jews who are “cast out into outer darkness” (Matt 8:12), but in the Matthew 13 context, the “sons of the kingdom” are contrasted to “the sons of the wicked one” (Matt 13:38), so unbelievers are excluded here. There are, however, dispensationalists who disagree with this view of the sons of the kingdom and the outer darkness²¹ and still interpret the Parable of the Tares in a manner that is consistent with a postponed kingdom.

All Bible interpreters recognize that there are believers and unbelievers coexisting today and all dispensationalists agree that there are believers and unbelievers in the tribulation, so the questions of whether or not the wheat and tares parable is limited to the tribulation and whether or not the sons of the kingdom include Gentiles are minor issues. Regardless of the length of time Jesus intends for the growth of the tares, a certain false view is the general judgement theory, which supposes that there is only one final judgment where all believers and all unbelievers from all time will stand before the Great White Throne, such that all judgments in the Bible refer to this event, and this event is depicted by the wheat and the tares. This theory of general judgment has several biblical shortcomings²² and they all stem from faulty hermeneutics. The timing for this judgment is when “The Son of Man will send out His angels” (Matt 13:41), which is descriptive of the second coming when “the armies in heaven... followed Him on white

²¹ For example, see Zane Hodges and Robert Wilkin, *What is the Outer Darkness?*

²² Samuel Hoyt, *The Judgment Seat of Christ*, 17–32.

horses” (Rev 19:14), not Great White Throne Judgement, which is preceded by the Satanic rebellion, in which “Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations... to gather them together to battle... They went up on the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city” (Rev 20:7–9). Is the Son of Man being referred to Jesus or is he Satan? Are His angels actually angels or are they the deceived nations? All interpreters would agree that Jesus is being spoken of in the parable, so the natural conclusion is to align this event with the judgment that best fits, and that is the second coming.

Granted, the modern interpreter has the advantage of being able to read the entirety of Scripture after the New Testament authors filled in the gaps of missing information. At the time when Jesus delivers this parable, not even the Olivet Discourse had been delivered to the disciples to further explain the Sheep and Goats Judgment (Matt 25:31–46); however, the disciples do have the idea of the conquering Messiah as developed in the Old Testament. They know that “Daniel [7:13–14] predicted that the Son of Man would come with the clouds of heaven to earth to reign as king over the nations.”²³ It is no mystery that the Messiah is to come to conquer the nations and establish the Messianic Kingdom on earth, nor is it unknown that Daniel’s 70th week must come to pass before the establishment of the Messianic Kingdom.²⁴ The new revelation is that the wheat must grow together with the tares during this interim period. It is no surprise that evil is on earth until Messiah comes, but for a nation that strives for separation from evil, the necessity to live together lest becoming uprooted with the evil is certainly a shocking realization.

²³ Gary Gromacki, “The Time of the Gentiles,” 37.

²⁴ See Rashi on Daniel 9:27.

Parable of the Mustard Seed

Another parable He put forth to them, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.” (Matt 13:31–32)

Jesus puts forth another agricultural parable, this time comparing the kingdom to a small mustard seed. In short, the Parable of the Mustard Seed is about the kingdom being offered to Israel, but because of Israel’s rejection, a different Satanic kingdom grows in place of Messiah’s kingdom.²⁵ This is in contrast to many interpreters who see the tree as God’s kingdom that the Church is tasked with growing. Such interpretations are most popular and are explained with terms such as “From an insignificant beginning the Lord’s people grow to a mighty kingdom”²⁶ or “A well-known saying reminds us that ‘great oaks from little acorns grow.’ This is another way to express this parable.”²⁷ To defend the minority position that this tree symbolizes a corruption, attention is first due to the identity of the mustard seed and the description of the tree, before moving on to the significance of the parable in its biblical context.

The seed and the tree

The Parable of the Mustard Seed is often interpreted to be speaking about the Church and its blessing to the world. This view typically is spoken in support of inaugurated eschatology in which the Church has replaced Israel and the millennium of Revelation is the Church Age which has already exceeded its 1,000-year description. Some dispensational postponement theologians

²⁵ A similar interpretation, which is also consistent with a full kingdom postponement, holds that the mustard tree is the corruption of the Church. See Herbert Lockyer, *All the Parables of the Bible*, 184–189.

²⁶ George DeHoff, *Dehoff’s Commentary* (Murfreesboro, TN: 1981), 5.67.

²⁷ Landrum P. Leavell, “Mark” in *The Teacher’s Bible Commentary*, H. Franklin Paschall and Herschel H. Hobbs, eds., 622.

also take a Church Age interpretation of the Parable of the Mustard Seed; for example, Dwight Pentecost has:

...we can see that Christ was teaching that though the new form of the kingdom would begin with an insignificant beginning, it would grow to great proportions and provide blessing and bounty for the many people who would come into it.

This new form of theocracy did begin with an insignificant beginning. Eleven men met in the upper room with Christ on the eve of His crucifixion. One hundred and twenty gathered to pray between His ascension and the descent of the Spirit on Pentecost. From such a small beginning the new form of the kingdom began to spread... This parable, then, was given to encourage the hearers to believe that the new form of the theocracy would grow to great proportions despite its insignificant beginning and despite Satan's opposition.²⁸

Objections to the implication that there is a current kingdom shall be handled in the next chapter along with some internal disputes among postponement theologians. For now, suffice to say that while the tree in the Parable of the Mustard Seed may be interpreted as the Church and still be consistent with the kingdom postponement, the interpretation to be promoted here is that the tree represents the current reality that the flourishing Satanic world system.

The parable speaks of a seed being planted and a different plant growing in its place. To prove this, it is first necessary to identify the mustard plant in question. The mustard seed is a common object that Jewish teachers refer to, as John Lightfoot writes:

Hence it is passed into a common proverb, כזרע חרדל “According to the quantity of a grain of mustard:” and כטיפת חרדל “According to the quantity of a little drop of mustard,” very frequently used by the Rabbins, when they would express the smallest thing, or the most diminutive quantity.²⁹

Modern English-speaking tourists may confuse the mustard plant with the tree, *Salvadora persica*, because its English names include “toothbrush tree, mustard tree, salt bush,”³⁰ perhaps

²⁸ Dwight Pentecost, *The Parables of Jesus*, 53.

²⁹ John Lightfoot, *Horæ Hebraicæ et Talmudicæ* in *The Whole Works of the Rev. John Lightfoot*, John Rogers Pitman, ed., XI.206.

³⁰ *Agroforestry Database 4.0* (Orwa et al.2009), 1..

because its “leaf is somewhat bitter and aromatic, with a taste likened to mustard,”³¹ but it is known in Israel by its transliterated Latin nomenclature, סלוודורה פרסית, and is entirely unrelated to the plant, חרדל, which Lightfoot referenced. The actual mustard plant (from the *Brassica* or perhaps *Sinapis* genus of the Brassicaceae family) is not a tree; in fact, the Greek word in the parable for “mustard” is σίναπι (Attic and Ionic Greek have νᾶπι),³² the etymology of which comes from the plant’s smallness and lack of growth, as Athenaeus explains:

for no Attic writer ever used the form σίναπι, although there is a reason for each form. For νᾶπι may be said, as if it were νᾶφν, because it has no φύσις, or growth. [For] it is ἀφυσὲς and little, like the anchovy, which is called ἀφύνη, and is called σίναπι, because it injures the eyes (σίνεταί τοὺς ὄφθαλμοὺς) by its smell, as the onion has the name of κρόμμυον, because it makes us wink our eyes (ὄτι τὰς κόρας μύομεν).³³

According to ancient Greek sources, the mustard seed “has no φύσις, or growth.” This fits well with Israel’s white mustard plant (Hebrew לבן חרדל; Latin *Sinapis alba*), which is described, “Root is a thin taproot, sparsely branching; stem cylindrical; to 60 cm by 30 cm,”³⁴ but perhaps 2,000 years ago before certain advancements in plant-breeding the mustard plant was even smaller, hence the Greek name. Actual Israeli mustard plants with their thin roots and sparse branching are not at all similar to the plant that actually grows into a monstrosity in the parable’s mustard garden.

Of the grown plant, Jesus says, “when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree” (Matt 13:32). This tree is a different plant from the original seed of the mustard herb. All three accounts include the detail of birds nesting in the tree (Matt 13:31; Mark 4:32; Luke

³¹ Ibid., 3.

³² Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, σίναπι.

³³ Athenaeus. *The Deipnosophists*, 9.2..

³⁴ Martha Modzelevich, “Sinapis alba, White mustard, Salad mustard, Hebrew: לבן חרדל, Arabic: خردل اصفر.”

13:19), with Mark including καὶ ποιεῖ κλάδους μεγάλους, ὥστε δύνασθαι ὑπὸ τὴν σκιὰν αὐτοῦ τὰ πετεινὰ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ κατασκηνοῦν “and shoots out large branches, so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade” (Mark 4:32). Three key details in this phrase give insight about the tree: first, the tree produces large branches; second, the birds can build a nest,³⁵ such that the structural integrity of the branches is sufficient to build a nest; third, they do so ὑπὸ τὴν σκιὰν αὐτοῦ “under [the tree’s] shade,” such that the tree’s branches are big enough to bring an internal shade. The biblical description of this giant shade tree is not at all descriptive of the small herb plant that the planter hopes for.

The biblical context

All three accounts of the Parable of the Mustard Seed include other horticultural parables that give insight to the corruptness of the growth. Immediately before the Parable of the Mustard Seed (Mark 4:30–32), Mark has the Parable of the Growing Seed (4:26–29), in which a man watches carefully the development of the grain and harvests it immediately when the grain is ready. The Parable of the Growing Seed begins Οὕτως ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ ὡς ἄνθρωπος βάλῃ τὸν σπόρον ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground,” (4:26) thus comparing the kingdom to the farmer, who represents God bringing in the kingdom when it is ready³⁶ (and sleeping in the meantime), but the Parable of the Mustard Seed has ὡς κόκκῳ σινάπεως “*It is like a mustard seed*” (4:31), which represents the kingdom itself being corrupted. Even if the tree growing in the mustard garden was a monstrosity of a mustard

³⁵ The word, κατασκηνώ, comes from the σκῆνος root and implies to pitch a home, rather than just temporary landing.

³⁶ “But the circumstance that, when the fruit offers itself to him, the man *at once* applies the sickle, shows anew that his previous inaction was not owing to want of concern about the grain, but was prescribed to him by the nature of the case. When the time comes for him to intervene, he acts without delay.” Siegfried Goebel, *The Parables of Jesus*, 86.

plant (as countless interpreters say), it shows a lack of attentiveness on the gardener's part in contrast to the gardener who harvests at the proper time. It is more likely that Mark uses the first parable to show that God will bring in the kingdom at the end of the tribulation when Israel is ready, but the mustard seed shows that in the meantime a giant corrupt kingdom will grow as a weed instead of the Messianic Kingdom. Luke is even more explicit. Chapter 12 begins with a warning of hypocrisy and the "leaven of the Pharisees" (Luke 12:1), then warns against the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit (12:8–12), and tells them to discern the time (12:54–56). "They refused to see that prophecies were being fulfilled around them which were bound up with the coming of Messiah, and that Messiah Himself must be in the midst of them."³⁷ Jesus continues to urge them to repentance in accordance with the kingdom offer (12:57–13:5), which sets the context for the Parable of the Fig Tree, in which He warns that if the fig tree does not bear fruit (meaning, if Israel does not repent), then it will be cut down (that is, the kingdom offer will be withdrawn). The Parable of the Fig Tree sets the horticultural mood for the corruption of the mustard seed, but between the two parables, Luke records an attack from the Pharisees over healing on the Sabbath (12:10–17), which parallels Matthew's account in Matt 12:1–21. Having established the requirement of repentance, the contemporary controversies about the Messiah and the consequence for failure, Luke's context is perfectly aligned to present the truth that the kingdom is like a mustard seed in that Jesus offers it contingent upon repentance, but in light of the contemporary controversies, it is rejected and as a consequence, the kingdom is postponed and another takes its place in the meantime.

³⁷ J. C. Ryle, *Ryle's Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, II.ii.101–102.

Describing a kingdom as a tree with birds in the branches is reminiscent of previous Old Testament passages that use similar imagery to describe an evil entity to be defeated upon the Second Coming. In Ezekiel 31:1–14, God issues a warning to Egypt by comparing Assyria (אֲשׁוּר vs. 3) to a great cedar with birds³⁸ in its branches that will be cut down. One interpretation is that Assyria here is the contemporary kingdom of Nebuchadnezzar, but that conquest occurs two months prior (Ezek 30:20, ff. cf. 31:1), so more likely this prophecy is an expansion of previous revelation of the future Assyrian who will be in the tribulation placed in Ezek 31 as a transition from the oracles against foreign nations (Ezek 25–32) to the future blessings for Israel (Ezek 33–48). Through the prophet Isaiah, God announces, “That I will break the Assyrian [אֲשׁוּר] in My land” (Isaiah 14:25) and likewise Micah has “When the Assyrian [אֲשׁוּר] comes into our land... we will raise against him... They shall waste with the sword the land of Assyria [נִרְעוּ אֶת-אֲרָץ] אֲשׁוּר]... Thus He shall deliver us from the Assyrian [מִן-אֲשׁוּר]” (Micah 5:5–6). Thomas Constable comments:

“This” Redeemer would also be responsible for—and the source of—the “peace” that God promised Israel that she would experience (in the Millennium; cf. 4:3–5; Eph. 2:14)...

Assyria was the main threat to the Israelites in Micah's day, but this prophecy predicts Israel's victory over the Assyrians. This did not happen in the history of Israel; Assyria defeated the Northern Kingdom and most of the Southern Kingdom. Thus, this prophecy must be a continuation of the vision of the distant future that God gave Micah (4:1–5:5a).³⁹

This future Assyrian kingdom is a Satanic government as “The Great Tribulation is Satan’s supreme opportunity to prove God false. If he can simply eliminate from earth’s inhabitants all

³⁸ Solomon Fisch has that the birds in Ezekiel’s prophecy are “are figures for the people which passed under Assyrian domination,” which certainly include both those who are in favor of the Assyrian and those who are opposed. Solomon Fisch, *Soncino Books of the Bible: Ezekiel*, 209.

³⁹ Thomas Constable, *Constable’s Notes on Micah*, 49.

Jews who believe in Jesus, God will have no one among men to whom the kingdom of God can be given.”⁴⁰

Similar imagery also occurs in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream (Dan 4:10–18) to make a similar point, as the tree with birds represents his kingdom (4:19–22) on the verge of humiliation (4:23–33). Nebuchadnezzar’s situation is unique as his includes restoration, as David Jeremiah writes, “A cut-down tree was a symbol of judgment, but the protected stump (the bands of iron and bronze) suggests a future for the tree (Daniel 4:26). The vision was a message of judgment and restoration.”⁴¹ Dwight Pentecost does well to associate the tree in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream with the tree in the Parable of the Mustard Seed,⁴² but he fails to transfer the negative connotations therein. This is not to say that Pentecost rejects the kingdom postponement, nor that he advocates for redefining the promised kingdom into a current spiritual reality, but his interpretation of this parable (and others like it) could be more consistent by allowing the Satanic symbols to speak for themselves.

While the tree with birds’ nests from the Parable of the Mustard Seed is predictive of dark days in Israel’s future, it also conjures imagery from prophecies of Christ’s glorious conquest and establishment of the Messianic Kingdom. This interpretation is significantly more Jewish than the notion that the Church is a mustard tree spiritual kingdom that grows in a positive sense.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed begins, Ὁμοία ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν κόκκῳ σινάπεως, ὃν... “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which...” (Matt 13:31). The comparison does not stop with the seed but includes the entire situation. On this point, even

⁴⁰ Zane Hodges, *Power to Make War*, 66.

⁴¹ David Jeremiah, *Agents of Babylon: What the Prophecies of Daniel Tell Us about the End of Days*, 54.

⁴² Dwight Pentecost, *The Parables of Jesus*, 53.

Kingdom Now theologians agree, as they say that the Church is not only the seed but the tree. From the more consistent postponement perspective, the kingdom is being compared to the entire situation of a seed being planted, a tree growing, and birds nesting. The kingdom offer movement in the life of Christ is indeed like a tiny mustard seed. Israel rejects the offer, so as a result, the Messianic Kingdom does not grow, and instead, an evil kingdom stands in its place with Satanic birds building their nests in the branches. This wicked kingdom's culmination comes during the tribulation period and ends when Jesus returns to establish His kingdom on earth.

Parable of the Leaven

Another parable He spoke to them: "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened." (Matt 13:33)

Trees do not typically have nests on every branch, so the description of the tree that grows in place of the mustard seed may conjure images of a few bare branches free of the evil birds that nest in the other branches. Lest the disciples have any optimism left after hearing the Parable of the Mustard Seed, Jesus delivers the Parable of the Leaven to assure them that the entire world is to be corrupted until the kingdom comes to earth.

The Parable of the Leaven has caused problems for many interpreters who come with the presupposition that the kingdom is now manifest in the Church or somehow related to the proclamation of the Gospel. Alford explains the problem:

Difficulties have been raised as to the interpretation of the parable which do not seem to belong to it. It has been questioned whether ζύμη must not be taken in the sense in which it so often occurs in Scripture, as symbolic of *pollutions* and *corruptions*... But then, how is it said that the *Kingdom of Heaven is like this leaven?* ...if the progress of the Kingdom of Heaven be *towards corruption, till*

the whole is corrupted, surely there is an end of all the blessings and healing influence of the Gospel on the world.⁴³

To avoid relating the kingdom with corruption, many expositors skip the Jewish implication of leaven and simply take it as a growing effect. For example, David Hill has “From hidden beginnings in Jesus’ ministry, which must have caused many to be impatient, God causes his Kingdom to grow”⁴⁴ and “The verb **hid** is important (cf. 13:35 and 44): the Kingdom was inaugurated without display or pomp; its silent, secret character must have surprised those who were zealously impatient for its expected manifestation in power and glory.”⁴⁵ A reading that is sensitive to Jewish symbolism would accept the leaven as an evil influence within a worldly kingdom, which happens to align well with the Parable of the Mustard Seed that proceeds the Parable of the Leaven in every account (Matt 13:31–32; Mark 4:30–32; Luke 13:18–19).

This is not to say that postponement theology hinges on interpreting the leaven as evil. Dispensationalists may interpret this parable as teaching that Satan cannot “interrupt the progress of the kingdom”⁴⁶ and still hold to a future Messianic Kingdom that Jesus offers to Israel and postpones for a future day. These good leaven interpretations may align with postponement theology (or practically any other system) but are neither coherent with the biblical usage of “leaven” nor Church history. Darby does well to write, “He knows that leaven everywhere else is the symbol of that which is bad. Has not the history of Christendom supplied that which fully corresponds to such a symbol?”⁴⁷ Allowing the text to speak for itself on this point results in an interpretation that certainly aligns with the current experience.

⁴³ Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, I.144.

⁴⁴ David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 233.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 234.

⁴⁶ Dwight Pentecost, *The Parables of Jesus*, 54.

⁴⁷ John Nelson Darby, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, ch. 13.

An objection might be that if the leaven is evil, then the kingdom of heaven is also evil, as the parable begins Ὁμοία ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ζύμη... “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven...” (Matt 13:33a); however, the thought continues ἣν λαβοῦσα γυνὴ ἔκρυψεν εἰς ἀλεύρου σάτα τρία ἕως οὗ ἐζυμώθη ὅλον “which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened” (Matt 13:33b). Just as the Parable of the Sower begins, Ὁμοιώθη ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ἀνθρώπῳ... “The kingdom of heaven is like a man...” (Matt 13:24), but is not claiming the kingdom to be like the man and the man alone apart from the whole situation, the Parable of the Leaven likewise is not comparing the kingdom to the leaven alone. The entire picture is vital to understanding the parable. The parable features leaven, which represents evil in every other context, a woman who is hiding the leaven (note the sinister connotations of ἣν λαβοῦσα γυνὴ ἔκρυψεν “which a woman took and hid”), and the large sum of three measures of meal into which she is hiding the leaven and waiting for it to rise.

Indeed, Jesus even uses the term “the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” to mean “the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and Sadducees” a few chapters later in Matthew (Matt 16:3, 5–12) and Luke records Jesus saying “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy” (Luke 12:1) in the chapter prior to his record of the Parable of the Leaven. He does not call their hypocrisy, “leaven,” because it is growing, but rather because He wants to attach something negative to His warning to “Take heed and beware” (Matt 16:6). This hypocrisy is rooted in aberrant doctrine, as Robert Govett’s writes likewise, “The *Leaven* manifests the false doctrine which accompanies this worldly system, and which will finally leaven all national establishments.”⁴⁸ William Kelly writes from a similar perspective:

⁴⁸ Robert Govett, *The Jews, The Gentiles, and the Church of God, in the Gospel of Matthew*, 26.

Again, whenever “leaven” occurs symbolically in the word of God, it is never employed save to characterize corruption which tends to work actively and spread; so that it must not be assumed to be the extension of the gospel. The meaning, I doubt not, is a system of doctrine which fills and gives its tone to a certain given mass of men. On the other hand, the gospel is the seed — the incorruptible seed — of life, as being God's testimony to Christ and His work. Leaven has nowhere anything to do with Christ or giving life, but expressly the contrary. Hence there is not the smallest analogy between the action of leaven and the reception of life in Christ through the gospel. I believe that the leaven here sets forth the propagandism of dogmas and decrees, after that Christendom became a great power in the earth (answering to the tree — which was the case, historically, in the time of Constantine the Great). We know that the result of this was an awful departure from the truth. When Christianity grew into respectability in the world, instead of being persecuted and a reproach, crowds of men were brought in. A whole army was baptized at the word of command. Now the sword was used to defend or enforce Christianity.⁴⁹

Even Francis Wright Beare, a nondispensationalist, cited in a commentary by W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., also nondispensationalists, proposes that Matthew 13:33 “was originally a warning against the dangerous contagion of evil. It would be understood as an illustration of the warning against ‘the leaven of the Pharisees.’”⁵⁰

For the Parable of the Leaven to speak of evil and corruption would flow naturally with the rest of the parables. Haldeman has a slightly different interpretation of the Parable of the Mustard Seed, but agrees that the leaven is part of an ongoing theme within the parables:

Beginning with the parable of the sower, indicating, as it does, a not universal reception of the Gospel, going on with the story of the tares, presenting to us the introduction of a false and corrupt profession of Christianity, and a world divided between God and Satan till the end, and closing with the mustard tree, showing us the birds which our Lord uses as a symbol of evil and uncleanness nesting in and finding shelter in the professed kingdom of heaven in this age, are we warranted to expect—would we have any legitimate ground on which to base our expectation—that the next parable would reverse the whole course of the previous teaching, and announce to us the universal reception of the Gospel? The answer to such a question must be in the negative. No such expectation is or could be

⁴⁹ William Kelly, *Lectures on the Gospel of Matthew*, ch. 13.

⁵⁰ The precise citation is not given, but presumably this is intended to be Francis Wright Beare, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, 309 cited by W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, II.422.

warranted. And when it is added that the symbol on which such an interpretation relies is the known and confessed symbol in every other scripture to set forth corruption and sin, such an exegesis of the parable is ruled out of court.⁵¹

The Parable of the Leaven essentially repeats the Parable of the Mustard Seed in that it proclaims a wicked kingdom that grows in the interim period. The Parable of the Mustard Seed is clear in its distinction between the seed and the tree, but it is restricted in that the birds cannot technically nest in the tree until its branches are ready. “It was not the *leaven* alone that illustrated the kingdom of heaven, but the *whole* of the parable... The leaven was hidden in the meal, and as a type of evil, represents the way in which Satan’s subtle forces militate against the truth.”⁵² The Parable of the Leaven clarifies that there is not a time when evil is absent and it will continue to grow and corrupt the entire world.

Transition from Public to Private Parables

All these things Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables; and without a parable He did not speak to them, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying:

“I will open My mouth in parables;
I will utter things kept secret from the foundation of the world.” (Matt 13:34–35)

After the Parable of the Leaven, Matthew includes some remarks to transition from the public parables, which He speaks before all of Israel, to the private parables, which He only gives to His disciples. Perhaps Matt 13:34–35 closes an *inclusio* (beginning with vv. 10, ff.) to set apart the public kingdom mystery parables, which are the parables of the tares, mustard seed, and leaven. The *inclusio* opens with Isaiah’s prophecy (Isaiah 6:9–10; Matt 13:14–15) and then closes with a fulfillment of a Psalm (Ps 78:2; Matt 13:35). Matthew maintains the LXX translation of אֶפְתָּחָהּ בְּמִשְׁלַל פִּי Ἀνοίξω ἐν παραβολαῖς τὸ στόμα μου, “I will open My mouth in

⁵¹ I. M. Haldeman, *How to Study the Bible, The Second Coming and Other Expositions*, 461.

⁵² Herbert Lockyer, *All the Parables of the Bible*, 190.

parables;” but modifies the translation of םִתְּקַיֵּימִי תִּידִיָּהּ הַפְּצִיָּהּ from the LXX φθέγξομαι προβλήματα ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς “I will shout [solutions to] riddles [posed] from the beginning” to ἐρεύξομαι κεκρυμμένα ἀπὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου “I will utter things kept secret from the foundation of the world” (NKJV). The Hebrew word, תִּידִיָּהּ, has a range of meaning that can include the translations προβλήματα or κεκρυμμένα, but there is a distinction between the two, and Matthew specifically chooses to override the LXX.⁵³ The LXX has προβλήματα, which carries the connotation of a problem (in the sense of, for example, a math problem) which has been posed, but not yet solved, while Matthew has κεκρυμμένα, which comes from the root κρύπτω and portrays the connotation of something not yet revealed, or covered from old. This is the nature of the mysteries of the kingdom, not that they are presented in a riddle format, but that they were unrevealed until Christ spoke them. The verb פָּצָה has the connotation of flowing like water, so the range of meaning of הַפְּצִיָּהּ as applied to speech can be φθέγξομαι “I will shout” (perhaps as a waterfall) or ἐρεύξομαι “I will utter” (perhaps as a more silent creek), but Matthew chooses to use ἐρεύξομαι perhaps because Jesus is no longer shouting to Israel the command to repent, but teaching mysteries with those present to whom they are not given. For םִתְּקַיֵּימִי, the JPS has “of the past,” which again is within the range of the bare Hebrew, but it is more restrictive than the LXX ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς “from the beginning,” which is close to ἐν ἀρχῇ of Gen 1:1, but Matthew is even more explicit with ἀπὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου “from the foundation of the world,” which should be understood as a claim to Deity.

⁵³ The Old Church Slavonic follows the Greek and has провъщяю гананїа испѣрва, which is an unfortunate restriction away from the inspiration of the New Testament, where Matt 13:35b is more properly restricted to ѿрѣгнѹ сокровѣннаѹ ѿ сложенїа мїра.

Parable of the Hidden Treasure

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. (Matt 13:44)

Before delivering the final four parables, Jesus sends away the multitudes and explains the Parable of the Tares. He defines the good seeds as “the sons of the kingdom” (Matt 13:38), a clear reference to saved Israel:

Jesus Christ identified “the sons of the kingdom” in Matthew 8:12 as the original people group to whom were offered the Kingdom of Heaven, namely the nation of Israel. But unlike Matthew 8, the “good” “sons of the kingdom” in this passage are contrasted with the “bad” “sons of the wicked one,” who is the Devil (13:39).⁵⁴

The location of this section is significant. Matthew could have arranged the explanation toward the end of the chapter or immediately after the parable itself, but instead, he places this before the Parable of the Hidden Treasure, which begins in the Textus Receptus, Πάλιν ὁμοία ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like” (Matt 13:44). This parable is a continuation of the discussion of Israel.

Unfortunately, confusion abounds over this aspect of the parable. Many interpreters would push a soteriological reading into the passage and turn this into a proof text for salvation through lordship:

The man whose heart has been awakened in regeneration is like a man who stumbles on a priceless, buried treasure. And because of the surpassing value of the treasure that is Christ Jesus, the sinner willingly forsakes everything he has so he can lay hold of the Savior whom he regards as supremely precious (Luke 9:23; 14:26–33; cf. Matt 10:37–39).⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Dennis Rokser, “Examining the Exegetical Problems” in Dennis Rokser, Tom Stegall, Kurt Witzig, *Should Christians Fear the Outer Darkness*, 100.

⁵⁵ John MacArthur, Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine*, 599.

While the appropriate reaction to Christ is to forsake everything else and pursue proper fellowship with Him, discipleship is an extensive growing process and should not be equated with saving faith. Still others have tried to equate the kingdom with the Church and in doing so have made the field to be the Church. Siegfried Goebel holds to a different interpretation of the parable than the one here, but he agrees that the field is not the Church:

Especially must we reject the frequently attempted reference of the field to the *Church*, because the relation of the Church to the blessings of God's kingdom treasured by it in no way corresponds to the relation of a field to the treasure buried in it. For instead of concealing and hiding the blessings of God's kingdom, the Church's calling is rather in every way to make known and publish those blessings, which in themselves are of a hidden nature. And if we attempt to apply the field to the secularized Church, in which the true blessings of salvation are buried under the rubbish of external worldly aims and human ordinances, the re-burying of the treasure in the field and the buying of the field at the conclusion will not at all harmonize with such a view. For on no account can the meaning be, that, in order to obtain the blessings of salvation, one must accept a church, which has perverted its true calling into its opposite, into the bargain. To accept this interpretation is to attribute to the parable *ex eventu* a prophetic signification, having reference to particular periods in the history of the Church, to which the text gives no manner of support.⁵⁶

Dispensationalism is marked by a grammatical-historical hermeneutic that results in a distinction between Israel and the Church, so a reading of the Church in these parables must be accompanied by a strong contextual warrant to do so and in the case of the Parable of the Hidden Treasure, such evidence is lacking.

Jesus likens the kingdom to a treasure, which is yet another clue that this parable is Israel-centric as God has called Israel to be His special treasure (Exod 19:5; Deut 7:6; 14:2; 32:8; Ps 135:4). Jesus likens the kingdom to *θησαυρῶ κεκρυμμένῳ ἐν τῷ ἀγρῷ, ὃν εὗρὼν ἄνθρωπος ἔκρυψε* “treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid” (Matt 13:44). Matthew has

⁵⁶ Siegfried Goebel, *The Parables of Jesus*, 111.

already identified the parable as a fulfilment of the phrase ἐρεῦξομαι κεκρυμμένα “I will utter things kept secret” (Matt 13:35 cf. Ps 78:2) and now the word κεκρυμμένα returns as the kingdom is likened to θησαυρῶ κεκρυμμένῳ “treasure hidden” (Matt 13:44). The κεκρυμμένα identified in the parables of the tares, mustard seed, and leaven, revolves around the idea that the prophesied kingdom comes much later than previously revealed. This is not to say that Jesus is speaking of the Church here. The Church is indeed a mystery that exists during the postponement interim, but the topic at hand is the mysteries of the kingdom being postponed, not the mystery that the Church exists during the period of postponement.

An important detail that seems to be missing in many nondispensational interpretations is that the man found and hid the treasure before purchasing it.⁵⁷ This is a poor picture of the gospel of eternal life as the Church is to proclaim this Gospel, not hide it, but it is an excellent picture of the gospel of the kingdom, which Jesus has offered and withdrawn. Stanley Toussaint expounds:

The parable’s hidden state views the dark hours of Israel from the time of Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, to the period of Christ’s ministry. The uncovering of the treasure is the coming near of the kingdom in the person of the King. The removal of the kingdom from Israel (Matthew 21:43) is represented by the hiding of the treasure... When the man comes again he will unveil the treasure and be very rich. This, of course, pictures the glory of Christ when He comes again in His kingdom.

⁵⁷ The deal was an ethical one. Rabbinic sources have much discussion in accordance with Deut 22:1–3 over the treatment of things that have been found. *Mishnah Bava Metzia* 2:1–2 indicates that if a man finds מעות מפזרות “scattered money,” then he may keep it, but if he finds מעות בקיס “money in a bag,” מעות צבורי “piles of money,” or שלשה מטבעות זה על גב זה “three coins stacked on each other,” then he must proclaim it. The concept is that money that is in order has recently been left either by accident or will be returned to shortly, while money that has fallen into disarray as likely been abandoned. The Babylonian Talmud notes further that רבי שמעון בן אלעזר אומר כל כלי אנפוריא אין חייב להכריז [Aramaic אנפוריא from Greek εμπορία] are not required to be proclaimed” (*Bava Metzia* 21a). It is possible that the treasure in the field was in a vessel of commerce, which would render it of the same status as scattered money, but regardless, because it was in the field being purchased, if the seller knowingly possessed the treasure in the land, then he surely would include this in the price negotiation.

The mystery revealed in this parable is the putting aside of Israel's program for a time. The redemption of the treasure has been accomplished, but the unveiling of it has not. This will occur at Christ's second coming to the earth.⁵⁸

The Parable of the Hidden Treasure gives a hint to the coming crucifixion from the kingdom's perspective. This is the first parable to mention the necessity of a purchase, so Jesus follows with another parable to describe the purchase from God's perspective.

Parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it. (Matt 13:44–46)

Next is a couplet of two similar parables: the Parable of the Pearl of Great Price and the Parable of the Hidden Treasure (Matt 13:44–46). A common interpretation is that the men in both parables represent a believer who sells everything in order to possess eternal life.⁵⁹ This interpretation is not new and has roots as early as the gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*,⁶⁰ but there are several shortcomings with this view. One glaring problem is that “If it is concluded that the man is a believer rather than Christ, then this parable teaches a works-oriented salvation.”⁶¹

A distinction between the two parables is that, while the hidden treasure is found unintentionally, a professional merchant purposefully seeks the pearl for purchase.⁶² This difference is not necessarily because Jesus is discussing two distinct purchases, but rather there is

⁵⁸ Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 183–184.

⁵⁹ See John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, Matt. 13:44–46.

⁶⁰ “Yeshua says: The Sovereignty of the Father is like a tradesman having merchandise, who found a pearl. That tradesman was wise; he sold the merchandise, he bought that single pearl for himself. You yourselves, seek for His treasure, which perishes not, which endures—the place where no moth comes near to devour nor worm ravages.” *Gospel of Thomas*, 76, in *The Annotated Gospel of Thomas by Dr. Thomas Paterson Brown*.

⁶¹ Andrew Woods, *The Coming Kingdom*, 130.

⁶² Mark Bailey, “The Parables of the Hidden Treasure and of the Pearl Merchant,” 186.

only one actual purchase and He is overcoming the restrictions of the first parable by presenting a second. In the Parable of the Hidden Treasure, “The purchase of the field refers to Christ dying for Israel’s sins (2 Peter 2:1),”⁶³ so the anticipation would be that the purchase of the pearl represents the same. This is certainly a source of encouragement for the disciples, for whereas every parable before this is an example of Satan’s work, finally the Parable of the Pearl of Great Price illustrates God’s work.

Parable of the Dragnet

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, which, when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but threw the bad away. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just, and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.” (Matt 13:47–50)

Jesus mentions the man hiding the treasure again and the harvest of the wheat and tares together, but the end of the age was not the main point in either parable, so He gives the Parable of the Dragnet in order to expound upon the end. The events at the end of the tribulation are discussed in the Old Testament, but with this parable Jesus puts the timing of the judgment after the kingdom postponement and He establishes a framework for additional New Testament revelation on the subject.

From many Scriptures it may be gathered that all the wicked will be put to death after the second coming of Christ; and only saints who have lived through the preceding time of trouble will be eligible for entrance into the millennial kingdom. This is demonstrated in the judgment of the Gentiles in Matthew 25:31–46, where only the righteous are permitted to enter the millennium. According to Ezekiel 20:33–38, God will also deal with Israel and purge out all rebels, that is, unbelievers, permitting only the saints among Israel to enter the millennial kingdom. The parables of the wheat and the tares (Matt 13:30–31) and of the

⁶³ Andrew Woods, *The Coming Kingdom*, 128.

good and bad fish (Matt 13:49–50) teach likewise that only the wheat and the good fish, representing the righteous, will survive the judgment.⁶⁴

The Parable of the Dragnet has an element of shock value. After a string of unsettling parables, Jesus tells good news in the Parable of the Pearl of Great Price and then immediately follows with a parable that has a graphic description of judgment, fire, wailing, and gnashing of teeth.

Parable of the Householder

Jesus said to them, “Have you understood all these things?”

They said to Him, “Yes, Lord.”

Then He said to them, “Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure *things* new and old.” (Matt 13:51–52)

Jesus finishes His string of parables with the Parable of the Householder. This parable is often neglected, as Lockyer records:

This last and eighth parable of this great parabolic chapter seems to be the unwanted orphan by many writers on the parables of our Lord. Expositors like Trench, Goebel, Marcus Dods, Arnot, Cummings, Taylor, C. Dodd, Guthrie, Scofield and other less known names, make no mention whatever of this most important, climactic parable.⁶⁵

This parable is also distinct from those preceding it, as “This parable, strictly speaking, is not a parable of the kingdom. Neither ὁμοία ἐστίν nor ὁμοιόω is used to introduce it. As the parable of the sower and the soils is employed to initiate this parabolic series, so this parable concludes it.”⁶⁶ On the surface, this short parable does not seem to offer much opportunity for spiritualizing the kingdom, so one would anticipate general agreement across the theological traditions, but in actuality, this surprisingly is not true. An overview of dispensationalists’ comments on this parable compared with nondispensationalists demonstrates that this short saying actually reveals

⁶⁴ John Walvoord, “The Doctrine of the Millennium Part I: The Righteous Government of the Millennium,” 6–7.

⁶⁵ Herbert Lockyer, *All the Parables of the Bible*, 208.

⁶⁶ Stanley Toussaint, “The Introductory and Concluding Parables of Matthew Thirteen,” 354–355.

a deeply rooted theological divide over the relevance of the Old Testament in New Testament studies.

Dispensational interpretation

Jesus begins by asking His disciples if they understand His previous parables, which Mike Stallard explains:

The parable describes a scribe who follows Christ as having a correct understanding of both the old and new things relative to the kingdom. That the issue of understanding is in the forefront is seen by the preceding question of Christ about the disciples' understanding of the previous parables (v. 51). Thus, the main question is not the timing of the kingdom.⁶⁷

The clear Jewish reference to scribes shows that the corrupt order that abandons the Old Testament in favor of tradition is to be replaced with a consistent Jewish interpretation that considers all revelation, as Stanley Toussaint writes:

Quite significantly the Lord here referred to His disciples as scribes. By so doing Christ Jesus rejected the ministry of the already established scribes and appointed His own. The scribes were an official order who studied and taught the law. Although they were esteemed highly by the people of Israel for their knowledge of the Old Testament, Jesus steadfastly rebuked them. Here the Lord put the established order of scribes aside and appointed His disciples. They were now responsible for dispensing the whole truth, for only they possessed it.⁶⁸

The householder brings out both old and new things, so a dispensationalist conclusion would be:

This parable teaches that these new kingdom mysteries as disclosed in these parables found in Matthew 13 must be considered alongside Old Testament kingdom truth if one is to understand the totality of God's kingdom agenda. In other words, to gain a complete perspective on the outworking of God's kingdom program, the Matthew 13 parables must be studied alongside Old Testament kingdom truth in order to comprehend the course of the present age involving the coexistence of good and evil prior to the ultimate establishment of Christ's earthly kingdom.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Mike Stallard, "Hermeneutics and Matthew 13 Part II," 357.

⁶⁸ Stanley Toussaint, "The Introductory and Concluding Parables of Matthew Thirteen," 355.

⁶⁹ Andrew Woods, *The Coming Kingdom*, 134.

The parable is simple: Jesus gives new revelation about the kingdom and it is to be understood in light of earlier revelation. The disciples indicate that they understand the new parables and with their background in the study of the Old Testament the natural result is dispensationalism.

Nondispensationalist interpretation

If Jesus is saying that the scribe who understands the kingdom does so by considering the Old Testament revelation along with New Testament revelation, and if Kingdom Now Theology fundamentally redefines Old Testament revelation to fit their New Testament interpretations, then it follows that Replacement Theology sidesteps this reference to Old Testament kingdom theology in the Parable of the Householder. For example, John Calvin rejects the notion that this is a reference to the Old Testament foundation of the coming kingdom (though he does recognize that this is the interpretation of “many of the ancient expositors”):

The meaning, therefore, is, that the teachers of the Church ought to be prepared by long study for giving to the people, as out of a storehouse, a variety of instruction concerning the word of God, as the necessity of the case may require. Many of the ancient expositors understand by *things new and old* the Law and the Gospel; but this appears to me to be forced. I understand them simply to mean a varied and manifold distribution, wisely and properly adapted to the capacity of every individual.⁷⁰

Matthew Henry gives a nod to the Old Testament, but gives priority to tradition and experience:

Now a skillful, faithful minister of the gospel is a scribe too; but for distinction, he is called a scribe *instructed unto the kingdom of heaven*, well versed in the things of the gospel, and well able to teach those things... He compares them to a good householder, who *brings forth out of his treasure things new and old*; fruits of last year's growth and this year's gathering, abundance and variety, for the entertainment of his friends, Cant. vii. 13. See here, [1.] What should be a minister's furniture, *a treasure of things new and old*. Those who have so many and various occasions, have need to stock themselves well in their gathering days with truths new and old, out of the Old Testament and out of the new; with ancient and modern improvements, *that the man of God may be thoroughly furnished*, 2 Tim. iii. 16, 17. Old experiences, and new observations, all have their

⁷⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on a harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, Matthew 13:51.

use; and we must not content ourselves with old discoveries, but must be adding new. Live and learn. [2.] What use he should make of this furniture; he should *bring forth*: laying up is in order to laying out, for the benefit of others. *Sic vox non vobis—You are to lay up, but not for yourselves*. Many are full, but they have no vent (Job xxxii. 19); have a talent, but they bury it; such are unprofitable servants; Christ himself received that he might give; so must we, and we shall have more. In bringing forth, things new and old do best together; old truths, but new methods and expressions, especially new affections.⁷¹

Robert South pushes an evangelistic meaning into the text:

By treasure is here signified that which in Latin is called *penus*, a *storehouse*, or *repository*; and the bringing out thence things new and old was (as some are of opinion) a kind of proverb, or proverbial speech amongst the Hebrews, expressing a man's giving a plentiful or liberal entertainment to his friends, and such as came about him.⁷²

John Lightfoot may be one whom South refers to, but his lack of actual Hebraic citation is noteworthy as is his replacement of *καί* “and” with *ἢ* “or” in his book on Hebraisms in Matthew:

What wine, what corn, or fruits, were to be used in the holy things, and in some rites, new or more old,—namely of the present year, or the years past [שן או שן]. But now, a thrifty man, provident of his own affairs, was stored both with the one and the other, prepared for either, which should be required. So it becomes a scribe of the gospel, to have all things in readiness, to bring forth according to the condition and nature of the thing, of the place, and of the hearers.⁷³

Henry Alford abandons the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* with this parable:

Every read spiritually-learned scribe of the Kingdom of Heaven is able, from the increasing stores of his genuine experimental knowledge of the word (not merely from books or learning, or the Bible itself, but ἐκ τοῦ θησ. αὐτοῦ), to bring forth things new and old.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary*, Matthew 13:51.

⁷² Robert South, “Sermon XXXVII. The Scribe Instructed, &c.”

⁷³ John Lightfoot, *Horæ Hebraicæ et Talmudicæ* in *The Whole Works of the Rev. John Lightfoot*, John Rogers Pitman, ed., XI.207. Bracketed text is in original.

⁷⁴ Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, I.149.

The difference in interpretation of the Parable of the Householder comes from a difference in approach to the Word of God itself and results in forcing the parables to fit an erroneous view of the kingdom.

Conclusion of Postponement Parables

After Israel's final rejection of the kingdom offer by blaspheming the Holy Spirit, Jesus withdraws His offer of the kingdom, but when God guarantees His promise to Abraham by swearing by His own name (Gen 22:16; Heb 6:13). Jesus uses the parables to explain that His withdrawal of the kingdom offer neither negates nor changes God's promises, but only postpones the kingdom for a future day. Many have turned the postponement parables into spiritualization parables, using a process that forsakes the context of kingdom revelation as a whole as well as what is written about the Church. Thomas S. Baurain explains well the source of the spiritualized approaches:

The greatest challenge today still seems to be the authority of Scripture, correctly interpreted using a normal hermeneutic; literal, grammatical, historical, plain, contextual, and objective; not by a "Protestant pope," but by every Christian following Christ.⁷⁵

Robert Govett does well to point out, "Here then is rebuked that school of interpretation, which teaches that the *Old Testament prophets* spoke of the *kingdom in mystery*, or of the *Church*. They did not: it was a *secret*, as is here stated; and as is affirmed by Paul: Eph. iii."⁷⁶ The notion of an inaugurated spirit kingdom is entirely foreign to the Bible and would completely evade the original audiences of the postponement parables. By allowing the text to stand on its own

⁷⁵ Thomas S. Baurain, "Sola Scriptura: Return to Literal Grammatical-Historical Hermeneutics" in *Forged From Reformation: How Dispensational Thought Advances the Reformed Legacy*, Christopher Cone and James Fazio, gen. eds., 328.

⁷⁶ Robert Govett, *The Jews, The Gentiles, and the Church of God, in the Gospel of Matthew*, 27.

tradition rooted in the kingdom theology of the Old Testament and the life of Christ, the parables of Matthew 13 present the clear truth that the kingdom is to be established at a future time.

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