

The Kingdom Parables in Matthew: A Prophetic Sketch of Church History?

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Abstract:

The seven parables of the kingdom in Matthew 13 are here assumed to have been delivered by Jesus on one particular occasion, rather than assembled by Matthew from Jesus= teaching at various times . Only the first, second and last of these parables are interpreted by Jesus, so we are left to speculate about the significance of parables 3, 4 and 5, 6. These are, however, obviously in pairs. The internal structure of the seven suggests a chronological sequence: the first parable (Sower) is primarily about planting, the second (Wheat & Weeds) about planting, growth, and (looking forward to the) harvest, and the last (Dragnet) is about the harvest. This suggests that the Mustard Seed and Leaven parables, which are obviously also about growth, are providing a message which is intended to be read as chronologically following parables 1 and 2, with #2 sketching the complete chronological overview. The fact that parables 1 and 2 concern the planting of the good and bad seed, and that parables 2 and 7 concern the harvest of good and bad, may indicate that (contra both traditional and dispensational interpreters), that parables 3 and 4 should be taken as growth of good (3) and bad (4), rather than both the same sort of growth. What, then, are we to make of parables 5 and 6, the hidden treasure and the valuable pearl? I would suggest that these show us the results in a society when the growth of the bad seed has had its full effect: to find the Gospel in such a society, one must either stumble upon it by accident or be diligently looking for it. I conclude that Jesus= parables of the kingdom give us a sort of overview of the church age, not in a strict straight-line chronology from beginning to end, but in the form of the typical history of the Gospel in any given society.

Introduction

The seven or eight parables in the 13th chapter of Matthew constitute the largest block of parables in the Gospels. They appear to have been given on one occasion. If we harmonize these parables in Matthew with the accounts in Mark and Luke, then the occasion included at least one more parable not recorded in Matthew. These parables may be listed as follows, with the parable peculiar to Mark and the eighth parable of the kingdom in Matthew given in italics:

The Sower (Mt 13:1-9), interpreted in 13:18-23 (parallels in Mk 4 and Lk 8);
The Weeds (Mt 13:24-30), interpreted in 13:36-43 (no parallels);
The Growing Seed (Mk 4:26-29), no interpretation or parallels;
The Mustard Seed (Mt 13:31-32), no interpretation (also in Mk 4 and Lk 13);
The Leaven (Mt 13:33), no interpretation (also in Lk 13);
The Hidden Treasure (Mt 13:44), no interpretation or parallels;
The Valuable Pearl (Mt 13:45-46), no interpretation or parallels;

The Dragnet (Mt 13:47-38), interpreted in 13:51-52 (no parallels);
New Treasures and Old (Mt 13:51-52), no interpretations or parallels.

In recent New Testament studies, it has been common to see the discourses of Jesus in Matthew as constructs of the evangelist rather than of Jesus, the evangelist having assembled independently circulating oral sayings or extracts from various written sources.¹ But for our passage at least, this does not seem to be consistent with a fair reading of Matthew's text, where the narrative framework surrounding these parables is very explicit (my italics):²

13:1ff B A That *same day* Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them *many things in parables*, saying...@

13:10-11 B A The disciples came to him and asked, >Why do you speak to the people *in parables*?= He replied...@

13:24 B A Jesus told them *another* parable...@

13:31 B A He told them *another* parable...@

13:33 B A He told them *still another* parable...@

13:34-37 B A Jesus spoke *all these things* to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable.... Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, >Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.= He answered...@

13:51-52 B A >Have you understood *all these things*?= Jesus asked. >Yes,= they replied. He said to them...@

13:53 B A When Jesus had *finished these parables*, he moved on from there.@

Of course, it is possible that the single occasion narrated here might have lasted more than one day, thus accounting for the various settings in which Jesus is speaking to the crowds or alone with his disciples. Yet this is not necessary; these various settings may result from Jesus breaking away from the crowd for food or rest. It is also possible that Matthew used a narrative strategy of moving questions asked Jesus in the evening back to locations in the narrative near the parables they concern. This is a more satisfactory technique for historical narration than inventing whole scenes and discourses.

We propose, then, to take the parables as they stand in Matthew. We will also assume that the

1. e.g., Willoughby C. Allen, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912), p. lxiv; Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 250; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1993), p. li; Barclay M. Newman and Philip C. Stine, *A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew* (London: United Bible Societies, 1988), p. 411.

2. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible.

reader is not expected to go find the parallel passage in Mark and insert its unique parable in the proper place among the others in order to understand the parables in Matthew. Thus we here consider only the Matthew parables.

It also appears likely that the last parable in Matthew 13 is not intended to be a part of the seven-parable kingdom sequence, but a final exhortation to the disciples to meditate on the kingdom teachings. As they do so they will continue to find new truths therein. It is, in fact, something of this sort that we are seeking to do here, to see if there is not an overarching structure to this parable group that has hitherto been overlooked.

The Interpreted Parables of the Kingdom

This leaves us with seven parables to consider B those listed above in regular rather than *italic* type. Of these, three are interpreted by Jesus and four are not. Since it is safer methodology to start from the known and move to the unknown, let us look first at the interpreted parables. These are the first, second and last of the seven parables, so they form a sort of interpretive *inclusio* around the other four.

The Sower

Jesus= story of the sower pictures the usual method of planting grain by casting seed abroad while walking through a field. We are not told whether the plowing precedes or follows the sowing. As is typical of the terrain and the small farm plots in Israel at NT times, some of the seed falls on various unsatisfactory soils where it does not produce grain, while other seed falls on good soil.³

Jesus gives us a detailed explanation of the story, showing it to be an allegorical type of parable B that is, one in which several of the features are independently figurative so that an explanation is necessary to catch the meaning. The overall picture is that A the message of the kingdom @ will encounter varied receptions in the different sorts of people that hear it, rather than everyone jumping on the kingdom bandwagon, as the disciples probably expected. At the least, many will jump off again.

The Weeds

Jesus= second parable is a story parable, with more of a plot. After a landowner has sown wheat seed in his field, an enemy comes at night and spitefully scatters weed seed on top of it. Later on in the growing season B presumably the delay is because both plants are similar grasses B the farmhands notice the weeds growing with the wheat. Though they want to uproot the weeds right away, the owner won=t let them for fear of uprooting some of the wheat. Both are to grow

3. Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 82; Newman and Stine, *Translator=s Handbook*, p. 404.

together until the harvest.

Jesus' interpretation identifies the two planters as himself and the devil, the two kinds of seeds as his followers and Satan's. Rather than have his servants on earth try to get rid of all the bad guys, Jesus tells us that the angels will do so at the end of the age.

The Dragnet

The seventh of Jesus' parables of the kingdom continues the harvest theme from the parable of the Weeds, but now we are shown a fish harvest. The fishermen appear to be using a dragnet or seine, a long net that is only a few feet wide, with weights on one long side and floats on the other. The net is set out to enclose a section of water with both ends on shore. The net is wide enough to reach from the surface to the lake bottom. Everything larger than the net mesh is trapped; it is then brought ashore as the net is hauled in. The fishermen finally separate the good, marketable fish from the worthless ones.⁴

Jesus sketches the meaning of this parable by noting that drawing the net represents the end of the age, the fishermen are angels and the good and bad fish are the righteous and wicked.

These three interpreted parables, taken together, reveal a chronological sequence, beginning with the planting of the Kingdom message and culminating in the harvest at the end of the age. Planting, growth, harvest and separation are all significant themes. The presence of this chronological sequence raises the possibility that the whole seven-parable set might be chronological, since the other four are bracketed by these three.

The Uninterpreted Parables of the Kingdom

Within this bracket formed by the interpreted parables, we find four parables which Jesus leaves uninterpreted. What do these four mean? Not surprisingly, there has been more diversity of opinion here even among Bible-believing scholars than was the case with the other three. Nevertheless we can make some uncontroversial statements about them.

First of all, these four parables form two pairs. The first pair, the parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven, are clearly about growth. The second pair, the parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Valuable Pearl, are clearly about finding, buying, and giving up everything to possess.

As a matter of fact, the three interpreted parables we looked at previously can also be seen as forming two pairs by having one of the parables do double-duty. Thus the seven parables of the kingdom provide us with four pairs, as follows:

4. Newman and Stine, *Translator's Handbook*, p. 452.

Sower/Weeds - planting of the good and bad
Weeds/Dragnet - harvesting of the good and bad
Mustard Seed/Leaven - growth
Treasure/Pearl - finding, buying, giving up all

The Mustard Seed and the Leaven

Turning now to the paired parables of the mustard seed and the leaven, Jesus here gives us two pictures of growth, which thus expand on a theme mentioned in the first two parables. In the first of these, a mustard plant, starting from a very small seed, grows to become a very large herb B in fact a small tree B large enough that birds come and nest⁵ in its branches. In the other picture, a woman mixes a little sourdough in a large batch of flour, and eventually the whole batch is leavened.

Interpreters have debated the significance of these two parables. The traditional view has been that both picture the growth of the kingdom (the church) over the ages as it has spread throughout the world.⁶ A minority view, held by many dispensationalists, is that both picture the growth of apostasy in the church.⁷

In favor of the traditional view, note that both parables start with the phrase *The kingdom of heaven is like* and the object in one case is *a mustard seed* and in the other *leaven*. Thus it sounds like the mustard seed and the leaven each represent the kingdom. The force of this argument is seriously weakened when it is realized from rabbinical parables that the opening phrase *this is like* often refers to the whole story to follow, not just the next word.⁸ This would seem to be the case in two other of the kingdom parables we are here considering. In the

5. The NIV's rendering *A perch* is a little weak, probably because mustard trees do not typically grow large enough for birds to build nests in them. Yet Jesus may very well have added this peculiar feature to draw the attention of his hearers to this point.

6. e.g., John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke*, transl. T. H. L. Parker. 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 2:78-80; R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of Matthew's Gospel* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg, 1943), pp. 527-33; Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew* (New York: Scribners, 1909), p. 194; William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1973), pp. 565-68; H. N. Ridderbos, *Matthew*, transl. by Ray Toedtman (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), pp. 262-64.

7. e.g., J. Vernon McGee, *Matthew*, 2 vols. (Pasadena, CA: Thru the Bible Books, 1973), 1:176-181.

8. Keener, *Bible Background Commentary*, p. 83 (on Matt 13:24); Newman and Stine, *Translator's Handbook*, pp. 433-34, 437, 439.

Weeds, the object of the kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed, but Jesus explains that this man is himself, the Son of Man, rather than the kingdom as such. In the Dragnet, the object is the net, which is surely not identical to the kingdom. A similar feature also occurs in the parable of the Children in the Marketplace (Matt 11:16-19; Lk 7:31-35), where this generation is not the children who suggest the various games (these are John and Jesus) but rather the children who refuse to play either wedding or funeral.

Against the traditional view is the fact that unless this parable is an exception the figurative use of leaven is always negative, e.g., in the Old Testament sacrificial system, and in Jesus' and Paul's remarks about leaven (Matt 16:6, 11, 12; 1 Cor 5:7-8). These usages imply that the growth of the leaven is something bad, as the dispensationalists suggest.

But rather than going with either the traditional or dispensational view of these parables, it seems to me that a mediating position makes better sense. Since parables one and two picture the planting of the good and the bad, and parables two and seven picture the harvesting of the good and the bad, why not take parables three and four to picture the growing of *both* the good and bad? This allows us to give full weight to the fact that leaven has a negative figurative sense, and yet does not require us to force a bad sense on the growth of the mustard seed. For the growth of the mustard plant is not unnatural, as some have suggested. Rather, the mustard seed is an excellent illustration of something that starts very small and grows to be rather large B like the West European proverbial expressions regarding acorn to oak. And in doing so, the mustard plant is not diseased or malformed, it is just doing what God made it to do.

Moving on to consider the birds nesting in the branches, it may well be that they are intended to have a sinister significance, even if the growth of the mustard plant is not. In this very sequence of kingdom parables, the birds in the parable of the Sower represent the evil one. And back in the Old Testament, the allegorical dream Joseph interprets for the baker (Gen 40:16-19) also has birds with an ominous meaning.

The birds may also be doing something more than this in our parable of the Mustard Seed. For the Old Testament sometimes uses the picture of a tree with birds nesting in it to represent an empire (e.g., Ezk 31:6; Dan 4:12) B the birds presumably representing various dependents. Perhaps Jesus' picture is intended to suggest that the kingdom of heaven will grow to become a modest earthly kingdom. The arrival of the birds may even prepare the way for the next parable, that of the Leaven.

The Treasure and the Pearl

Turning to our last pair, Jesus now gives us two pictures of finding. In the first, we are probably to imagine a day-laborer or tenant farmer out plowing a field, when the plowshare strikes something hard. As he struggles to move the obstruction, he finds it is a clay pot, not the stone he had expected. Pulling out the pot, he sees it is filled with treasure, perhaps silver coins, gold, or even jewels. He knows that if he shows up in the village with all this wealth, there will be questions where it came from, and when the owner of the land learns where he found it, he will

claim right of ownership, and the laborer will be lucky if he gets anything. So he puts the pot back in the ground, goes home and considers his resources. He is barely able, by selling everything he has, to put together enough money to buy the land from its owner. Having bought it, he can find the pot again and then have clear right to its treasure.

The second picture is very similar, except the pearl merchant is *looking* for his treasure. Being a specialist, he is able to recognize the difference between an exceptionally valuable pearl and one which is merely good. When one day he sees the pearl of a lifetime, he sells everything he has to possess it. Here, too, we have a *hidden* treasure; though others see the pearl, they do not know enough about pearls to recognize what a treasure it is when they see it.

Clearly, both parables are about finding, about finding great treasure, about recognizing its value, and about giving up everything to have it. Though the finder's joy is mentioned only in the first parable, it is natural to understand the same in the second as well. In any case, both finders seem to realize they are getting a great bargain, worth far more than what they are paying for it.

But what is the treasure? The traditional view is that it is the kingdom of heaven, the Gospel, Jesus, or heaven.⁹ A common dispensational view, by contrast, is that the finder is Jesus, and the treasure is his people.¹⁰ Some such interpreters make the treasure found in the ground to be Israel (through a wordplay on the idea of the *Almond*), and the pearl (grown in the sea) to be the Gentiles (the nations of the world being sometimes pictured as the sea).

The major objection to the first alternative B seeing the treasure as the Gospel B is that we as believers cannot buy our salvation. This, of course, is true. Yet Jesus clearly indicates that his followers must be prepared to give up everything to follow him. And we should be able to do this with joy because of the enormous value of the heavenly reward. In any case the treasure is worth far more than what is paid for it.

The major problem with the second alternative B seeing the treasure as God's people B is in justifying how it can be that, while we were sinners, we were much in the way of a treasure. And how Jesus, in giving up his very life to ransom us, is paying a much smaller price than the value of the treasure. I think the traditional view gets much the best of it here!

It is tempting to try and take these two parables as depicting the finding of the good and the finding of the bad, but I cannot convince myself that this is the way to go. Instead, I take them to

9. e.g., Calvin, 2:81-82; Lenski, 541-546.

10. e.g., McGee, 1:181-185; Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1980), p. 183-184.

picture *two different ways* in which people find Jesus and the Gospel. Some find him accidentally; they are looking for no such thing. Others like C. S. Lewis in his *Pilgrim's Regress* and *Surprised by Joy* are searching for years for something which they finally recognize when they encounter Jesus.

A Prophetic Sketch of Church History?

These seven parables of the kingdom appear to form a sequence, starting with the proclamation of the Gospel to various sorts of hearers and ending with the final separation of righteous and wicked at the end of the age. It is certainly reasonable to inquire whether or not they are intended to give us some sort of prophetic picture of church history.

I believe that a case can be made for this, though not in the sense that each feature represents some particular incident in church history. Consider the following list which I propose as lessons to be gleaned from the successive parables:

The Sower

1. Though the Gospel is good news, not everyone is going to jump on the bandwagon, or stay on.
2. Some who hear will not understand, nor make any positive response, nor even remember the message.
3. Some will respond eagerly but not really be saved; persecution will reveal their true condition.
4. Others will begin to grow, but this world will seem more important; they will never bear fruit.
5. But others will be saved, and that will be demonstrated by their lives.

The Weeds

1. Not only will the followers of Jesus have to contend with the problems mentioned in the previous parable, they will also find that competing gospels and false Christians will show up. These find their source in Satan.
2. Although (as we learn elsewhere) we have a responsibility to exercise church discipline, such false believers and their gospels will continue till the end of the age. It will not be possible to destroy them without killing real believers as well.
3. Though such false believers may lead many astray and seem to get away with much wickedness, there will be no escape when the Lord comes. Their fate will be terrible burning, weeping, gnashing of teeth.
4. Though true believers seem to get lost in all the confusion of competing religions and false Christians, though their desire to be honest and do right may seem to go unnoticed, yet one day they will shine forth in God's kingdom.

Mustard and Leaven

1. Despite a small start, varied reception, and false believers, the church will commonly grow until it begins to dominate the society into which it has been introduced.
2. After it has come to dominance, people will begin to join the church for reasons other than its message, e.g., for prestige, or for possible advancement.
3. False teaching will then be able to do its work within the church far more effectively than

before, until it thoroughly permeates and transforms the institution.

Treasure and Pearl

1. When false teaching has done its work in the church, the Gospel may become so obscured as to be very difficult to find.
2. Nevertheless, some will find it. Some will not be looking for it but will find it by accident (God's providence). Others will be looking for it, because God has put a longing in their hearts.
3. Both will recognize its supreme value when they find it. They will be willing to give up everything to have and keep it, realizing that they have found an unbelievable bargain.

The Dragnet

1. Finally, the end of the age will come. There will be no escape from judgment then.
2. There will be a complete and accurate separation of wicked and righteous.
3. The fate of the wicked will be terrible B burning, weeping, being thrown away.

These lessons B given the truth of Christianity B have certainly characterized the movement of the Gospel as it has spread to the various nations of the world in the past two thousand years.

These parables do not B I think B give us a single linear movement from the first century to the coming of Christ. Instead, it appears that they provide a sketch of how the Gospel will typically fare as it comes into a particular society or culture. It will meet varied receptions from different sorts of people. Satan will quickly put together culturally appropriate heresies to limit the damage it will do to his kingdom. In spite of this, the Gospel and church will typically grow until they come to dominate the society. From then on, Satan will modify his strategy and seek to corrupt the church from within (without, presumably, giving up on competing religions). He will regularly be successful enough that the Gospel will become so obscured as to be difficult to find. Even so, God will make sure that some do find it.

This is certainly an apt description of how the Gospel has actually fared over church history. The only nuances I would add are two. In some societies, Christianity will be destroyed so that the cycle does not carry through; of course, it may start over again later, when Christianity is reintroduced. In other societies, freedom of religion will be established so that no church is able to become the state religion (and so the corruption by success is somewhat diluted); in these, the history of Christianity will look like several of these cycles superimposed and out of phase, with new groups forming as others become corrupt.

This, I think, is what Jesus is telling us in his seven parables of the kingdom, as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew.