

TWO PARABLES OF THE GROWTH OF
THE KINGDOM OF GOD:
THE MUSTARD SEED AND THE LEAVEN
(MATTHEW 13:31-33)

by
Eldon Grubb

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MUSTARD SEED AND THE LEAVEN (MATTHEW 13:31-33)
Author: Eldon E. Grubb
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Advisor: David Turner

From the time of the church fathers until the middle of the nineteenth century, most exegetes have interpreted the parables of Jesus in an allegorical and/or speculative manner. Part of the reason for the misunderstanding is that the concept of the kingdom of God is also misinterpreted. This study attempts to be consistent with the biblical view that the full manifestation of the kingdom is yet future, although some aspects of it such as the King, were present when Christ was on the earth at His incarnation and some of the benefits of it may be received now by Christians and the body of Christ.

Most biblical commentators agree that these two parables teach that insignificant things can and will have great effects. There is great difference of opinion over whether Christ was referring to the growth of the kingdom, the gospel, the Church, the evil within the Church, or the evil in professing Christendom. The details of the parable are understood as simply making the picture more vivid and realistic, not as symbolizing anything in particular.

The parable of the leaven is very often said to teach the growth of evil mainly because leaven is used to symbolize evil in the Bible. However, biblical symbols do not always symbolize the same thing in every context. The introductory formula, the context, the picture of the parable, and the biblical usage of the term ζυμή all support the view that Christ was teaching that the kingdom of God itself would grow, not evil within professing Christendom. The Bible does teach that there will be apostasy in the last days, but it is not taught in this parable. Furthermore, the parable of the leaven can be taken as a picture of good and remain consistent with a premillennial dispensational perspective.

The few who truly followed Christ at His first appearance and even today do not change who He is. When He sets up His millennial kingdom on earth with all believers from all ages, it will be a great number in contrast to the small number at His first appearance. It will be similar to the difference between the mustard seed and the mustard tree, and the leaven and the leavened dough. It will be clear that the outward extension of the kingdom is complete and the inward penetration is finished, because the absolute sovereignty of God is behind the teaching of these parables.

Accepted by the Faculty of Grace Theological Seminary
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David L. Turner

Adviser

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BAGD	Bauer, Walter; Arndt, William F.; Gingrich, F. Wilbur; and Danker, Frederick W. <u>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</u>
BDB	Brown, Francis; Driver, S. R.; and Briggs, C. A. <u>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</u>
<u>EvQ</u>	<u>Evangelical Quarterly</u>
<u>ExpTim</u>	<u>Expository Times</u>
<u>GTJ</u>	<u>Grace Theological Journal</u>
<u>JBL</u>	<u>Journal of Biblical Literature</u>
LSJ	Liddell, H. G.; Scott, R.; Jones. <u>A Greek-English Lexicon</u>
<u>NIDNTT</u>	<u>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</u>
<u>TDNT</u>	<u>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</u>

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Pre-determined Assumptions

All interpretation of any communication, written or spoken, must take into account the presuppositions of the writer or speaker and reader or listener. This is very true in the study of the Word of God, the Bible. This writer holds firmly to the fundamental doctrines of the Word of God. Since this paper is directly related to Eschatology and Ecclesiology, it is important to understand that the premillennial and dispensational approach to the Bible is followed in this study. Although the premillennial dispensational approach is taken, not all the conclusions will agree with other premillennial dispensational views on the passage.

Interpretation of the Parables of Jesus

Even though doctrines cannot be formed on parables alone, parables can affirm and support doctrines which are derived from the Word of God as a whole. Jesus used parables to draw verbal pictures of the world around Him. He used a story, taken from daily life with a familiar setting, to teach a new lesson. That lesson often comes at the end of the story, but it is not always understood.

The Greek word παραβολή means "to set beside, to compare." It is a story or narrative or figure from ordinary life cast or put beside a spiritual truth. In literary terms, it is a figure of speech known also as an extended simile. Hauck has defined the New Testament parables as:

an independent similitude in which an evident or accepted truth from a known field (nature, human life) is designed to establish or illustrate a new truth in the teaching of Jesus (kingdom of God, God's nature and action, piety).¹

Kistemaker makes an interesting comparison when he states that,

The art of composing and telling parables demonstrated by Jesus finds no parallel in literature. But close to the parables of Jesus are those of the ancient rabbis of the first and second centuries in the Christian era. . . However, the similiarity between Jesus' parables and those of the rabbis is only formal. Rabbinic parables normally are introduced to explain or elucidate the Law, verses of Scripture or a doctrine. They are not used for teaching new truths , as in the case with the parables of Jesus.²

After the Lord spoke the parables of Matthew 13, He asked His diciples if they understood all these things. They replied with a strong "yes" (Matt 13:51). Since they were able to understand the parables in that day, it follows that today they are not beyond comprehension. Many have claimed to understand since that day, but the parables remain among the most difficult and misunderstood discourses of the

¹TDNT, s.v. " παραβολή," by Friedrich Hauck, Vol. V, p. 744-761.

²Simon J. Kistemaker, The Parables of Jesus (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), p. xvi.

Savior. Alva J. McClain shows real wisdom in this statement:

In no area of the Word of God is there greater need for caution on the part of interpreters than in the parables and especially those concerned with the 'mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.' Even the most spiritual and well-taught students of the Word may go astray here; and many an error has found its basis in some parabolic detail. It is never safe to use either a type or a parable to teach something not elsewhere taught directly and clearly in the Word of God.¹

The history of the interpretation of parables reveals that they have been misinterpreted by most students of the Word. Kistemaker summarizes it well when he says:

In the early church, church fathers began to look for various hidden meanings concerning the coming of Jesus in the Old Testament Scriptures. As a natural consequence of this trend, the fathers began to find hidden meanings in the parables of Jesus. Perhaps they were influenced by Jewish apologetics in substituting the simplicity of Scripture for subtle speculations. In any event, the result was allegorical interpretations of the parables. Thus from the time of the church fathers until the middle of the nineteenth century, most exegetes interpreted parables allegorically.²

Origen was the most prominent allegorist of the parables. But during the Reformation, Martin Luther tried to change the direction of interpreting Scripture. He attempted to include the historical setting and grammatical structure. John Calvin was more direct in that he sought to establish the main point of its teaching. The details to him had nothing to do with what Jesus intended to teach with the parable.

¹Alva J. McClain, The Greatness of the Kingdom (Winona Lake, IN: Brethren Missionary Herald Co., 1959), p. 324.

²Kistemaker, Parables, pp. xix, xx.

Julicher, Dodd, and Jeremias continued the trend of the Reformation and were concerned with the setting and grammar. Jeremias believed that the parables developed in two stages. The first was the actual situation of Jesus' ministry, while the second was the way the parables were used and changed by the early church. He thought that the recovery of the original form of the parables was required to hear the voice of Jesus.¹

At the same time that the interpretation of parables has become more historical and grammatical, there have also been scholars of the New Hermeneutic school who have begun to treat the parables as existential literature. They have removed them from their historical settings and replaced their original meaning with a contemporary message.

From this brief look at the history of the interpretation of parables, it is deduced that three general principles must be followed. First of all, the student must make an historical setting of the parable which includes religious, social, political, and geographical circumstances. This involves seeking to understand the earthly details of the parables, the attitude and spiritual condition of the ori-

¹Joachim Jeremias, The Parables of Jesus (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), pp. 113, 114.

ginal hearers, and the reason which prompted Jesus to use the parable.¹

The second general principle is that the literary and grammatical structure of the parable must be studied. This includes observing the main point of the parable, the moods and tenses the writer has used, word studies in their biblical contexts, and especially the introductions and conclusions to the parables. Third, "the main point of a given parable should be checked theologically against the teaching of Jesus and the rest of Scripture," in the same way any passage should also be checked.² This should also include checking to see if the individual gospel writers used the parables in various special ways in each of their gospels. Only after these things are done can one translate its meaning in terms relevant to the needs of today.

These three general principles will guide the methodology of this paper. This should result in a full, accurate understanding of the meaning of these parables as they were first spoken by Jesus Christ and what it implies for the Church then and now, plus the future kingdom of God.

The Purpose of the Parables of Jesus

Jesus used parables to teach spiritual truth. But His aim was not always realized because of the spiritual

¹A. Berkeley Michelsen, Interpreting the Bible (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963), p. 229.

²Kistemaker, Parables, p. xxiv.

condition of His hearers. Because of this, His parables actually had a double purpose or function. The first was to teach and reveal spiritual truth to those who did see and hear Him. "They were far different from those who went through the motions of seeing but did not see, who went through the motions of hearing, but did not hear."¹ "Among Christ's listeners there were those who by grace had been led to trust in Christ to such an extent that they not only believed what they could readily understand, but even that which was as yet mysterious."²

There was also a second purpose which cannot be ignored. The parables were designed to puzzle, conceal, blind, even judge the unbelieving ones who rejected the person, works, and teachings of Jesus. McClain explains it well when he says,

Because they (Israel) had not received the simple announcement of the Kingdom, they now are given something they cannot understand. This judicial significance of the mystery parables is confirmed by the quotation of a well-known passage from Isaiah (in Matthew 13:13-15). This remarkable passage, originally given in Isaiah 6:9-10, is referred to five times in the New Testament, always in connection with Israel's rejection of her King. Arguments over the meaning of the conjunctive particles 'ὅτι' and 'ὥστε' whether the parables were given to produce blindness, or as a result of blindness, cannot change the judicial nature of our Lord's words.³

¹Michelsen, Interpreting, p. 215.

²William Hendriksen, The New Testament Commentary, vol. 1: The Book of Matthew (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973), p. 549.

³McClain, Kingdom, p, 323.

Among those who are opposed to the judicial meaning of this series of Kingdom parables, Bruce is willing to accuse the New Testament writers of error rather than admit the judicial meaning, when he says, "It is much better to impute a mistake to them than an inhuman purpose to Christ."¹ McClain is correct in replying to that, "As if it were 'inhuman' for God to judge men for their unbelief."²

The double purpose of the kingdom parables must be constantly kept in mind, especially for a complete hermeneutic. As James G. Inrig has correctly pointed out,

No system which rejects the judicial purpose of parables and claims that the parables needed no explanation is acceptable. Nor is any interpretation which rejects the Sitz im Leben Jesus, in this case the day of rejection (Matt 13), able to adequately deal with these parables.³

This paper will take into account the judicial purpose of the parables as well as the revelatory purpose.

The Context and Structure of Matthew 13

A formula appears periodically in Matthew's gospel to alert the reader to several of the book's larger divisions.⁴

¹A. B. Bruce, "The Synoptic Gospels," in vol. 1 of Expositors Greek New Testament, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), p. 196.

²McClain, Kingdom, p. 323.

³James Gary Inrig, "The Parables of Matthew 13" (Master's thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1968), p. 48.

⁴This formula occurs in Matthew 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; and 26:1.

Each of the five times it occurs, this formula, "And it happened when Jesus had finished. . .," follows directly the five major discourses or sermons that Matthew records. This supports the view that the parables of Matthew 13 were given at one occasion, like the Sermon on the Mount, Olivet Discourse, and other discourses. By relating chapter 13 to its immediate context, much insight is gained into the historical setting of chapter 13.

The passage from Matthew 11:2-13:53 is itself made up of two major parts with a break at the end of chapter 12. The central theme of chapters 11 and 12 is the rejection of Jesus. Until these chapters, Christ's ministry appears to face little human opposition. But the intensity of the opposition against Him grows steadily stronger from chapter 11 to the end of Matthew's gospel. The religious leaders condemn Him publicly in chapter 12 for healing on the Sabbath and for casting out demons. Jesus was very aware of feedback from His ministry, and this was a major reason why He began using parables as His method of teaching.

The second tour of Galilee with the twelve and the intense hostility of the Pharisees is recorded in Matthew 12. This is a major crisis point in the ministry of Jesus. He presents Himself to the nation of Israel as their King, but the religious leaders of the nation officially reject Him. Since they could not deny any of His miracles, they rejected Him by attributing His works to another source, namely, the

devil. This sets the stage for the first great group of parables of Jesus.

The basic question Jesus answers in the parables of Matthew 13 is this: "What will become of the kingdom since as a nation Israel had begun to reject Christ as their Promised King?" Each parable answers this question in a unique way and provides additional insights.

Chapter 13 divides naturally into two main sections: verses 1-35 and 36-52. These sections have a very similar structure. Each one has its own setting (vs. 1-3a, 36a), as well as an appropriate conclusion (vs. 34, 35, and vs. 53, 58). Inrig is correct when he says,

This structure evident in the parabolic discourse is not to be explained as a result of Matthew's editorial work. While the eight parables given by Matthew in chapter 13 may be selected from a larger number (as ἐν παραβολαῖς in verse 10 perhaps suggests), the arrangement of the parables as given here is a faithful representation of the Savior's discourse. There is a clear progression of thought, a consistent Sitz im Leben, a unity of subject matter, and an unassuming naturalness about the arrangement that form critics will always find embarrassing.¹

It is clear that Jesus spoke the first four parables from a boat (13:1, 2, 36), a little offshore in the Sea of Galilee (Mark 4:1). This provided an excellent place to be seen and heard easily. Matthew inserts verses 10-23 after the Parable of the Sower, even though it probably took place in private after all the parables in chapter 13. Matthew uses Christ's explanation as an introduction to parables

¹Inrig, "Matthew 13," p. 49.

giving the reason for Christ using parables (vs. 10-17) and an example of how a parable should be interpreted (vs. 18-23), which does not deny the inerrancy of Scripture. After four parables, Jesus left the crowds (v. 36), went ashore, and went into a home. Then He explained the Parable of the Weeds and shared three more parables.

The actual parables cover 38 verses, or about two-thirds of the chapter. The remaining 20 verses are devoted to introduction (vs. 1-3a), the answering of the disciples' question concerning the reason for the use of parables (vs. 10-17, 34, 35), a description of a true scribe (vs. 51, 52), and the concluding paragraph (vs. 53-58). This last paragraph records His own hometown's rejection of Him.

Three transitional statements bind together the Parables of the Tares, the Mustard Seed, and the Leaven (vs. 24a, 31a, 33a). These statements repeat the phrase: "ἄλλην παραβολήν παρέθηκεν αὐτοῖς λέγων" ("Another parable He told them, saying. . .").¹

The Parable of the Sower (vs. 3-9) teaches how various people responded to the message about the kingdom. The Parables of the Tares (vs. 24-30) and the Net (vs. 47-50) explain the present mixed character and future consummation in purity and splendor of the kingdom. The growth and development of the kingdom are dealt with in the Parables of the

¹J. D. Kingsbury, The Parables of Jesus in Matthew 13 (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1969), p. 14.

Mustard Seed (vs. 31, 32) and of the Leaven (v. 33). These are the last two parables He gives before He leaves the crowd. This does add to their significance, because Christ uses them as the final truths He would reveal to the crowds at this time. In verses 34 and 35, Matthew makes an insertion to help explain the reason Christ spoke in parables. The preciousness of the kingdom is taught in the Hidden Treasure (v. 44) and the Pearl (vs. 45, 46).

Three of the parables, the Sower, the Weeds, and the Net, are given some explanation by Christ Himself. Since the other four parables are shorter and are not explained, they are more difficult to understand.

The last verse of chapter 13 reveals that Jesus drastically reduced the number of miracles in His hometown because of the lack of faith in His hometown. Immediately, chapter 14 reveals that John the Baptist was beheaded. This is another indication that the opposition to Jesus and His followers was gaining momentum.

The Authenticity of the Text

It is widely claimed that the parables, as well as the rest of the Gospels, have been changed to suit the needs of the early church. The approach of Jeremias is typical of that of many contemporary New Testament scholars:

Jesus spoke in Galilean Aramaic. The task of translating His sayings into Greek, which began at an early date, necessarily involved, to a slight degree, innumer-

able changes of meaning. Hence, the retranslation of the parables into Jesus' mother-tongue is an important, perhaps the most important, aid to the recovery of their original meaning.¹

The basic assumption of Jeremias that Jesus spoke in Aramaic is by no means certain.² In addition, the entire process is of questionable value because of the present incomplete knowledge of Galilean Aramaic and the great subjectivity of the process of retranslation.

Kingsbury follows the tenets of redaction-criticism. He states that his

study of chapter 13 is based on the premise that, just as Jesus employed the parables to meet the demands of His own situation, so Matthew employed parables that had come down to him to meet the demands of the situation of the Church to which he belonged.³

While this premise is valid in some sense, this view seems to ignore the fact that Matthew was an eyewitness to the ministry of Christ and that the gospel of Matthew was written to Jews primarily. The term 'church' is only mentioned three times in the whole gospel, and all occurrences are in chapters 16 and 18 of Matthew.

Kingsbury does point out that there is " a tension between the autonomy of the church and its involvement with

¹Jeremias, Parables, p. 25.

²Nigel Turner, Grammatical Insights into the New Testament (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1965), pp. 174-178. For further reference see Robert Gundry, "The Language Milieu of First Century Palestine," JBL 83 (December 1964): 404.

³Kingsbury, Matthew 13, p. 10.

the Jews."¹ He appears to believe that the Church had already reached a high degree of autonomy and even looked upon itself as the 'true Israel.'

However, in this paper, the modern solutions to the synoptic problem and much of modern form criticism will not be adopted, because they rest on an improper understanding of the nature of Scripture. This does not mean that Jeremias, Kingsbury, and others should be avoided in the study of parables, because they have dealt carefully with the text of the parables.

In addition, this paper will defend the text of the parable of the Mustard Seed when Jesus said that the mustard seed was the smallest of all seeds. He did not merely accommodate His language to the knowledge of the people or use errant proverbial language. The text of the Scriptures will be assumed to be innocent or inerrant in its original autographs, rather than being assumed to be guilty or errant. The Scriptures must be proved guilty, not proved innocent.

The Biblical Concept of the Kingdom of Heaven/God

One of the most important single concepts in Matthew's entire gospel is the kingdom of heaven (which is equivalent to the phrase, "the kingdom of God"). Matthew reads "kingdom of heaven," while the Synoptic parallels read

¹Ibid., p. 11.

"kingdom of God." Edersheim deals with the heart of the issue, when he correctly states:

According to the Rabbinic views of the time, the terms 'Kingdom,' 'Kingdom of heaven,' and the 'Kingdom of God' (in the Targum on Micah 4:7 'Kingdom of Jehovah'), were equivalent. In fact, the word 'heaven' was very often used instead of 'God,' so as to avoid unduly familiarizing the ear with the Sacred Name. This, probably, accounts for the exclusive use of the expression 'Kingdom of Heaven' in the Gospel of St. Matthew.¹

Both expressions denote God's dominion, sovereignty, or kingly rule. However, much confusion and controversy surround these expressions. Three basic views are all widely held by scholars today.

The first is that Christ proclaimed that the kingdom was present, having been established in His person and work. Second, some believe that for Christ, the kingdom was yet a fact of the future. Third, a mediating view, is that some believe that for our Lord the kingdom is in some sense both present and future. There are variations of each of these views, which emphasize certain aspects. Identical evidence is used by various schools of thought to support very different positions, so this issue is by no means simple.

The kingdom of God in the New Testament does not speak of something present. Kingsbury summarizes well when he says,

¹Alfred Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), pp. 266-267.

According to first century thought, God's kingly rule was eternal; it encompassed the entire world and all of the nations and powers in it. In the present age, however, God's sovereignty was fully recognized only in Israel. Consequently, it was the hope of Israel that God would intervene in history, openly manifest Himself as the Ruler of all, and in so doing free His people from heathen bondage and subject all nations to His holy will.¹

When Jesus spoke of the kingdom, He meant that over which He rules as the Son of Man, which the Old Testament prophesies. "The parables of Matthew 13 do not transform or ignore this Old Testament use."²

Much more space would be required than is possible here to look at even the major passages on the kingdom and all the ways they are interpreted. As a result, this study will attempt to be consistent with the view that the full manifestation of the kingdom is yet future, although some aspects of it, such as the King, were present when Christ was on the earth and some of the benefits of it may be received now by the Church. This is basically what McClain taught when he said,

At His first coming, our Lord was exalted to be both Lord and Messianic King (Acts 2:35); but not until His second coming will He establish His kingdom on earth as the rightful successor to the throne of His father David. In the interim, He is gathering to Himself a body of people, distressed and debtors because of sin, who are destined to become associated with Him in the coming Kingdom. Upon them from His present throne in the heavens, He is abundantly able to bestow certain of

¹Ibid., p. 17

²Inrig, "Matthew 13," p, 34.

His regal blessings even before the arrival of the kingdom.³

¹McClain, Kingdom, p, 440.

CHAPTER II

THE PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD SEED

The Problem of Interpretation

The Parable of the Mustard Seed (Matt 13:31,32 and Mark 4:30-32) is "a favorite target for opponents of the inerrancy of the autographs of Scripture."¹ Most biblical commentators agree that this parable teaches virtually the same thing as the Parable of the Leaven, but what that truth is, is the subject of vigorous discussion. Both parables teach something about the growth of the kingdom, that insignificant things can and will have great effects. Most commentators state that the mustard seed is a symbol of good, while there is not even that much agreement on the leaven. However, because there is agreement that the mustard seed is a symbol of good does not mean that all agree as to what specific good it is. What good it symbolizes is closely related to a person's view of the kingdom of God, the purpose of Jesus' parables, and the context of Matthew 13.

Neither the mustard seed nor the leaven can be equated with the Church, either ancient or modern. Church history must be distorted to say that the church is becoming

¹John Sproule, "The Problem of the Mustard Seed," GTJ Vol. I (Spring 1980):37.

the governing force in this world. In addition to this, the New Testament does not teach that the Church is or will become (or even bring in) the kingdom of God. Christ will build His Church and the gospel will be preached to all nations, but that is a much different concept than the kingdom which Christ revealed.

Those who have concluded that both of these parables show the growth of evil, equate the kingdom of heaven with professing Christendom. And since it is merely professing, it is seen as becoming more dominated by evil during the present age. This is taught in Scripture, but the question must be answered, "Is it taught in these two parables?" To answer this, the actual text must be studied thoroughly, which will be the aim of the rest of this chapter.

The Introductory Formula

Six of the parables in Matthew 13 are introduced by very similar phrases. The phrase ὅμια ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία οὐρανῶν is repeated five times (vs. 31, 33, 44, 45, 47) while it is slightly different in verse 24, ὁμοιώθη ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν. Each of these is followed by a noun in the dative case. This phrase, or a variation of it, occurs ten times in the book of Matthew.

The transitional statement preceding this phrase (Ἄλλην παραβολὴν παρέθηκεν αὐτοῖς λέγων) also serves to introduce the parable as well as link it with the rest of the

chapter. Matthew uses αὐτοῖς to stress that the parable is also addressed to the Jews on the shore. This transitional statement also informs us that the purpose of chapter 13 (vs. 10-17) also applies here.

Inrig makes an important statement concerning the introductory formula when he says, "It must not be supposed in any of these cases (in chapter 13) that the kingdom of heaven is compared with the noun in the dative alone."¹ This ambiguity in the introduction and comparison has been observed by other scholars, also. Kingsbury and Jeremias agree that this would become clearer in English if it was translated, "It is the case with the kingdom of heaven as with. . ."² Jeremias supports this with some excellent observations concerning parables,

In Matthew 13:45, the kingdom of God is, of course, not 'like a merchant,' but like a pearl; in Matthew 25:1, it is not 'like ten virgins,' but like the wedding; in 22:2, it is not 'like a householder,' but like a distribution of wages; in 13:24, it is not 'like a man who sowed good seed,' but like the harvest; in 18:23, it is not 'like an earthly king,' but like the settlement of accounts.³

Both the Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven are similiar to these parables. The kingdom of God is not compared to the mustard seed (alone), but to the tall garden

¹Inrig, "Matthew 13," p. 52.

²Jeremias, Parables, p. 101, and Kingsbury, Matthew 13, p. 85.

³Jeremias, Parables, p. 101.

or yard shrub. The kingdom of God is not like leaven (only), but also like the prepared risen dough.¹

Kingsbury goes further and says that "the structure of the parables calls for the interpreter to concentrate both on the grain of mustard seed and on the mature mustard shrub; on this account one is justified in speaking of incongruence as an inherent feature of this parable."² How the introduction is understood will definitely influence the interpretation of this parable and the picture of the parable.

The Picture of the Parable

The picture to which the kingdom is compared is not a difficult one. Jesus uses an example out of everyday life in the land of Galilee. Since He was teaching outside, it is possible that He could have pointed to a mature mustard shrub as He told this parable. Today with all the canned, bottled, and packaged food, gardens are much less common and necessary than in that day. Since Jesus compares it to a garden plant or herb, it is implied that it also was an herb.

There would be no point in the statement that a plant of the nature of a tree grew to be greater than all garden herbs. This excludes the mustard tree to which some have thought the parables refers.³

¹Ibid., p. 102.

²Kingsbury, Matthew 13, p. 78.

³Bruce, "Synoptic," p. 200.

The plant may most often have been grown in a field beside a garden, because of its demand for space. In Matthew, the gardener plants the seed 'in a field' (Matt 13:31), in Luke, 'in a garden' (Luke 13:19), and in Mark, 'in the ground' (Mark 4:31). This probably just reflects the different places it could grow and was planted, rather than one reading being the correct one. It was known as a cultivated shrub that could grow in a field or garden. This would have made it even more possible for Jesus to point to a mustard plant as He taught this. The mustard plant (*sinapis nigra*), is an herb which by the Lake of Galilee attains the height of about eight to ten, and sometimes, 15 feet. It is used in food and medicine, but that is not mentioned here.¹

This parable, in contrast to that of the wheat and weeds, is very brief. But it does use a seed as an illustration once again, which reflects Jesus' use of common objects to teach.

As Kingsbury has observed, this parable is an interesting mixture of narrative and detailed explanation. "It begins as a fable, as a story narrated in the past time."² From the past tense, λαβὼν and ἔσπειρεν, the verbs shift into the present tense ἔστιν and γίνεται, "a characteristic indicative of the similitude."³ This served to make the picture

¹Hendriksen, New Testament Commentary, p. 565.

²Kingsbury, Matthew 13, p. 78

³Ibid., p. 78.

more vivid and realistic, as if Jesus had seen this happen recently. The picture of the parable would have been very clear to His hearers.

"The Smallest of All Seeds"
and the Inerrancy of Scripture

The phrase, "the smallest of all seeds," has been cited sometimes as an error in the text of Scripture. Lindsell has heard Fuller in his public lectures use Matthew 13:31 constantly as an example of an error in the "nonrevelational" portions of Scripture. The meaning of the parable is not directly related to this, but it is an issue which must be faced. The question that must be answered is, "Is the mustard seed the smallest seed?"

One solution that has been proposed by Fuller that is cited by Lindsell is that "Jesus accommodated Himself to the ignorance of the people to whom He was speaking, since they believed this. But it constitutes an error, and the presence of one error invalidates the claim to biblical inerrancy."¹

Lindsell appeals to a suggestion made nearly a century ago by Broadus when he wrote:

The American Commentary says of this passage that it was popular language, and it was the intention of the speaker to communicate the fact that the mustard seed

¹Cited by Harold Lindsell, The Battle for the Bible (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), p. 169.

was 'the smallest that His hearers were accustomed to sow.' And indeed this may well be the case.¹

Lindsell makes another admission when he says that "from the Greek it is not clear that Jesus was saying that the mustard seed is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth."² Because of this, it has been suggested that Jesus meant that it was 'one of the least of all seeds.' Lindsell continues by saying,

What must be determined is what the words 'all the seeds' mean here. If Jesus was talking about the seed commonly known to the people of that day, the effect of His words was different from what they would have been if He was speaking of all the seeds on the earth. When the possibility exists for a translation that fulfills the intention of the speaker and does not constitute error, that passage is to be preferred above the one that does the opposite.³

This solution of Lindsell is possible, but it does not depend on the actual text of the parable as it should. Sproule is correct in these observations and does provide some much stronger arguments from "the Greek text, the context, common sense, and the Bible's teaching concerning its own inerrancy."⁴

In English, there is a much clearer distinction between the comparative and superlative forms of the adjective than in the Greek New Testament. Many times the comparative

¹Ibid., p. 269.

²Ibid., p. 169.

³Ibid., p. 169.

⁴Sproule, "Problem," p. 39.

form of a word is used for both the comparative and superlative forms. The adjective μικρότερον, the comparative form of μικρός, is a good example of this principle, which is in the phrase ὁ μικρότερον μὲν ἔστιν πάντων των σπερμάτων.

An important statement concerning this is made by Robertson:

The comparative form, therefore, has two ideas, that of contrast or duality and of the relative comparative, though the first use was the original. Relative comparison is, of course, the dominant idea in most of the New Testament examples, though as already marked, the notion of duality always lies in the background.¹

With this in mind, when the immediate context combines the comparative idea with the idea of totality, i.e., 'less than all seed,' μικρότερον becomes superlative. In the parallel passage (Mark 4:31), Mark adds τῶν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς which supports this view further, because this includes the entire world in the comparison.²

Some other impressive information must be considered from the world of botany. Of all seeds, the orchid seed is the smallest. However, when only the garden-variety of seeds in Palestine, or the entire eastern world, are compared, the mustard seed was the smallest at the time of Christ. Sproule interviewed an authority in the field of botany, Dr. L. H. Shinnars. Shinnars states:

¹A. T. Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament. Vol. 1 (New York: Richard R. Smith, Inc., 1930), p. 668.

²Sproule, "Problem," p. 39.

The mustard seed would indeed have been the smallest of those likely to have been noticed by the people at the time of Christ. The principle field crops (such as barley, wheat, lentils, beans) have much larger seeds . . . The only modern crop plant of importance with smaller seeds than mustard is tobacco, but this plant is of American origin and was not grown in the Old World until the 16th century and later . . . In absolute terms, the number of species in Christ's time was almost the same as at present, the chief differences being the disappearance of some and the development of hybrids or garden varieties.¹

Looking at the context, Jesus was referring to garden-variety mustard seed, because it is an intentionally planted seed which He mentions. Usually when the term σπέρμα is used in the New Testament, it is used botanically and agriculturally (Matt 13:24, 27, 37; Mark 4:31; 2 Cor 9:10). This is supported further "by the obvious association between σπερμάτων and λαχάνων ('herbs or garden plants') in the text."² Liddell and Scott describe λαχάνων as occurring mostly in the plural and referring to garden herbs rather than wild plants.³

The other argument against the claim of inerrancy is that Jesus was speaking proverbially. Proverbial language is not expected to be scientifically precise and is not necessarily errant language. The use of the terms 'sunrise' and 'sunset' are proverbial even today, even though they are not scientifically precise.

¹Shinners cited by Sproule, "Problems," p. 40.

²Ibid., p. 41.

³LSJ, p. 1414.

In conclusion, Jesus was correct when He says that the mustard seed is the smallest of garden seeds. This is supported by the Greek text and context and the science of botany as Sproule has demonstrated. This is a good example of the fact that when the text is believed to be innocent or inerrant and is studied in depth, solutions can be found to difficulties in the Bible.

The New Testament
Usage of Mustard Seed

The mustard seed is not mentioned in the Old Testament, "yet later Jewish literature shows that it was well-known in Palestine (Hebrew מִן־הַתְּבַרְבָּר). According to the Mishnah, it was not cultivated in gardens, but in fields."¹

Hunzinger affirms that:

The smallness of the seed was proverbial. In some rules of cleanness the slightest quantity defiles, 'even as little as a grain of mustard seed' . . . Even today there is an Arab proverb: 'No mustard seed slips from the hands of a miser.'²

In the New Testament, σίναπι occurs only three times. The only other places are in the sayings about faith as the grain of mustard seed (Matt 17:20, Luke 17:6). This is also a reference to the smallness of the seed, which is another sign that it was used proverbially for a symbol of minuteness.

¹TDNT, s.v. "σίναπι," by Claus-Hunno Hunzinger, vol. VII, p. 288.

²Ibid., p. 288.

The Interpretation of the Parable

The heart of the parable is the contrast and comparison between the smallness of the seed and the greatness of the plant or shrub. None of the other qualities of the mustard seed are mentioned, such as its odor or taste. A question which must be answered is, "Why did Christ use a mustard seed and plant to symbolize the kingdom of heaven?"

Two major reasons stand out. The first is that it was the smallest seed of garden variety known at that time. Although there are some seeds smaller, they are not garden variety seeds. In addition, it was also used proverbially of minute quantities by Jesus Himself in Matthew 17:20 and Luke 17:6, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed." Rabbis also used it proverbially "to indicate the smallest amount, the least drop of blood, the least defilement, or the smallest remnant of sun-glow in the sky" (in the Midrash or Jewish commentary on Genesis and Leviticus).¹ The second reason that the mustard seed was ideally-suited was that no other small seed grew into such a large plant. As a result, it could depict perfectly both the insignificant manner in which the kingdom first appeared and the over-powering form it would take at the end of time.

As Inrig has pointed out, "the ~~NOTE~~ clause (v. 32) is of great importance to the parable, for it not only empha-

¹Edersheim, vol. 1, p. 593.

sizes the size of the shrub, it affords a clear Old Testament allusion."¹ The size of the shrub is contrasted sharply with the seed when it is realized that the same birds which perch in its branches could most likely eat the small mustard seeds as food.

Although all scholars do not agree, Dodd makes a strong statement when he says, "There is a clear reference to the Old Testament passages (Dan 4:12, Ezek 31:6, 17:22-23), where a tree sheltering the birds is a symbol for a great empire offering political protection to its subject states."²

Lehman Strauss also says that the tree alludes to Daniel 4:10-17, but he says it is symbolizing the growth of evil in the kingdom. He states,

Today we are witnessing renewed efforts to establish the glory of the tree through the ecumenical church. In this parable, the tree symbolizes growth, greatness, and prominence. Judged by the world's standard, its size and influence make it important, so that now it is popular to find shelter in this religious monstrosity.³

The passages in Ezekiel which speak of a great tree are almost totally ignored by these who claim that this parable teaches the growth of evil in the kingdom. In Ezekiel 17:22-23, the tree described is clearly a symbol of good, probably Messianic, not evil. A tree is used as a

¹Inrig, "Matthew 13," p. 66.

²C. H. Dodd, The Parables of the Kingdom (London: Nisbet, 1935), p. 190.

³Lehman Strauss, Prophetic Mysteries Revealed (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1980), p. 66.

symbol of the Assyrian Empire in Ezekiel 31:1-9, and the birds seem to picture other nations which nested in its branches.

These Old Testament passages were probably well-known to the audience of Jesus, since He was speaking to Jews. But the crucial issues which need resolved here are the following: "Was Jesus purposely equating the mustard tree with the ones in Daniel and/or Ezekiel?" and "Was Jesus simply making the picture more realistic by including birds in the tree's branches?" and "If there is allusion to the Old Testament, is it simply incidental to the main point of the parable or is it essential?"

The last phrase of verse 32 seems to be a clear allusion to the Old Testament, but it also appears to make the picture more realistic. This is put well by Mayhue:

It is true that evil invades the kingdom temporarily as has been illustrated by the parable of the tares. However, it is probably best to view reference to the provision for the birds as only illustrative of the massive expansion of the kingdom from its limited beginning to its current international proportions.¹

A normal place for birds to nest and perch is in a tree or shrub. But the tendency to think the birds symbolize evil takes the analogy farther than Christ intended. He was more concerned with the contrasting sizes than with creating an allegory. Bruce makes a good observation when he says,

¹Richard L. Mayhue, "Kingdom Scenes: A Sermon in Parables," Seminary Spire 10 (Summer 1982):7.

NOTE here indicates at once tendency and result, large enough to make that possible, and it actually happened. The mustard plant is, after all, of humble size, and gives a very modest idea of the growth of the kingdom. But it serves admirably to express the thought of a growth beyond expectation. Who would expect so tiny a seed to produce such a large herb, a monster in the garden?¹

From the preceding context, Trench cites Chrysostom as tracing the connection between these parables and those before. The Parable of the Sower may have discouraged the disciples, because only one out of four seeds would have revealed the prospect of further hindrances to the one-quarter of the seeds that did grow. "Now, then, lest they should be tempted to lose heart and despair, these two parables are spoken for their encouragement."²

Hinzinger affirms the same idea,

The aim of the parable is that this inconspicuous presence should not be an offense, but a guarantee of confidence. In the concealment of present demonstrations of God's power lies the promise of an imminent victorious exercise of His dominion. God has already made a beginning: this is the pledge that He will carry through His cause to the end. The parable of the grain of mustard seed summons to this confidence.³

Some interpreters insist that the focus of the parable is on the starting point, the mustard seed. However, since the introductory formula is rather ambiguous, as has

¹Bruce, "Synoptic, p. 201.

²Richard Chenevix Trench, Notes on the Parables of Our Lord (New York: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), p. 88.

³TDNT, s.v. "σίναπι," p. 290.

already been observed, it must be insisted that the focus is on the mustard tree as well as the mustard seed. Jesus' hearers did know about the overpowering greatness of the future kingdom from the Old Testament. Jesus had been dashing their high hopes in the preceding parables, and they needed to realize that God is just as concerned with the small beginning of the kingdom as with the large ending. But to say that the small beginning is more important to God than the large ending is not consistent with God's nature.

It is not necessary to the meaning of the parable that the sower and the field represent the Savior and the world, respectively. This seems to be an attempt to allegorize the parable. The dominant feature of the parable is the contrast. The concern is not with the process of growth, nor the gradual extension of the kingdom of God or of the church. The smallness and greatness are contrasted without reference to describing how the small thing became great. Men will not cause it to grow, only God will. Christ did not intend to teach the means by which it would grow, but only the certainty that it would grow.

Conclusion

The intention of Christ in this parable was simply to teach that what appears to have a small beginning, will grow beyond expectation. Without the picture of the mustard seed and shrub, the parable could be stated somewhat like Bruce

has when he says, "The kingdom is now in appearance insignificant and impotent, but it has within it a Divine power which will enable it to triumph over all hindrances."¹

It must be affirmed that God is as concerned with and in control of the small beginning of the kingdom as the large ending. This is supported by the very nature of God as well as the ambiguity of the introductory formula which likens the kingdom of heaven to the mustard seed and full-grown plant. The comparison is to the total picture of the parable, not just one aspect.

Both the revelational and judgmental purposes are present in this parable. The group of Christ's true followers, even at the time He spoke this parable, was very small in number. They were looking for revolutionary changes from Christ but had some deep discouragement because of growing opposition to Christ.

Hendriksen makes an interesting observation when he says,

The disciples, and other adherents in a looser sense, were often impatient. Relatively speaking, the group of Christ's followers was so small and so weak that at times they must have almost despaired. They were looking for revolutionary changes right here and now (Matt 21:8, 9; Luke 9:54; John 6:15; Acts 1:6).²

This parable was a source of hope and encouragement to His

¹A. B. Bruce, The Parabolic Teaching of Christ, 4th ed. (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, n.d.), p. 105.

²Hendriksen, Matthew, p. 565.

loyal followers. But to those who definitely opposed Him or were only curious followers, this parable was judgmental. He was claiming that the kingdom would have an obscure beginning and a great ending. All they were interested in seeing and joining was a great movement; they were not willing to join an obscure group of followers of a carpenter turned preacher.

When a group is small, there is less tendency to join it for the wrong reasons, e.g. to follow the crowd or to gain social status. True believers will follow simply because they believe in the truth of the message.

Since the parable did provide hope for His true followers, it must be affirmed the parable is a symbol of the growth of good, not evil. This view does not necessarily support only falsely optimistic postmillennialism. It must be insisted that premillennialism is very optimistic about the millennial kingdom but also insists that the full manifestation of the kingdom must be future to be biblical. This is most consistent with the context, the introductory formula, and the picture of the parable itself in the text. It does not refer to the Church as Kingsbury and others insist, but to the kingdom of God. However, there are implications for the kingdom and the Church, then and now, which will be considered in the concluding chapter.

CHAPTER III

THE PARABLE OF THE LEAVEN

The Problem

The Parable of the Leaven is not attacked as being errant as is the Parable of the Mustard Seed. But there is more controversy over what Christ intended to teach with the Parable of the Leaven. If these two parables teach similar truths about the growth of the kingdom, as most scholars think, then the picture of this parable is good. But this appears to contradict many other uses of leaven in Scripture, where it ususally pictures evil. This parable is often cited to support the idea that corruption and evil will grow in the kingdom, the Church, or the gospel. But as a general principle, symbols in the Bible, like in any literature or communication, are not always used to represent the same things in every case. For example, the lion in Scripture is used of Satan (1 Pet 5:8) and also of Christ (Rev 5:5).

The interpretation of this parable is often related to and even guided by whether a person is optimistic or pessimistic about the Church, the gospel, or the kingdom of God. Those who are optimistic logically see the leaven as a symbol of good. They believe that this parable teaches either that the gospel will pervade the mass of humanity or

that the Church will triumph in Christianizing the world. Others say that the kingdom is present now or yet future. Postmillennialists are generally more optimistic, while premillennialists and dispensationalists are usually pessimistic, at least to some degree, about the Church and the gospel, although not about the kingdom. Amillennialists are generally pessimistic about both the earthly kingdom and the Church.

Many interpretations of this parable and each part have been suggested. Kistemaker cites Jerome as identifying the woman with the Church and many have followed this view. The three measures of flour have been explained as the three branches of the human race (descendants of Ham, Shem, and Japheth); the Greeks, Jews, and Samaritans, or the heart, soul, and mind. Kistemaker correctly evaluates these ideas as "speculative, imaginary, and of little more than passing value. The emphasis, however, should fall on the inherent power of the yeast and not on the significance of the flour or the number three."¹

The controversy surrounding this parable even divides the postmillennial, amillennial, and premillennial camps. Those who say it is a symbol of evil criticize the others for violating sound hermeneutical principles.² These who teach

¹Cited by Kistemaker, Parables, p.49.

²Hendriksen, Matthew, p. 568.

that it is a symbol of good criticize the others for equating the kingdom of God with evil.¹ Each view claims to be consistent with the rest of Matthew 13 and the whole Word of God. If the Word of God is consistent with itself, and it is, and if God is consistent with Himself, and He is, then one view should be the biblical one. The aim of this chapter will be to examine related biblical data and the text of the parable to determine which view is best--what Christ intended to teach originally.

The Introductory Formula

The Parable of the Leaven (13:33) has the same introductory formula as the Parable of the Mustard Seed, except the verb παρέθηκεν "to put before, give," is replaced by the verb ἐλάλησεν "to speak, say, tell, preach." Although they are not exact synonyms, they can both be used of someone speaking.

Practically all that was written concerning the introduction to the mustard seed parable applies to the leaven, also. The transitional statement in 13:33, Ἄλλην παραβολὴν ἐλάλησεν αὐτοῖς, introduces the parable and links it closely with the parable of the mustard seed as well as the whole of Matthew 13, both backwards and forwards. This helps to stress for Matthew that this parable is addressed to

¹Morgan, Parables, p. 61.

the Jews on the shore on the same occasion. The purpose of the parables of chapter 13 also applies to this parable.

In the second chapter of this paper, it was affirmed that the next phrase in 13:33, introducing the actual picture of the parable, ὅμια ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν, is rather ambiguous. It is not intended to compare the kingdom of heaven to 'leaven' alone. Nor is the kingdom of heaven to be compared solely to the great bulk of fully leavened bread. "Instead, the interpreter is invited by Matthew to keep two quantities in view: the small lump of yeast and the large measure of leavened bread."¹ Jeremias has strongly supported this idea also by pointing out other parables where this principle is also applied.²

Kingsbury adds further to this idea of ambiguity by stating that the actual structure of the parable points the interpreter to concentrate on both the leaven and the leavened risen dough.³ It is not only the introductory formula which support this ambiguity, but also the structure of the parable.

The Picture of the Parable

Once again, Jesus uses an example out of everyday life, not some artificial or abstract picture which the

¹Kingsbury, Matthew 13, p. 85.

²Jeremias, Parables, p. 101.

³Kingsbury, Matthew 13, p. 85.

people would have difficulty understanding. Just as one of the most common tasks of a man in Palestine was to sow seed, the task pictured in each of the first three parables in Matthew 13, so it is normally the responsibility of the woman to bake bread. There is a high probability that all of His listeners had done this or had seen it done at least once in their lifetimes. As Jesus grew up in Nazareth, he undoubtedly saw His mother bake bread. "Visual education was one of Jesus' pedagogical rules."¹

Some modern translations render the Greek word ζύμη as yeast, not leaven. "Apart from the Jewish people, hardly anyone is familiar with the word 'leaven.'"² Kistemaker distinguishes the two words in this way:

Yeast, as we know it today, is clean, fresh, wholesome, and even tasty. It is made from a cultivation of a mineral salt-sugar solution to which starch is added. Leaven, however, was produced by storing a piece of dough from the previous week and adding juices to promote the process of fermentation. Should the leaven become infected with a harmful bacteria culture, it would be passed on in the bread until the process was broken when the people ate unleavened bread for a week, as they did during Passover.³

Even though leaven and yeast may be distinguished in English, the Greek word ζύμη can indicate both the terms leaven and yeast according to Arndt and Gingrich.⁴ Mitton

¹Kistemaker, Parables, p. 48.

²Ibid., p. 49.

³Ibid., p. 49

⁴BAGD, p. 340.

says that the modern translations obscure the issue by interchanging leaven and yeast.¹ Webster's confirms that they can be used interchangeably in the definition of leaven, "a substance (as yeast) used to produce fermentation in dough or a liquid."² Therefore, it is accepted that the terms leaven and yeast can be used interchangeably in English.

The amount of flour or dough in which the leaven is placed was three measures or 'σάτα' (13:33). This is approximately four and one-half pecks, or 39 liters or more than 50 pounds of flour.³ This is a large amount, since:

It will produce enough bread to satisfy the needs of a household of 36 members for one day, or to feed more than one hundred persons at a single meal. These proportions show how stark the contrast inherent in this parable is meant to be: on the one hand, enough bread to feed over one hundred persons at a sitting; on the other hand, enough bread to feed a large household for one day.⁴

Although this amount is mentioned in Genesis 18:6, it is very doubtful that Jesus intended to allude to this Old Testament verse. A similar amount is also mentioned in Judges 6:19 and 1 Samuel 1:24. So, it was not unusual for a woman to make such a large amount. It may have been more efficient to bake large batches of bread less often, rather

¹C. L. Mitton, "Leaven," ExpTim 84 (1972-73):339.

²Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary (1972), s.v. "leaven," p. 481.

³BAGD, p. 752.

⁴Kingsbury, Matthew 13, p. 85.

than small batches of bread more often. Three *σάτα* was probably an amount that could be eaten before it would become stale or moldy. On this basis, the amount of flour was used by Jesus only to make the picture more realistic. It was not to symbolize three parts of the human race or of man himself. It is even possible to omit the actual words 'three satas' and replace it with a phrase such as 'a large amount of flour,' as the New International Version has done in Matthew 13:33, although the meaning is more vague.

Because it was a common amount made in Jewish homes, "this would account for the use of this expression, and it would indicate also that the allusion is not to the sacramental significance of leaven, its rigid exclusion from most sacramental rites, but on the contrary, to the prominent part which leaven played in the daily life of the people."¹ Bread was a major staple of the diet in the Lord's day, as it is in most societies even today.

In light of this, the details of this parable will be viewed only as adding realism to the picture, not as symbols of other things or persons.

There is usually agreement on what is the central feature of a parable, but there is some difference of opinion on this parable. In his day, G. Campbell Morgan taught that the three measures of meal was the central fact and that

¹O. T. Allis, "The Parable of the Leaven," EvQ 19 (1947):265.

Christ was referring back to Genesis 18 when Sarah prepared three measures of meal for their special guests.¹ He concludes that the three measures of meal illustrate fellowship. Although it is not a common view today, it is an example of a view which attempts to make the details more important than they were intended to be. The central feature is the effect that the leaven has on the dough or simply the leaven, which is supported strongly by the text itself and most commentators. The leaven and its effects and symbolism will be discussed further in the following sections.

Old Testament Usage of Leaven

The usage of leaven is almost entirely literal in the Old Testament, while the New Testament usage is largely figurative. The most common mention of it in the Old and New Testaments is in connection with the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which was part of the Jewish Passover. This Feast began in Exodus 12:17, when Israel was commanded by the Lord to celebrate the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, as they were preparing to leave Egypt. The destruction of all leaven and the eating of only unleavened bread for one entire week per year were essential elements of the Passover. Exodus 12:1-20 gives extensive instructions concerning the exact way to observe the festival.

¹G. Campbell Morgan, The Parables and Metaphors of our Lord (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1943), p. 61.

Two Hebrew words are translated "leaven" and "unleavened" in the Old Testament. The term לֶחֶם is found only five times and probably expresses the idea of fermentation. The more common term, חֶמֶץ , refers to that which was leavened. It was forbidden at Passover (Exod 12:15, 13:13, 17; Deut 16:3) and in all sacrifices (Exod 23:18, 34:25; Lev 2:11, 6:10; Amos 4:5). But exceptions to this are the peace-offering in Leviticus 7:13 and the wave-loaves in Leviticus 23:17. The verb form of this word means to be sour, leavened, or embittered.¹

These Hebrew terms, including the mention of the absence of leaven, occur 72 times in the Old Testament. Leaven is referred to in connection with the Passover or the Feast of Unleavened Bread 36 times, in reference to any other of the offerings, 30 times, and in domestic situations, six times.²

In his thesis Chapman looks at each of these passages, which is not possible here, to determine what leaven means in each context. He discovered that the use of or absence of leaven was related to time. The reason for this is that it takes much more time to make leavened bread than unleavened bread. God had this in mind when He commanded

¹BDB, p. 329.

²William Keene Chapman, "Christ's Use of Leaven as a Symbol" (Master's thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1968), p. 14.

Israel to eat unleavened bread when they were preparing to leave Egypt. This is true of leaven related to the Passover, to the Feast of Unleavened Bread, to the other offerings, and also simply to the domestic occurrences.

But Chapman tries to limit the meaning of this parable to time, by saying that "Christ was telling the disciples that this new era was to last for some length of time."¹ But Chapman tries to impose the Old Testament usage of leaven on this parable. Just because God commanded the Israelites to have bread without leaven when they were to be ready to leave Egypt in haste, does not mean that Christ was referring to time in this parable. Christ was teaching the fact that small beginnings can result in great endings.

Lewis also affirms that in the Old Testament, unleavened bread was made in haste. He states,

In memorial of the Exodus and its hurried flight (Exod 12:11, 39; Deut 16:3), Israel was commanded to cast out annually leaven from the house on the fourteenth day of the first month (abib) and to eat unleavened bread ('the bread of affliction,' Deut 16:3) for seven days . . . The penalty for the native or sojourner who ate that which was leavened in this period was to be cut off from the congregation (Exod 12:15-30; 13:7).²

The Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were important memorials to Israel's flight from Egypt. In addition to being memorials, they could have served as a valuable

¹Chapman, "Christ's Use," p. 52.

²Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, s.v. "Leaven," by J. P. Lewis, p. 901-902.

device for social hygiene, by breaking any chain of infection established by the successive use of leaven.¹

But it must also be remembered that leavened bread was a staple in the diet of ancient Israel. "That leaven made the bread light, palatable, and wholesome, was a fact of common knowledge . . . a powerful agent exerting a wholesome and beneficent influence."² It did not make the bread unhealthy or physically evil, but actually better tasting and more nutritious. This contradicts Scofield who says, "Leaven, as a symbolic or typical substance, is always mentioned in the Old Testament in an evil sense."³ After mentioning all the passages in the New Testament where leaven does symbolize evil, Scofield concludes that, "The use of the word in Matthew 13:33 is congruous with its universal meaning,"⁴ which is for him evil. Scofield's Bible was so widely used that it popularized this view. However, Scofield ignored the fact that the literal use of leaven did not make bread evil, but actually more healthy.

As a result, some questions are raised which need to be resolved in order to understand Christ's use of leaven in Matthew 13. "What is the relation between the literal and

¹Mitton, "Leaven," p. 339.

²Allis, "Parable," p. 258.

³C. I. Scofield, ed., The Scofield Reference Bible (New York: Oxford University Press, 1917), p. 1016.

⁴Ibid., p. 1016.

the figurative use of leaven?" "Does the Parable of the Leaven have reference to time as in the Old Testament usage?" These questions will be discussed in the interpretation of this parable.

Another minor problem with some interpreters is that they follow a rule of interpretation called "the law of first occurrence," which is not always valid in interpreting the Bible. Morgan and others use this to provide a clue to the meaning of leaven throughout the Bible.¹ The first occurrence (Gen 19:3) has been used to support that leaven is a symbol of good and also of evil. It is also used by Morgan to say that "three measures" is the central feature of the parable rather than leaven.² Because of these contradicting interpretations, it must be affirmed that "the law of first occurrence" is of no value in interpreting this parable.

The New Testament Usage of Leaven

The Greek noun ζύμη is translated "leaven" or "yeast" in the New Testament. The Greek noun άζυμος is translated "unleavened." The verb ζυμώω simply means "to ferment, to leaven or to rise." These words are equivalents of the Old Testament leaven and absence of leaven. Leaven is found 24 times in 12 passages in the New Testament.

¹Morgan, Metaphors, p. 61.

²Ibid., p. 74.

It is interesting to note that in rabbinic tradition leaven in the figurative uses was given different meanings.

Rabbi Alexander used it as a metaphor for human restraints on obeying God, whereas Rabbi Chizya bar Avva described as leaven the Torah with its power to lead Israelites who observe it back to God. Philo also gave it divergent transferred meanings. On the one hand, it symbolized swelling arrogance, indulgence, and pretension. On the other hand, it suggested complete (spiritual) nourishment and blissful joy.¹

Even though these interpretations are not legitimate, they point out that leaven was not interpreted to symbolize the same thing in every case even outside the New Testament.

Angel is correct in saying, "The point of the various uses varies from context to context, despite the frequent claim among scholars that in the New Testament leaven is used symbolically to picture an evil influence."²

The Feast of Unleavened Bread is mentioned in the New Testament seven times, all in the Gospels and Acts.³ It is implied by these passages that this Feast was practiced by those who heard the parables of Matthew 13. But this does not mean that the Old Testament concept of time or haste is what Christ was referring to in the Parable of the Leaven.

The expression "the leaven of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herod" is obviously using leaven in an evil sense.

¹NIDNTT, s.v. "Leaven," by Gervais T. D. Angel, vol. II, p. 461.

²Ibid., p. 462.

³Matthew 26:17; Mark 14:1, 12; Luke 22:1, 7; Acts 12:3, 20:6.

But the disciples did not immediately realize that Christ was talking symbolically. From Matthew 16:7, it is clear that they thought he was referring to bread. Instead, He had to correct them and point out that the leaven represented their teaching.

Allis has observed this and continues to draw an interesting and very sound conclusion. He states:

This certainly seems to justify the inference that, when 'leaven' is used in an evil sense, it has no reference at all to 'bread,' when bread means wholesome food. This inference is supported by the use of the word ἄρτος elsewhere in the Gospels. The 'loaves' which Jesus multiplied and the 'bread' to which He compared Himself when He said, 'I am the bread of life,' are simply called ἄρτος as representing the daily food of the people; and the same word is used in the four narratives (the Synoptics and 1 Cor) which describe the Last Supper, where unleavened bread was undoubtedly used. This loose and ambiguous use of the word to refer to both unleavened and leavened bread, is thoroughly in accord with the view that leaven 'per se' had no ethical significance. Used in the daily bread, it represented a wholesome principle; and such bread when used in daily life, was as 'clean' as was the unleavened bread when used on the occasions that required it. Otherwise, if the leaven always symbolized an evil principle, we must either assume that the loaves which Jesus multiplies and the bread to which he likened Himself were unleavened--a highly improbable supposition--or conclude that He like the people constantly contaminated Himself with that which represented an evil principle. This, of course, we cannot admit.¹

This indicates also that the literal use of leaven does influence the figurative use of leaven. Literally, leaven can be a wholesome influence, so it follows that it can be a good influence when used symbolically.

¹Allis, "Leaven," p. 260-261.

Paul's use of the figure of leaven is clearly to symbolize evil in 1 Corinthians 5:7 and Galatians 5:9. It pictures the spirit of lawlessness and the pervasiveness of evil. He makes a metaphor or illustration on the casting out of leaven at Passover. The leaven represents malice and evil which are to be replaced by sincerity and truth, so that the festival may be celebrated. But even though it is a clear symbol of evil here, it is another instance where leaven is used to picture small beginning or cause resulting in large endings or effects.

Although leaven is not very common in the New Testament, some definite things have been learned from its other occurrences. The main principle which must be admitted is that leaven used literally is usually a wholesome influence and leaven used figuratively can be a symbol of good or evil. A proper conclusion has been given by Allis when he declares:

Leaven 'per se' was a perfectly neutral element. When its use was prohibited, it represented an evil principle; when its use was permitted, it represented a wholesome and beneficent principle. Both of these meanings are to be found in Scripture.¹

This places importance on the context of the symbol in determining its meaning instead of insisting that the symbol must always picture the same thing throughout Scripture. The meaning of the Parable of the Leaven will be determined according to this principle in the following section.

¹Ibid., p. 262.

The Interpretation of the Parable

The Parable of the Leaven has been used to support many doctrines. Those who are optimistic believe that it is a picture of the growth of good, while those who are pessimistic believe that it is a picture of the growth of evil. Basing interpretations on optimism or pessimism with little support from the Bible is a very subjective way to interpret any literature, especially the Bible.

For example, in a section discussing the characteristics of apostates, Pickering uses Matthew 13:33 under the subpoint "Apostasy is Pervasive and Progressive."

Leaven pictures false doctrine in that it works its way through the mass till the whole is leavened. It is quite common for interpreters to admit the fact that leaven in Matthew 16 is false doctrine, because Christ plainly says so, but they abandon that meaning when interpreting the parable of the leaven in Matthew 13:33. There they see the gospel permeating the world, or some other good influence gradually winning its way. However, Unger is more accurate when he takes Matthew 13:33 as referring to the gradual process of evil within Christendom, which interpretation is in agreement with the unvarying Scriptural meaning of leaven.

The growth of false doctrine and evil living in the last days is predicted in Scripture, but it difficult to see how this parable can be made to say this. One reason is that, as has been determined, leaven is not always a symbol of evil. Another reason is that this parable is describing the kingdom of God, not the gospel or the Church. Also,

¹Ernest Pickering, Biblical Separation: The Struggle for a Pure Church (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1979), p. 160.

Pickering has to ignore the context of this parable to come to this conclusion.

The main concern should be to get back to what Christ intended to teach with this parable. If leaven represents evil, the phraseology of 13:33 is remarkable. As Allis notes, the parable would then read, "The kingdom of heaven is like an evil principle which a woman took" ¹ It has been discovered that the kingdom is compared to the picture as a whole, and not the leaven alone at the beginning of the parable. But it certainly seems to contradict the very nature of the kingdom to say that it is evil or is even pervaded by evil, as Scofield, Morgan, Strauss, and others say. ²

If the parable teaches evil and apostasy, Allis correctly observes that "it can only refer to the professing church and can have no reference to the true Church." ³ The true body of Christ will not become apostate but will remain true to the end. Speaking of most Dispensationalists, Allis points out that "it appears that their interpretation involves an impossible distinction between the true Church

¹Allis, "Leaven," p. 273.

²Morgan, Parables, p. 63; Scofield, Bible, p. 1016; and Strauss, Mysteries, p. 71.

³Allis, "Leaven," p. 270.

and the 'professing' church which are 'mingled' in this present age."¹

Baxter, a premillennial dispensationalist, also affirms this by stating that the parables of Matthew 13 do not refer to the church,

for the church had not yet been mentioned in Matthew. That kingdom is not the church. Nor do they picture Christendom in this present age, as certain dispensationalists aver.

This is where in our own judgment, the 'Scofield' Bible slips into error, propounding an artificial theory that the kingdom exists on earth today in a so-called 'mystery form.' The Scofield note on Matthew 13 equates this 'mystery form' of the kingdom with 'the sphere of Christian profession' and then adds, 'It is Christendom.'²

Another sound argument is stated by Allis in the following:

If we must reject the Dispensational interpretation because it arbitrarily excludes the true Church from the scope of the parable, we must reject this one which excludes the 'professing' church, and for the same reason. The first four of the parables are so similar that it is difficult or impossible to believe that the words 'kingdom of heaven' have one meaning in two of them and a different, much more restricted, meaning in the other two.³

Baxter affirms that:

If the seven parables of Matthew 13 are to speak consistently, there are two opposite extremes of interpretation which must be avoided: first, that of spiritualizing them so that they supposedly refer to the Church

¹Ibid., p. 270.

²J. Sidlow Baxter, Explore the Book, vol. V (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1960), p. 164.

³Allis, "Leaven," p. 271.

and the Christian religion, second, that of manipulating them so as to make them fit a dispensational theory.¹

Other interpreters say the three measures of meal or the dough is the kingdom, and that then the leaven can represent evil, as Scofield, Mayhue, and others suggest. Mayhue says that "evil will penetrate the dough of God's kingdom."² This view also goes against the context, the text itself, and the biblical usage of leaven which have been covered.

If the leaven is a symbol of evil, then the woman would have been guilty of a most serious offense and would be an evil agent, even if she mixed in the leaven unknowingly. "The woman, so far as the language of the parable is concerned, is a neutral figure. There is not a word of criticism or denunciation of her or of her act to be found in the parable."³ Nor is there any criticism of her in the following verses. Although this is an argument from silence, it is a possible inference.

Lenski points out that the past participle λαβοῦσα indicates that "this leaven came from elsewhere . . . and that the act of mixing it with flour was deliberate and done for a specific intention. It was not mere impulse that led

¹Baxter, Explore, p. 164.

²Mayhue, "Scenes," p. 7.

³Allis, "Leaven," p. 266.

the woman to put yeast into the flour."¹ But Lenski seems to be making too much of a minor detail of the parable, instead of focusing on the major point. However, Bruce seems to stretch the verse by saying that,

One in quest of arguments to prove the supernatural character of the kingdom might see one here. The woman took the leaven from another place and put it into the dough, to produce effects which the dough itself could never bring about.²

The verb ἐνέκρυψεν, translated "hid" or "mixed," must also be made to imply evil, secrecy, and disobedience of sacramental laws, if leaven is taken as a symbol of evil. The term ἐνέκρυψεν only occurs in this parable in Matthew 13 and Luke 13, but its root, κρύπτω, is a common term in the New Testament. It is used in both a good and bad sense in Scripture. Later in this same chapter, Christ uses this verb to describe what is done to a treasure (13:44). It does not imply something evil here, because the man goes and hides it again and then sells all he had and bought that field. A treasure is valuable even when hidden. In Colossians 3:3, the same verb is even used to describe the Christian's position, "your life is hidden with Christ in God." This must be a good sense of the verb κρύπτω.

¹R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel, vol. 1 in Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1943), p. 530.

²A. B. Bruce, The Parabolic Teaching of Christ, 4th ed. (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, n.d.), p. 115.

In discussing this term, Oepke even makes this statement:

Everything divine is primarily and essentially hidden. It is accessible only to revelation. This is seldom brought out in the transmitted sayings of the Lord but it is always presupposed. God's kingdom in particular is in its beginnings in this world comparable with a hidden treasure (Matt 13:44) or the leaven which disappears in a measure of meal (Luke 13:21; Matt 13:33: ἐνέκρυπτο). Its divine nature is thereby manifested . . . for God reveals Himself. The treasure is found, the leaven begins to work. By means of a general principle Jesus impresses on His disciples the fact that the cause of God is entrusted to them, that it has emerged from its original concealment, and that God will publicly confess it (Matt 20:26f; Luke 12:2f; Mark 4:22; Luke 8:17).¹

In the Old Testament, "God Himself judicially hides the knowledge of salvation from those who do not seek it seriously" (Isa 6:9-10).² The Psalmist even asks the Lord to hide His face from his sins (Ps 50:9). Yahweh has hidden the knowledge of salvation from the wise and clever and has revealed them to babes (Matt 11:25ff and Luke 10:21).

When Christ used this word in the parable, He was affirming the reason He gave for using the parables back in 13:10-17. For those unreceptive, the parables were judgmental. Since this parable was the last one given to the crowds in chapter 13, it is possible that is the reason He used this word κρύπτω . This is supported further by the quote included by Matthew in verse 35. Matthew reiterates

¹TDNT, s.v. "κρύπτω" by Albrecht Oepke, vol. III, p. 973.

²Oepke, vol. III, p. 973.

the purpose Christ spoke in parables by quoting Psalm 78:2, which says, "I will open by mouth in parables, I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world." The Greek verb is a past perfect form of the verb κεκρυμμένα, which Christ uses in verse 33. So the hiddenness of the leaven could possibly picture God's judicial hardening of the Jewish people.

In Luke 19:41-44 when Christ approached Jerusalem and wept over it, He very possibly referred back to Matthew 13 when He began telling parables to the crowds. He uses the same root word κρύπτω in the statement, "if you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace--but now it is hidden from your eyes." The implication is clearly that it once was not hidden. In the following verses (Luke 19:43, 44) He vividly predicts Jerusalem's destruction, which is the result of the hiddenness of the truth.

When Christ is talking about the leaven of the Pharisees (Luke 12:1-3), He declares that what is concealed and hidden will be made known, even in the daylight, and from the housetops. This again speaks of a future judgment.

The hiding of the leaven in this parable makes the picture of the parable more realistic, because leaven is something which must be hidden to do its work. But since hiding is often connected to judgment, this suggest one of the purposes of parables. It may also be teaching that "the

kingdom is in its nature spiritual. Leaven works from the center to the circumference."¹

The distinction between the two parables is in that Jesus declares the extent and outward spread of the kingdom with the mustard seed parable and declares the internal power of the kingdom which leaves nothing unaffected. In stating the similiarity between the two parables, Baxter states:

The one buried in the ground yet eventually a great tree, the other hidden in the meal yet eventually filling the whole, our Lord surely pictures the then rejected kingdom's similarity being now hidden, or removed from view, but at last reappearing in greatness all-prevading.²

The phrase "till the whole was leavened" or "until it worked all through the dough" (NIV) should be taken as "a broad statement of tendency, not as exact historical result."³ Those who take the leaven to be evil say that it must be an exact historical result. For example, Strauss uses history to try to prove that leaven is a picture of evil by saying,

Two World Wars, plus more than a dozen major conflicts in Asia and the Middle East, have reduced considerably the ranks of those who fail to see in the parable, that which our Lord intended to teach, namely, the progress of deterioration and corruption. History disproves leaven to be an influence for good, purifying the truth.⁴

¹Bruce, Parabolic, p. 106.

²Baxter, Explore, vol. V, p. 169.

³Bruce, Parabolic, p. 111.

⁴Strauss, Mysteries, p. 71.

The explanation given by Allis of the phrase goes back to very common sense, "The reason for the use of leaven in bread is not that the bread may become, be changed into leaven, but simply to penetrate the meal completely with this active and wholesome ferment."¹ Speaking of Morgan, Strauss, and others, Allis gives them a valid challenge that if they:

refute the optimistic interpretation because both Scripture and history disprove the claim that the 'whole world' is to be leavened by the gospel, then the pessimistic view must stand or fall by the answer it gives to the same question, whether the 'whole world' will be leavened by the evil principle of apostasy and unbelief . . . If applied without qualification to the pessimistic view, it teaches that the end of the kingdom of heaven on earth is total apostasy!²

The optimistic interpretation can be held without insisting that the whole world will become the kingdom of God. However, it will be greatly influenced. This also squares with the instructions given in the great commission to proclaim the gospel in all the world and teach believers all He commanded (Matt 28:19, 20; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8). While the gospel and the church are promised great success in the present age, the full manifestation of the kingdom in all of Matthew 13 remain in the future. There is still many prophecies in the Old Testament that are unfulfilled yet today (for example, Ps 72:11; Isa 2:2).

Baxter expresses the future aspect of the kingdom in this way:

¹Allis, "Leaven," p. 269.

²Ibid., p. 268-269.

Instead of the supposed 'mystery' form of the kingdom now on earth, let it be realized that there is present suspension, and that when our Lord returns all these parables will suddenly 'come alive' with new activity and be seen in their true fulfillment.¹

The present aspect of the kingdom taught in this parable is carefully worded by Kistemaker:

Jesus' intention is not to call something evil. He uses the concept of leaven because of its hidden power. Yeast and leaven cause the dough to rise by permeating the entire batch. The yeast or leaven, after it is mixed in flour, could not be found anymore. It was hidden and invisible . . . The yeast is hidden from sight, and yet its effect is visible to all. That is how the kingdom of God demonstrates its power and presence in today's world.²

When the full manifestation of the kingdom is consistently held Christ's intended meaning is discovered.

Conclusion

Each phrase and important word in this parable have been discussed at length. The complete manifestation of the kingdom in this parable must remain in the future to be consistent with the rest of the Bible, although the kingdom was and is present in a limited sense. Christ encourages His loyal followers with the fact that even though small in number and hidden from view that they can be assured of great growth. To the unbelievers, they expected the kingdom to come in power and glory when it came, so this parable helped to harden their hearts to Christ and thus to conceal more

¹Baxter, Explore, p. 169.

²Kistemaker, Parables, p. 50.

truth from them. They would be judged for what they knew, but not as much as if Christ had told them more truth.

It has been observed that comparison is the heart of this parable and that it is not with the beginning or end of the parable alone, but with the whole picture. Jeremias expresses the purpose and meaning of both these parables when he says:

It is not the purpose of either parable merely to describe a process: that would be the way of the western mind. The oriental mind includes both beginning and end in its purview, seizing the paradoxical element in both cases, the two successive, yet fundamentally differing, situations. Their meaning is that out of the most insignificant beginnings, invisible to the human eye, God creates His mighty kingdom, which embraces all the peoples of the world.

If that is right, the occasion of the utterance of the parables may be taken to be some expression of doubt concerning the mission of Jesus. How differently the beginnings of the Messianic Age announced by Jesus appeared than was commonly expected! Could this wretched band, comprising so many disreputable characters be the wedding guests of God's redeemed community? 'Yes,' says Jesus, 'it is.'

With the same compelling certainty that causes a tall shrub to grow out of a minute grain of mustard seed, or a small piece of leaven to produce a vast mass of dough, will God's miraculous power cause my small band to swell into the mighty host of the people of God in the Messianic Age, embracing the Gentiles.¹

The views of certain Dispensationalists such as Scofield, Morgan, Strauss, and others, have been challenged and shown to be very weak and inconsistent. The studies of certain amillennialists such as Allis, Kingsbury, Jeremias,

¹Jeremias, Parables, pp. 148-149.

and others have been valuable in spite of their confusing of the church and the kingdom, because many times they have studied with more diligence the actual text.

Allis has shown clearly how difficult it is to make the rest of the parable a picture of the growth of evil, which is said to be symbolized by the leaven. However, the parable of the Leaven can be taken as a picture of good and still be interpreted from a premillennial and dispensational perspective. Biblical optimism can be maintained concerning the Kingdom of God and at the same time concerning the Church, without the exact equating of the two concepts.

As the mustard seed teaches that small causes will have large effects, so the leaven teaches that hidden causes will have great outward effects. The few who follow Christ at His first appearance do not change who He is or will be. When He sets up His kingdom on the earth with all believers from all ages, it will be a great number in contrast to the small number at His first appearance. By teaching this, Christ was pronouncing judgment on the majority of the crowd, because they were not a part of this hidden cause that will have a great outward effect.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUDING IMPLICATIONS

For the Original Audience

To the disciples and other loyal followers these two parables gave assurance, hope, and encouragement. Christ wanted them to realize that although they were small in number and influence, God had chosen to manifest His kingdom in insignificance and humility at Christ's first appearance. Although some Jews followed Christ, the nation as a whole rejected Him as their King. Christ used these parables to make known that "this rejection of Messiah by the people and the restriction of reception of kingdom truths to the few does not represent a failure in the divine program."¹

Instead of being a mistake or failure in the divine program, the rejection of Messiah would bring about a change in God's program. The change involved the setting aside of the nation of Israel and the replacing of it as God's primary means of reaching the world. This was not seen by Old Testament prophets, but it was only made known as the rejection of the Messiah became more historically certain, and even then many people did not understand the suffering and death of

¹Inrig, Parables, p. 65.

Christ. The kingdom of God would not be revealed in full power and glory until first there was an indefinite length of time when the kingdom would remain small and even hidden from view. This time is called the interregnum, after which the kingdom would be revealed in full power and glory. Even though these parables are not directly referring to the church, they are a part of Christ's ministry in which He prepared His followers for the beginning of the church, which He announced shortly afterward in Matthew 16:19. For this reason, there are definite implications which can be applied to the church, also.

To the nation of Israel as a whole, these parables did not give hope or encouragement. Rather they puzzled and even concealed truth from them. "Because they had not received the simple announcement of the Kingdom, they are now given something they cannot understand" (at least in the full sense).¹ They probably understood these parables in a limited sense, possibly realizing that Christ was declaring that His small group of followers at that time would some day be revealed as the beginning of the true kingdom of God. These parables were actually a subtle rebuke of the growing opposition to His ministry and an indirect appeal to turn from popular opinion and to follow Him. This assisted Him in avoiding a direct confrontation with opposition before the

¹McClain, Kingdom, p. 322.

time was right. He did use these parables as a form of judgment which produced or resulted in more hardness of heart.

Christ probably referred back to this time in Luke 19:41-44, after the triumphal entry, when He wept over Jerusalem and said, "If you, even you had only known on this day what would bring you peace--but now it is hidden from your eyes." He then proceeded to predict the fall of Jerusalem. The fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. was a direct judgment on the nation of Israel for rejecting the Messiah. However, these parables were a judgment on the unbelievers in the crowd that very day.

For the Church--Early and Modern

Because the true Church is not a political and ethnic force as the nation Israel was, it has always seemed to be insignificant and obscure. This was very true for the Early Church. These parables should have helped confirm in their minds that the Church was God's program for this age. Their faith would be strengthened by the fact that Christ taught that the kingdom of God would go through a stage when it would be small and insignificant. With certainty, they could look to the building of the church by the world-wide proclamation of the gospel. But since the church was never intended to rule this world politically, they could be certain that this would eventually take place at Christ's second coming.

The Church today can benefit from these parables in much the same way. It can also be assured that small causes can have great effects. There is no way to measure the great influence of the program of God in the past or present, but the church can be encouraged by the fact that this will be revealed at the Second Coming of Christ. At that time the mustard tree and leavened dough will be definite reality, but not before that time. Since it has been shown that the mustard seed and leaven parables are pictures of good, not evil, these parables provide a source of hope and encouragement, instead of despair and even judgment.

For the Kingdom of God

The absolute sovereignty of God over this world is behind the teaching of these parables. They confirm that even though the nation of Israel rejected the Messiah's offer of the kingdom at His first appearance, He will fulfill His unconditional promise in the Old Testament to include them in the kingdom of God. The rejection of the Messiah by Israel as a whole is not a mistake or failure in the divine program. Neither is it a total abandonment of the nation of Israel forever. Israel still has a future in God's program, contrary to what most amillennialists teach.

The apostle Paul deals with this in Romans 11 and affirms that God did not reject His people, that they did not fall beyond recovery.

Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring! (Romans 11:11, 12)

Further in the same chapter, Paul explains why Israel has experienced the hardening which resulted in part from the parables in Matthew 13. In this high point of the book of Romans, he states that, "God has bound all men over to disobedience so that He may have mercy on them all." Paul very likely realized the part that the parables of Matthew 13 had in binding Israel over to disobedience and in preparing His followers for the new divine program which would provide a definite way to have mercy on all.

When the kingdom of God is set up on earth, it will be a great contrast to the minute beginnings of it. It will be similar to the difference between the mustard seed and the mustard tree, and the leaven and the leavened dough. It will be clear that the outward extension of the kingdom is complete and the inward penetration is finished.

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