

HERMENEUTICS AND MATTHEW 13

Part I: Preliminary Hermeneutical Concerns

When one reads the parables of the mystery of the kingdom of heaven given by Jesus in the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, one immediately senses a majestic air to this teaching of Christ. However, the observant reader also discerns that a mere casual reading will not uncover all there is to know. In fact, it is tempting to believe that the disciples lied when they told Jesus that they understood all that He had said (13:51-52)!¹ The large number of divergent views of the passage, even within traditional dispensationalism, speaks to the hermeneutical problems associated with any attempt to understand its meaning. Nonetheless, this paper is written with the express conviction that to read the text *with difficulty* does not automatically translate into the notion of reading the text *without understanding*. A proper awareness of background hermeneutical issues along with a rather straightforward reading of the text will yield a comprehension of the passage that is available, not just to the technical experts in biblical studies, but to the average Christian in the world who contemplates these remarkable words of Jesus.

This article is designed to be the first part of a two-part series on Matthew chapter thirteen. Here preliminary considerations in hermeneutics are discussed as a precursor to actual examination of the text of Matthew thirteen. The second article will discuss the particular exegetical issues of the chapter itself. However, two tables of information are included at the end of this article to assist the reader in looking ahead in light of these initial discussions.

There are several preliminary considerations that affect one's reading of Matthew thirteen. Some of these, on the surface at least, appear to be common sense. However, each is debated at great length in the literature. The discussion below will highlight four issues that relate directly to the methodology one uses in his interpretation of Matthew chapter thirteen: 1) the foundational approach of literal interpretation, 2) the Old Testament understanding of the kingdom of God, 3) the issue of harmonizing the Gospels, 4) the development of a biblical theology of Matthew. A proper understanding of each area will go a long way toward objectifying one's grasp of the passage.

Literal Interpretation

At a recent prophecy conference this writer was confronted by an amillennialist of the preterist variety. His complaint was that dispensational premillennialists ignore church history in general and the early church fathers in particular. He appealed to the teachings of the early church fathers to disprove a distinction between Israel and the Church and to discredit the position of premillennialism. When responses were made based upon the biblical texts and to the idea that we should understand them as they were written to the original audiences, this particular person (and some others at the conference) seemed to assume that the interpretation of the church fathers was automatically what God wanted "us" to know. In summary, he did not really seem to care about what the text meant to the original audience.

To be sure not all amillennialists argue this way. Also, he is right that all too often Christians ignore the historical developments of the last two thousand years. However, the denigration of the

¹ The present writer is not succumbing to the temptation, just asserting its existence. The fact of the matter is that within the argument of the chapter, the genuine understanding of the disciples may be set over against the lack of understanding of the Jewish leaders due to their unbelief.

discipline of history in our own time is a cultural dilemma and not one owned exclusively by premillennialists. The recent resurgence of interest in the theology of the early church fathers is indeed welcome.² However, the push for “classical” interpretation should not replace the desire to understand the texts of the Bible literally.

Literal interpretation is nothing more and nothing less than grammatical-historical interpretation. As such it has had a long history within the Church.³ It is the approach to reading the text that acknowledges that the author’s intended meaning is given in the text itself and that it comes with a grammatical or language context and a historical or occasional context.⁴ The two main rival approaches to interpretation in the history of the church have been the allegorical method and the historical-critical method.⁵

What does all of this mean for Matthew thirteen? It means, for one example, that the word βασιλεία (kingdom), which is so crucial to the passage, should be interpreted based upon the context of the teaching of Jesus to his audience of disciples and others. How would *they* have understood the word *kingdom*? Such an understanding would be informed by prior conceptions in the Old Testament (see below) as well as the immediate historical situation of the speaker and audience. It is allowed that Jesus could be using the term in a new way. However, such an understanding would only be true if evidence in the chapter (and book) itself suggested such a thing and not because Origen, Augustine, or the Reformers believed such a thing. Arno Gaebelein, a dispensationalist, complained in the first decade of the twentieth century that most Christians in his day had been influenced by the predominant postmillennial view highlighting the future success of the church. Furthermore, he lamented the fact that this modern view was being read back into the text of Matthew thirteen.

Precisely that which the Lord did not mean has been read into this chapter. The whole chapter has been, so to speak, turned upside down by most of the learned commentators of Christendom. . . . The professing mass continues, and will continue, with the majority of those who are not merely outward professors, to build upon the misinterpretation of our Lord’s parables the optimistic dreams of the enlargement of the church, the foreshadowing of the universal extension of the church and the continued good work of the leaven in the three measures of meal . . .⁶

² See in particular the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* series edited by Thomas C. Oden (InterVarsity Press).

³ See Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 156-76.

⁴ This has been the consensus among evangelicals at least in theory. Article 18 of *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* agreed upon by the *International Council on Biblical Inerrancy* notes “We affirm that the text of Scripture is to be interpreted by grammatico-historical exegesis, taking account of its literary forms and devices, and that Scripture is to interpret Scripture. We deny the legitimacy of any treatment of the text or quest for sources lying behind it that leads to relativizing, dehistoricizing, or discounting its teaching, or rejecting its claims to authorship.” See Norman L. Geisler, ed., *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 497. Compare also Robert Preus and Earl Radmacher, eds., *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 884-85.

⁵ An excellent resource for understanding interaction between the historical-critical school and the issue of *sensus literalis* is Paul Noble, *The Canonical Approach: A Critical Reconstruction of the Hermeneutics of Breward S. Childs* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1995), 306-13. Noble discusses *sensus literalis* in light of Childs’ consideration of John Calvin’s use of the term. Another helpful collection of writings which helps to frame the discussion from a recent Reformed perspective is Moisés Silva, gen. ed., *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

Consequently, it is important that one read the text of Matthew thirteen with the idea that the primary source for understanding it is the actual text itself and not some later historically-conditioned understanding of it.

However, such a literalistic approach is not to be done in a naïve manner. Right away one is confronted in the chapter with the idea of parables. These will be discussed in a more complete way later in Part II. However, for now it is important to acknowledge three important methodological points. First, the reader of Matthew thirteen would not even be certain of the presence of parables in the chapter unless he had first practiced a measure of grammatical-historical interpretation of its words in order to ascertain that fact. Second, a corollary of the first point is that recognition of literary features such as parables fall within the purview of literal interpretation. Thus, the Christian reader should not attempt to find any hidden truths in the text, but actually study the parables themselves for clues to their meaning. Third, Matthew's recording of the parables of Jesus in this chapter could conceivably show entirely new ways of using the form of parables in teaching situations. Consequently, the primary way that one comes to understand the parables is what the text actually says about them. In the end, the presence of the parabolic form in this chapter should not be used to undermine the grammatical-historical interpretation of the passage although its appearance indicates that the student may have more to think through while examining the text.

Old Testament Understanding of the Kingdom

One of the often overlooked features of the kingdom of God as revealed in the Bible is its Jewish character. Amillennialist Oswald T. Allis writing more than half a century ago noted that "if the principle of interpretation is adopted that Israel always means Israel, that it does not mean the Church, then it follows of necessity that practically all of our information regarding the millennium will concern a Jewish or Israelitish age."⁷ A literal interpretation of the Old Testament does indeed justify this conclusion. Several strands of kingdom promises highlight the Jewish expectation of a literal, future, ethnic, political, and glorious kingdom of God on the earth ruled by the Messianic Davidic King. Such hopes were generated by predictions that served to alleviate the nation's distress over the dividing of the Davidic monarchy after the days of Solomon and then later during and after the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities. Notice the sampling of passages below:

- There is the explicit promise to restore Davidic rule to all of the tribes, north and south, as outlined in Amos 9:11-15.⁸ The original readers of the prophecy would have understood the restoration of the Davidic throne in a straight-forward way.

⁶ Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Gospel of Matthew: An Exposition* (New York: Publication Office Our Hope, 1910; reprint, Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1961), 258-59. One of the problems with Gaebelein, and dispensationalists like him, is that while he insisted on a straight-forward reading of passages that touched upon prophetic themes, he frequently resorted to allegorical interpretation in non-prophetic passages to give them a prophetic flavor. See Mike Stallard, "Literal Interpretation, Theological Method, and the Essence of Dispensationalism" *The Journal of Ministry & Theology* 1 (Spring 1997): 5-36.

⁷ Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1945), 244.

⁸ This passage from Amos is quoted by James as recorded in Acts 15:13-18. It is interesting to note that the *Scofield Reference Bible* refers to this passage in Acts with the words, "Dispensationally, this is the most important passage in the N.T." (p. 1169). While this is probably an exaggeration, it does emphasize the significance of the prediction of Amos

- The many pictures of a coming kingdom in Isaiah demonstrate its national character and focal point in the specific place of Mount Zion or Jerusalem (e.g., Is. 2:1-4), its fulfillment of hopes concerning the Davidic throne itself (Is. 9:1-7), the regathering of the people of Israel literally to a specific land (11:11-16), etc. In summary, one cannot read the prophecies of Isaiah at face value without believing that the nature of the kingdom in view is a literal, earthly, political, ethnic dominion ruled by the coming Messianic King.
- The detailed outline of the four world kingdoms given in Daniel 2 & 7 (Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome) followed by a fifth kingdom (the kingdom of God) leads to the conclusion that the fifth kingdom is an earthly, ethnic, political kingdom headed up by the Davidic Son of Man. It would violate the context to interpret the last kingdom differently than the other four. Jewish expectation during the Babylonian captivity would have centered on the restoration of national hopes.
- The restoration to the land mentioned in Ezekiel 36, the coming to life again of the nation cited in Ezekiel 37, and the kingdom descriptions involving temple, worship, and land (Ez. 40-48) lead easily to the conclusion that God's ultimate plan for the nation centered in a restoration of the kingdom in a literal, earthly sense.

These are only a few of the places where future kingdom hopes are mentioned in the Old Testament. It is common and correct to mention them in proofs of premillennialism. An expansion of this list in addition to more detailed discussions about some of the biblical covenants (Abrahamic, Land, Davidic, and New) established graciously by God in the Old Testament would complete the picture of how the average Jew would understand the nature of God's kingdom.

Consequently, it would be exceedingly anachronistic to read back into the Old Testament any later post-Christian historical developments of a kingdom-in-the-heart idea or a rulership of God in the world through the Church. The burden of proof is on those who wish to diminish the aspect of Jewish expectation in all of these passages. Arno C. Gaebelein, a one-time Methodist missionary to orthodox Jewish immigrants in the 1890s, tells of his conversion from postmillennialism to premillennial understanding:

This initial attempt to bring the Gospel to the Jews led me deeper into the Old Testament Scriptures. I began to study prophecy. Up to this time I had followed in the interpretation of Old Testament prophecy the so-called "spiritualization method." Israel, that method teaches, is no longer the Israel of old, but it means the Church now. For the natural Israel no hope of a future restoration is left. All their glorious and unfulfilled promises find now their fulfillment in the Church of Jesus Christ. But as I came in closer touch with this remarkable people, those who are still orthodox, I soon had to face their never-dying hope. As I began to read their *Machsorim*, their rituals and prayers, I found the expressions of hope and longing for Messiah's coming. Do they not say each time *Pesach* is celebrated, commemorating their supernatural deliverance out of Egypt's slavery, "This year here, next year in Jerusalem"? Many an old, long-bearded, orthodox Hebrew assured me that the Messiah, the son of David, the Bethlehemite, will surely come to claim David's throne. In the beginning it sounded foreign to me, but as I turned to the Bible I soon discovered the real hope of Israel and the truth of the promised return of our Lord, and the earthly glories connected with that future event were brought through the Spirit of God to my heart. Then the study of the Bible became my most fascinating occupation . . .⁹

as it relates to the first-century Jewish understanding of the kingdom flowing out of a background of Old Testament teaching.

⁹ Arno C. Gaebelein, *Half a Century: The Autobiography of a Servant* (New York: Publication Office "Our Hope," 1930), 20-21.

This picture of Jewish expectation captures the essence of Old Testament teaching. It should not be taken to demean in any way the idea of God as King in the sense of general sovereignty over all things, an idea commonly referred to as the universal kingdom. It also should not lead to a devaluing of Jesus' present rulership as the head of the Church. However, it does remind us of the great truth that for the Old Testament Jew, the concept of kingdom was concrete and national in its character.

Again, what does this have to do with Matthew thirteen? One immediately confronts the question of continuity between the Old Testament and first century thinking in relation to Jewish kingdom expectations. There is abundant evidence that the first-century notion of kingdom that would be uppermost in the minds of Jesus' audience was, in fact, the same as that of the literal, Davidic kingdom foretold in the Old Testament (e.g., Lk. 1:32-33; Acts 1:6). The Acts 1:6 passage is especially crucial in light of the fact that the question of the disciples about restoring the kingdom to Israel comes after years of teaching by Christ during His earthly ministry and the more recent instruction about the kingdom given during the post-resurrection appearances (Acts 1:3). One would have to believe that the disciples were quite dense if Jesus had been changing the notion of kingdom from that of the Old Testament. In fact, Acts 1:7 is significant in that Jesus does not scold the disciples for their question, but simply affirms that they are not going to know the time when the kingdom comes.

Toussaint does a good job of expressing the continuity of the first-century Jewish idea of kingdom with Old Testament teaching as he reviews the very purpose of the book of Matthew:

A nonbelieving Jew would scoff at any assertion of the Lord Jesus being the Messiah, let alone King. "If Jesus is the Messiah of Israel, where is His kingdom? Where is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises to Israel?" he would ask. After all, the Hebrew Scriptures are replete with foreviews of a Utopian age headed by Israel and their Messiah. Therefore, the objector would contend Jesus could not be the Messiah because He did not fulfill Old Testament prophecies promising a kingdom for Israel.¹⁰

Matthew, in Toussaint's view, gives an answer to this objection. The answer, however, is directly related to notions of the kingdom which flow out of Old Testament teaching. In fact, the teachings of Matthew thirteen must be seen in the light of this Old Testament teaching in order to understand the entire flow of the book.

Harmony of the Gospels

One of the recent and growing controversies within evangelical interpretation involves the relationship of the Gospels to each other. In particular, the rise of redaction criticism and its many offshoots has focused attention on the text as we have it, but with an emphasis on the writer's distinctive use of material to present theological concerns. For example, in this view, the arrangement, choice of material, and distinct wording in Matthew help the reader to know what Matthew is indeed trying to communicate. In other words, one should study the differences between Matthew, Mark, and Luke in order to learn the intended focus of Matthew as he shapes his Gospel story.¹¹

While there is no doubt distinctive emphases in Matthew's account, the evangelical interpreter must be extremely cautious at this point. Such a hermeneutical focus runs the risk of diminishing the historical factor of the text. One might be tempted to view Matthew's shaping of the text as overriding

¹⁰ Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1980), 19.

¹¹ Perhaps one of the best places to go to see this emphasis in interpreting Matthew's Gospel is Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982).

the historical realities of the statement of the text. This is precisely what Gundry does in his commentary on Matthew.¹² Consequently, there has been quite a bit of uneasiness with attempts by evangelicals to emphasize this approach to interpretation.¹³ On the other hand, the traditional approach of reading the Gospels with a view to harmonizing them maintains the historical integrity of the text as different texts in many cases cover the same historical events. The result is a non-contradictory mosaic that fleshes out the event itself while at the same time rescuing the reader from potential pitfalls in interpretation.

A case in point can be shown from Matthew thirteen. Some earlier dispensationalists made a sharp distinction between the concepts *kingdom of God* and *kingdom of (the) heaven(s)*,¹⁴ the latter phrase occurring only in Matthew.¹⁵ A typical analysis would be that of Arno C. Gaebelein who argued that the kingdom of heaven was a subset of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of heaven appears to be used by Gaebelein in two senses. In the first case, “it refers to this period which we have come to call the millennium . . . The ‘kingdom of heaven’ is the establishment, through Christ, of God’s righteous reign on the earth; it is always limited to the earth, that is its sphere – though glorified saints of this and past ages are concerned with it.”¹⁶ Thus, the term kingdom of the heavens was a more specific term with an ultimate realization in the future millennium.

However, Gaebelein’s second use of the term directly involves the parables in Matthew thirteen. There is, in his view, during the present age, a mystery form of the kingdom on earth which could be associated with what can be labeled *Christendom* (more below). The earthly character of this rule of God is maintained for the term *kingdom of the heavens* in this second use although the nature of this kingdom form is different than the previous use of it by Gaebelein. However, both uses of the term make it distinct from the more general term *kingdom of God* in Gaebelein’s thinking. Later dispensationalists have been more cautious. J. Dwight Pentecost, whose overall view of Matthew thirteen is extremely similar to Gaebelein’s, nevertheless comments:

In regard to the terms *kingdom of God* and *the kingdom of the heavens* it is to be observed that, while not synonymous, they are used interchangeably. What distinctions there are are not inherent in the words themselves, but in their usage in the context. Both of these terms are used to designate the millennial kingdom, the spiritual kingdom, and the mystery form of the kingdom. While we recognize the distinctions between the earthly and the eternal aspects of the kingdom program, we must guard against making the terms kingdom of God and the kingdom of the heavens absolute. Only the context can determine the meaning intended to be conveyed by the terms.¹⁷

¹² Ibid.

¹³ The most recent substantial challenge to the evangelical drift in this direction and one that deals head on with issues in the Gospels is F. David Farnell and Robert L. Thomas, *The Jesus Crisis: The Inroads of Historical Criticism into Evangelical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998).

¹⁴ In this paper, *kingdom of heaven* and *kingdom of the heavens* will be used interchangeably. Whether the plural or the singular is implied will not be an issue for this particular study.

¹⁵ Such a teaching is not explicitly taught by Darby in his *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible* (reprint ed., Addison, IL: Bible Truth Publishers, 1979).

¹⁶ Arno C. Gaebelein, “The Millennium” *Our Hope* 9 (November 1902): 294. See also Scofield’s elaborate note on the matter in SRB, 1003.

¹⁷ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 144.

That any emphasis upon the distinctions of these terms is not warranted is proven largely by an appeal to parallel passages in other Gospels. One example will suffice to illustrate. In Mark 4:30-32 in the parable of the mustard seed, the Gospel writer uses the term *kingdom of God* in the same exact way and place wherein Matthew refers to the *kingdom of heaven*. Thus, it is hard theologically, unless one assumes that these are two separate historical occasions, to make a hard and fast distinction between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven as it appears in the teaching of Jesus about the matters that pertain to Matthew thirteen. Of course, this conclusion could be expected on the basis of a study of Matthew alone since Jesus' words about the difficulty of the rich man entering the kingdom of heaven (19:23) are followed in the next breath by the same idea, however using the term *kingdom of God* instead (19:24).¹⁸ Thus, in recent times, dispensationalists have rightly abandoned any sharp distinction between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven. They have done so largely, although not exclusively, because of the influence of parallel passages in the other Synoptic Gospels.

Biblical Theology of Matthew

In the prior sections, this paper examined three preliminary hermeneutical considerations for a proper understanding of Matthew 13. The starting place hermeneutically was literal interpretation understood as grammatical-historical interpretation. Secondly, as part of the historical background to any study of Matthew would be the Old Testament theology of the kingdom as a literal, earthly, ethnic, political rule of Christ on the throne of David in Jerusalem. Such prominent thinking cannot be ignored in one's reading of Matthew. Thirdly, it was found to be appropriate and helpful to include a harmony of Matthew 13 with accounts of the same teaching found in Mark and Luke. In this section, the goal is to point out the need to interpret Matthew 13, especially the parables, in the context of the flow of the argument of the entire book itself. In other words, it is vital to highlight the hermeneutical necessity of dealing with how Matthew thirteen fits into the argument of the entire book. It obviously does not stand in isolation. No proof-texting hermeneutical models are allowed.

While it is impossible to develop a full-orbed biblical theology of Matthew in this paper, it is feasible to suggest major themes to trace in its development. There appear to be three core themes around which the argument of Matthew rotates: (1) the kingdom, (2) the rejection of Christ by Israel, (3) the idea of surprise for Israel and an associated newness. It must be noted that these themes do not come merely from a study of Matthew thirteen, but arise by study throughout the entire book.

Matthew's Presentation of the Kingdom

Fifty-five times Matthew refers to the word *kingdom*. Thirty-two of those occurrences (almost 60%) use the phrase *kingdom of heaven*. In addition, the theme of kingdom is advanced by references to Jesus as the king even when the term *kingdom* is not used (e.g., genealogies, Mt. 1:1ff; birth narratives, Mt. 2:2; crucifixion, Mt. 27:27-44). What can be made of this large number of appeals to the concept of king and kingdom? Based upon the earlier expectations flowing out of Old Testament thinking, one should be inclined to see in such terms allusions to the coming Messianic and Davidic reign of the Christ upon the earth that was so strongly anticipated. Does a reading of the text of Matthew support such expectation?

¹⁸ Barbieri cites the four occurrences of Matthew's use of the term *kingdom of God* but fails to comment on the relationship of 19:24 to 19:23. See Louis Barbieri, "Matthew" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, New Testament Edition (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 49.

The answer is a resounding “Yes!” It is no accident that Matthew begins his Gospel with the genealogy of Christ traced back to David and Abraham. At the outset Jesus Christ is the son of David, a term loaded with Messianic kingdom implications (1:1).¹⁹ The formal mention of David within the genealogy highlights David’s status as king (1:6). Thus, only a few verses into the book of Matthew should lead a reader familiar with Old Testament teaching to begin to think about the promised Davidic kingdom. The birth narratives continue the emphasis with Jesus, the one from David’s city Bethlehem, born as king of the Jews (2:1-2). There is the interplay between Herod who is obviously worried about his kingship and the Magi who have come to offer royal gifts. There is little doubt that the flight of Jesus with his parents to Egypt and the return to the land identifies Him with national Israel.²⁰ Therefore, early in the book the stage has been set for an understanding of kingdom as earthly, national, and political in keeping with the Old Testament understanding.

On the heels of this introduction, Matthew shares the story of John the Baptist preaching that the kingdom of heaven is at hand (3:2) with references to Isaiah, a prophet who often alluded to the coming kingdom, mentioned in the context (3:3). There is nothing in the third chapter to suggest that the word *kingdom* must mean something other than what the preparatory two chapters have suggested. In essence, John seems to be warning and encouraging the people of Israel (no Gentiles in view at this point) that the promised national, Davidic kingdom was at the door. Traditional dispensationalism has often described this as a bona fide offer of the kingdom to the nation of Israel.²¹ Jesus as the King could usher in the fulfillment of all of the promises to David. What is interesting is that the following chapter describes the temptations of Christ by Satan. One of those temptations involved the offer given to Christ by Satan, the ruler of this age, to receive from the devil the kingdoms of the world. Thus, the concept of an offer of the kingdom is not some strange concept pulled out of thin air by dispensationalists. While God, through John, makes His offer, Satan makes his counter offer. The next chapter in Matthew highlights Jesus as the One who is declaring the good news of the kingdom (4:17, 23) in the same way as John had done. The Sermon on the Mount (5-7) reveals the righteous demands to enter the kingdom and how far short of those the Pharisees came.²² In Matthew 10, Jesus sends out the disciples to preach the same kingdom message (see v. 7).

However, even after the teaching of Matthew 13, with its array of parables about the kingdom, there is clear indication that a literal, earthly, national kingdom is in the forefront. In Matthew 19:23-24, as shown before, Jesus teaches about the difficulty a rich man will have in entering the kingdom of heaven/God. Peter responds to Jesus’ teaching in the next verses with a question: “We have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?” (19:27). Jesus answered “in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of glory, ye shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (19:28). Two significant points are to be made here. The idea of regeneration or the giving of renewal reflects Old Testament understanding about the Messianic Davidic kingdom

¹⁹ Thomas S. McCall, “Son of David” in *The Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, Edited by Mal Couch, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 394-96.

²⁰ R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries edited by R. V. G. Tasker, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 42.

²¹ Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968; reprint ed., Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1974), 306.

²² For a good overview of the issues from a traditional dispensational viewpoint, see J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1982).

(e.g., Is. 11). Also, the fact that the disciples will judge the twelve tribes of Israel during that time highlights the literal, national expectations of the nation. In summary, it is impossible to read Matthew without seeing the theme of the Davidic Messianic kingdom in the forefront of its entire argument. Therefore, one must interpret Matthew thirteen so as to relate it to this ongoing theme in the correct way.

The Rejection of Christ by Israel

The flip side of the proclamation of the kingdom to Israel as revealed in Matthew's Gospel is the fact of Israel's rejection of that message through its leaders. The motif of rejection stands alone as a serious sub-theme in the book. Herod, the Roman representative, rejects the Christ child early on (2:1-18). John the Baptist also shows a hint of the rejection of Christ when he challenged the Pharisees and Sadducees who had come to be baptized as a "generation of vipers" who needed to repent of their sin (3:7-8). However, what is overwhelming to the reader is the sense in which Jesus as the King is personally rejected by His own nation in spite of who He was and the miracles He was performing to convince them of who He was. Below is a partial list of rejection episodes involving the nation:

- In Matthew 8:5-13, Jesus heals the servant of a Roman centurion. The centurion's faith is compared by Christ to the lack of faith in Him on the part of the people of Israel (8:10).
- In the country of the Gergesenes, Jesus exorcises demons from two men and sends them into a herd of swine causing the swine to run violently off a steep place into the sea. As a result of this, the whole city came out to ask Jesus to leave that place (8:28-34).
- Certain scribes accuse Jesus of blasphemy because of he forgave the sins of a man sick with palsy (9:2-3).
- The Pharisees reject Christ because He eats with publicans and sinners (9:10-15).
- The Pharisees accuse Jesus of casting out demons and healing by the power of the prince of devils (9:34).
- In the instructions which Jesus gives the disciples as He sends them out, He warns them to expect persecution and opposition (10:11-24).
- Jesus teaches that the current generation (presupposed in the nation of Israel) accused Him of being gluttonous, a wine-bibber, and a friend of publicans and sinners (11:16-19).
- The Pharisees accused Jesus and His disciples of lawbreaking when they pluck food to eat on the sabbath (12:1-2).
- The Pharisees decide to destroy Jesus because He heals a man with a withered hand on the sabbath (12:9-14).
- The Pharisees once again accuse Jesus of casting out demons by the power of the prince of the devils (12:22-24).
- The current generation is declared by Jesus to be condemned in comparison to the men of Nineveh who repented at the preaching of Jonah. The implication is that the preaching of the King is being rejected 12:38-42).
- Jesus continues to condemn the Pharisees as hypocrites (15:1-11) and as teachers of false doctrine (16:1-12).
- The parable of the landowner who planted a vineyard demonstrates the rejection of Christ by the nation (21:33-41). Jesus summarizes by quoting the prophecy about the rejection of Messiah given in Psalm 118:22.

- Of course, there is the rejection by Judas, one of Jesus' own disciples, and the ultimate rejection led by the leaders of the nation which forced the crucifixion of Christ upon Pilate.

More examples could be documented. However, these should be more than sufficient to suggest that any understanding of Matthew thirteen must take into account this thread which runs throughout the book. This is especially significant in light of the fact that it is the previous chapter (12) where Jesus announces that the entire generation is to be judged (12:38-45), and in which the rejection of the Pharisees has become so great that the text says for the first time that there is a plot on their part to destroy Christ (12:14) while they accuse Him of being the operative of Satan (12:22-24). In light of this, it would seem impossible to approach the text of Matthew thirteen without seeing some connection to these themes.

Theme of Surprise for Israel and the Idea of Newness

The proclamation of the kingdom was followed by the rejection of Jesus by the nation of Israel as we have seen. The next logical step in the progression is the response of Jesus to all of this. The nature of his response is to announce judgment upon the nation and to remind the people that there were going to be those in the coming kingdom that they were not expecting to make it. Of course, this truth often centers around Gentiles. However, the Old Testament clearly taught that people from all nations would be included in the Messianic Davidic kingdom (e.g, Dan. 7:13-14; Is. 2:1-4). Why would the nation in Jesus' day be surprised by the inclusion of Gentiles? For the same reason that the Pharisee's had misunderstood other elements in the Law. The Sermon on the Mount shows Jesus' response to the distortion of the Old Testament by the Pharisees and scribes in many practical areas of life and in salvation itself. It is a sure bet, as we shall see, that such distortion in the understanding of the kingdom held sway as well.

While they correctly understood the nature of the kingdom as an earthly, national one, the Jews were slow to let the Gentiles into it. This appears to have been a national trait. Remember Jonah? It is quite intentional that at the pinnacle of the Pharisees' rejection of Jesus, He responds by reminding them of the repentance of the Gentile city of Nineveh at the preaching of the reluctant prophet of God (12:41; cp. 12:21). It is also instructive that the non-Jewish magi are included early on in God's program as well as the Gentile women of the genealogies in chapter one. Yet even well into the book of Acts, the Jews seem to be struggling with the idea of Gentile inclusion into God's things.²³

In fact, the presentation of the inclusion of *Gentiles* and *sinner*s in God's kingdom is most often presented by Matthew as something totally unexpected. In Matthew 8:5-13, the great faith of the Roman centurion above all of those in Israel was intended to shock. Jesus tells those following him that there would be many coming from east and west (Gentiles) who would sit down and dine with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom. To make sure they understood the significant nature of this remarkable assertion, he added that the "sons of the kingdom" would be cast out into outer darkness. Toussaint is probably correct in taking the sons of the kingdom here as the unbelieving Jews.²⁴ In particular, the Pharisees who seemed to have no doubt of their own role in the coming kingdom would

²³ Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1981), 197-213.

²⁴ Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 124.

be shocked to hear that they, according to Jesus, would not get in while Gentile dogs did. Other similar statements showing some form of priority of the Gentiles would be the following:

- The Gentile cities of Tyre, Sidon, and even Sodom comparatively stand above Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum because of the latter's rejection of Jesus (11:20-24).
- The Pharisees' blindness is compared to the seeking faith of the Canaanite woman (15:1-28).
- Jesus tells the chief priests and elders plainly that tax-collectors and harlots will enter the kingdom of God before they will (21:23-32). In saying this, Jesus highlights the faith that many of the sinners exercised in contrast to the unbelief of the self-righteous leaders.

All of these statements by Jesus were shocking to the sensibilities of the Jewish leaders. That is why they wanted to kill Him.

However, more remarkable than these statements (if such is possible) are the elements of transition that Jesus began to reveal to his disciples. One of the easiest transitions to notice is that when Jesus sends the disciples out in Matthew ten they are to go only to the house of Israel. However, by the end of the book, they have a mission that is world wide in scope (Mt. 28:19-20). It is also true that Jesus announces something to be built in the future called the *ecclesia* (Mt. 16:18). His assembly would be different in that it would be grounded upon acceptance of who He really is, the living Christ. Perhaps the most remarkable statement of transition is Matthew 21:43 where Jesus tells the Pharisees and Jewish leaders that the "kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and be given to a nation producing the fruit of it." Two major views of this passage exist in dispensational circles concerning the identity of the new nation. It is either (1) the Church, or (2) a later Jewish remnant coming out of the tribulation into the kingdom. At this point it is not necessary to distinguish between these two interpretations although the first option has a certain attractiveness to this writer in light of the flow of the entire book of Matthew. For now, it is sufficient to realize that Jesus has responded in a way unanticipated by the Jewish leaders of the nation in His day.

Now again, what does all of this have to do with Matthew thirteen? It may be possible to summarize the chapter by the illustration near the end where Jesus notes that "every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household, who brings forth out of his treasure things new and old" (13:52). This theme of newness, accented by the idea of mystery (in the biblical sense as something now revealed for the first time) but obscured somewhat by the parables marks the beginning of a major transition in the teaching ministry of Christ. It comes after the serious rejection of Christ by the Pharisees in chapter twelve and leads to predictions of new work to come in his own *ecclesia*. Thus, Matthew thirteen fits the overall development of this theme of surprise and newness as it appears in the book. Consequently, the reader in order to receive a full understanding of the parables of the kingdom of heaven must not view the chapter in isolation from larger context questions in Matthew's Gospel.

Conclusion

Matthew thirteen cannot adequately be understood without a commitment to literal interpretation of the Bible and an understanding of the kingdom of God as a national, ethnic, work of God in fulfillment of promises given to David in the Old Testament. Furthermore, it is helpful to compare parallel passages in the other Gospels to prevent any misreading of ideas in Matthew. Finally, Matthew thirteen does not stand alone in its interpretation. There is a remarkably clear flow of the argument in the Gospel of Matthew which centers around the same concept of the kingdom of God as

that found in the Old Testament, the tragic rejection of Christ by the nation of Israel, especially its leaders, and the notion of surprise for Israel and the introduction of something new and unexpected. Within this complete picture of the biblical theology of Matthew stands chapter thirteen as a transition section that marks the deliberate transition in Christ's ministry as He teaches His disciples that something new, namely the Church Age, is going to take place before the kingdom comes.

However, this understanding of Matthew thirteen must be demonstrated in detail in the next article in this series. At that time, five elements of the actual exegetical thrust of the chapter will be analyzed: (1) the nature of the parables, (2) the definition of mystery, (3) the nature and timing of the kingdom as presented in the chapter, (4) the individual interpretations of the parables, and (5) the main point of the chapter.

GENERAL UNDERSTANDING OF VARIOUS VIEWS OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 13

Viewpoint Concerning the Nature of the Kingdom of the Heavens	Nature of Kingdom of the Heavens	Time of the Kingdom of the Heavens	Time of the Sowing	The Mystery: What is Newly Revealed	Scope of the Kingdom of the Heavens
A Present Inauguration of the Davidic Kingdom (Progressive Dispensationalism, Amillennialism, Postmillennialism[?], other Premillennialists [Carson])	Spiritual/Davidic	Present Age	Present Age	There is still a mingling of good and evil even after the kingdom has come (Carson)	A Spiritual/Davidic Rule of Christ in the World (through the Church?)
A Present, Non-Davidic, Mystery Form of the Kingdom (Scofield, Ryrie, Walvoord, Barbieri, Pentecost, Bailey, Darby)	Spiritual/ Non-Davidic	Present Age	Present Age	In light of Israel's rejection of the Messiah, there will be an intercalation during which Christ will spiritually rule while we await the coming Davidic kingdom	A Spiritual Rule of Christ in the World
The Future Messianic Davidic Kingdom with Sowing in the Present Age (Toussaint, McClain)	Davidic	Future Age	Present Age	In light of Israel's rejection of the Messiah, there will be an interregnum during which many will unexpectedly be called out to be kingdom citizens for the coming kingdom	The Rule of Christ over Israel and the Nations
The Future Messianic Davidic Kingdom with Sowing in the Future (Glass)	Davidic	Future Age	Tribulation (parable of sower)/ Millennium (wheat and tares)	The future messianic kingdom will witness parallel development of good and evil	The Rule of Christ over Israel and the Nations

SELECTED DISPENSATIONAL VIEWS OF THE INDIVIDUAL PARABLES IN MATTHEW 13

Viewpoint	Sower	Wheat & Tares	Mustard Seed	Yeast/Leaven	Hidden Treasure	Pearl of Great Price	Net
Barbieri <i>(Bible Knowledge Commentary)</i>	Good news rejected by most	Genuine believers and false professors will coexist between the two Advents	Christendom will grow rapidly from a small beginning	People who falsely profess to belong to God will grow in numbers without being stopped	Christ came to purchase or redeem Israel	Christ gave His life to provide redemption for the church	Angels will separate the wicked from the righteous when Christ comes
Scroggie <i>(Prophecy and History cited in Things to Come)</i>	Proclamation of the Kingdom	False Imitation in the Kingdom	Wide, visible extension of the kingdom	Insidious corruption of the kingdom	The Israelitish Nation	Christ purchases the Jewish Remnant during the tribulation	The Judgment of the Nations at the end of the Tribulation
Pentecost <i>(Things to Come)</i>	Proclamation of the Kingdom in the present age with decreasing success	False sowing in competition with the true (present age but especially the tribulation)	Corruption of present program of God in the midst of external growth	The rise of a religious system that will introduce a corrupting element into doctrine	Israel is now in blindness, but is still possessed by Christ	Christ purchases the Church	The present age is to end in judgment
<i>Scofield Reference Bible</i>	Proclamation of the Kingdom in the present age	A description of the mingling of good and bad seed within Christendom	Rapid but unsubstantial growth of the mystery form of the kingdom from a small beginning	Corrupt and false doctrine will influence Christendom	Israel	Church	Mixture of good and bad in the sphere of profession which will one day be judged
Ronald Glass <i>(MTJ)</i>	Rejection of Christ by Israel during the Tribulation	The parallel development of both good and evil during the millennial reign of Christ	Growth of reign of Christ during the millennium but evil allowed in the kingdom	Gradual growth of evil in the millennium	The millennial kingdom/Israel at its center	Israel	The parallel development of both good and evil during the millennial reign of Christ
Toussaint <i>(Behold The King)</i>	The Reception of the Word of the Kingdom in one's heart produces more understanding and revelation of the kingdom	There is a new age in which sons of the kingdom were to be sown as well as sons of the evil one	The spread of the kingdom message before the kingdom comes	Evil will run its course and dominate the new age before the kingdom comes	Israel's kingdom program	Church	Judgement of Israel and the nations at the end of the new age and before the kingdom
Darby <i>(Synopsis)</i>	Proclamation of the word of God in a new work finding those who produce fruit unlike the Jews who had rejected Him	A description of the mingling of good and bad seed within Christendom	The development of the great power of Christendom	Corrupt and false doctrine will influence Christendom	Church	Church	Mixture of good and bad in the sphere of profession which will one day be judged

