

HERMENEUTICS AND MATTHEW 13

Part II: Exegetical Conclusions

This article is the second in a two-part series dealing with the prickly issue of the parables of the kingdom given in Matthew chapter thirteen. Familiarity with the first article is assumed in this particular presentation.¹ Reviewing briefly, the first article dealt with the preliminary hermeneutical concerns of literal interpretation, the resulting Old Testament understanding of the kingdom, the place for a harmony of the Gospels in interpretation, and the development of a biblical theology of Matthew. It was suggested that a proper handle on these issues must be in place before an accurate understanding of Matthew 13:3-52 can be approached.

Specifically, the idea of literal interpretation as grammatical-historical interpretation, an approach that takes into account figures of speech and elements of literary genre, was seen as crucial to understanding the text on its own terms. Second, any interpretation of Matthew's kingdom parables must understand at the outset the concrete essence of the kingdom as taught by the Old Testament. The Jews did not usually think in abstract terms about such things. Therefore, the literal, earthly, political, and ethnic nature of the kingdom as understood in such passages as Amos 9, Daniel 7, Isaiah 11, and Ezekiel 36-48 form a backdrop to one's reading of Matthew, the most Jewish of Gospels. Third, the harmony of the Gospels must be taken into account. When that is done, it is really impossible to argue for a distinction between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God relative to the kingdom parables. Fourth, a review of the biblical theology of Matthew, that is, Matthew's text on its own terms, reveals the same understanding of the kingdom as that of the Old Testament with its offer by Christ to the nation of Israel.

This kingdom reality is accompanied by the presentation of two related truths: (1) rejection of Christ by Israel, especially its leaders, and (2) the resulting theme of surprise for Israel and the idea of newness. It is especially the latter point which takes us to the heart of the matter for interpreting Matthew 13:3-52. Even apart from the kingdom parables in Matthew thirteen, this impression is clear in Matthew's Gospel. Matthew thirteen simply is part of the stream of meaning which flows throughout the book. The role that Jesus' teaching plays, when He gives the kingdom parables of chapter thirteen, is to help define the nature of the surprise for Israel and to anticipate the development of new things relating to the elements of surprise. In particular, the conclusion can be drawn that first-century Israel will be surprised by the rise of a Gentile infusion into God's plan as Jesus begins a new and distinct track of ministry (i.e., the anticipation of

¹ Mike Stallard, "Hermeneutics and Matthew 13, Part I: Preliminary Hermeneutical Concerns" *Conservative Theological Journal* 5 (August 2001): 131-54. This paper is in substantial agreement with Roy E. Beacham, "Kingdom, Parables of the" in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, edited by Mal Couch (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 231-34, and Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1980) especially with respect to the singular use of the word *kingdom* throughout most, if not all of, Matthew.

the Church), which produces many kingdom citizens which His Jewish audience was not expecting. From this vantage point, one can then finalize the analysis of Matthew 13:1-52.

The Interpretation of Parables

A few years ago, Mark Bailey reminded us that the recent study of the parables of Jesus has been “dominated by a ‘sophisticated’ literary criticism and structuralism which seems to be more concerned with the style of argumentation than the historical interpretation.”² Contrary to this unbalanced emphasis, many evangelicals have more often recognized the historical and cultural background to the parables.³ Bailey’s definition of a parable is instructive: “a figurative narrative that is true to life and is designed to convey through analogy some specific spiritual truth(s) usually relative to God’s kingdom program.”⁴ Moreover, he suggests five steps for understanding parables:⁵

1. Understand the historical and cultural setting of the parable;
2. Uncover the need that prompted the parable (as stated in the context of the parable);
3. Analyze the structure and details of the parable;
4. State the central truth of the parable and its relationship to the kingdom;
5. Respond to the intended appeal of the parable.

The last statement entails present application. As far as interpretation proper is concerned, the first two points involve exegetical and background work in the text.

However, the third and fourth steps form the crux of most of the debate about parabolic interpretation. The pendulum seems to swing between the view that says the details of the parable are unimportant (so we must focus on the big idea of the parable) and the position that the minutest details are significant. The last opinion has been rejected largely because of those who, following the historical example of the early Church Fathers, have used the details as a launching pad to do subjective allegorical interpretation based upon the interpreter’s whim.⁶ The first view, however, has the unfortunate plight of being contrary to the way that Jesus interpreted parables whenever

² Mark Bailey, “Guidelines for Interpreting Jesus’ Parables,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155 (January-March 1998): 29-30. In general, this article by Bailey provides a brief, but excellent, survey of current studies of the parables.

³ *Ibid.*, 30-33.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 30-38.

⁶ Ada R. Habershon discusses the extravagances of the Church Fathers but argues for a realistic and complete use of the details. See Ada R. Habershon, *The Study of the Parables* (Reprint; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1975), 10-12.

they were interpreted (e.g., the parable of the sower, parable of the tares). In all cases, he attaches specific meaning to the details. This is in fact the historic approach of the Church in interpreting the parables.⁷ The real mistake in using the details to interpret a parable has not been the attempt to understand the minutiae but to divorce the enterprise from the whole of the parable or from the whole of the context, whether with respect to a cluster of parables or to the biblical theology of the book in which the parable exists. The interpreter should seek to do justice to *both* the details *and* the big idea of the parable. Habershon summarizes the desired balance well: “But, as in a picture, if the details are made unduly prominent, there is a danger of losing the broad lights and shades, and spoiling the effect, so the details of the parable must not be pressed so as to obscure the general teaching.”⁸

There are many contextual factors that help the interpreter to maintain balanced focus in his interpretation of the parables. Sometimes, Jesus gives the interpretation Himself. Other times the Evangelist gives additional comments about what is going on. Special clues can also be found in the prologue or epilogue to the parable.⁹ At times there is a combination of these factors, especially if there are several parables clustered together to convey truths linked to some common theme.

The Structure of Matthew 13:3-52

What Matthew thirteen provides is such a cluster of eight parables with some (the first two) interpreted by Jesus and some stated without interpretation. Furthermore, the *first* and *last* parables, the parable of the sower and the parable of the householder, respectively, serve as **bookends** to identify the general ideas of the entire cluster and to tie the cluster to the ongoing argument of the entire book of Matthew, taking into account the rejection of Jesus by the leaders of Israel and the subsequent development of something new in the transition from the focus on the Jews to the focus on Gentiles. The middle six parables flesh out more details with respect to these general themes.¹⁰

⁷ R. C. Trench reminds us that many of the Fathers such as Chrysostom, Theophylact, and Origen tried to maintain a balance between details and the big idea of a parable. Yet, Fathers like Augustine pressed the details. See R. C. Trench, *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord* (Reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 15-16.

⁸ Habershon, *The Study of the Parables*, 12.

⁹ See Bailey’s summary with Scriptural examples, “Guidelines for Interpreting,” 30-31.

¹⁰ This approach to the structure of Matthew 13:3-52 recognizes some elements of chiasm. Several other scholars have argued for a form of chiastic structure. See David Wenham, “The Structure of Matthew XIII,” *New Testament Studies* 25 (1979): 517-18. D. A. Carson, following Wenham, does so also [“Matthew” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8, edited by Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 303-04]. In addition, Craig Blomberg admits to some inverted parallelism in the chapter while simultaneously recognizing that a chiastic presentation of the subdivisions throughout the chapter does not necessarily aid in understanding the content [*Matthew*, The New American Commentary Series, Vol. 22 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 225]. Similarly, this present writer does not see a clear and comprehensive chiastic structure for all of the details in the entire cluster of the eight parables in the chapter. However, there are enough elements to aid interpretation by highlighting certain connections and chief emphases.

Many presentations of the chapter list only seven parables.¹¹ J. Dwight Pentecost's analysis would be typical. In his outline of the kingdom parables, the parable of the householder (Matt. 13:52) is not considered part of the cluster of parables concerning the kingdom. He finishes with the parable of the dragnet. There are some possible reasons exegetically for separating verse 52 from the other parables in the context. Jesus' question to the disciples, "Have you understood these things?" along with their affirmative answer, is given between the parable of the dragnet and the statement about the householder (v. 51) while, for most of the other parables, no such interruption takes place. Furthermore, the introduction to the parable of the householder is different. The preceding six parables (starting with the tares and ending with the dragnet) are introduced by the words "the kingdom of heaven is like." For the householder parable, the introduction is "every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like." The point of comparison in the subject is not the same (kingdom versus scribe) even if kingdom teaching is part of the overall discussion for both.¹²

Not only is the description of the eighth parable different from the previous six, it is also different from the initiatory parable of the sower. Hagner argues strongly "Even if we allow v 52 to be reckoned as a parable, it is quite different from the parable of the sower both in form and content and is thus hard to regard as a proper inclusio."¹³ In addition, Pentecost argues that there is a possible similarity between the seven parables of Matthew 13 and the seven letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3 as they outline the course of the present age.¹⁴ The eighth parable of the householder apparently does not fit easily into this scheme. In general, most interpreters who argue for some kind of disjunction between the eighth parable and any or all of the previous parables, do so on the grounds that it is a kind of concluding statement rather than a parable *within* the cluster.

¹¹ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Dunham Publishing Co., 1958; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974). See also R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 134ff and Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 33A (Dallas, TX: Word, 1993), 362-64. Leon Morris emphasizes the first seven parables as a unit while acknowledging verse 52 (the householder) as a parable (*The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992], 334, 362). He speaks of the first seven as a series in spite of admitting that verse 53 teaches that all of the preceding parables (which would include the eighth) are grouped together as a "coherent series." The charts associated with this writer's previous article list only seven as a matter of convenience for sake of presentation (Stallard, "Hermeneutics and Matthew 13, Part I," 12-13). For an author who properly views eight parables in the chapter, see Mark Bailey, "The Doctrine of the Kingdom in Matthew 13, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156 (October-December 1999): 443-51; Habershon, *The Study of the Parables*, 121; and Blomberg, *Matthew*, 225.

¹² Leon Morris acknowledges some of the textual distinctions involved but does not use them to argue for a disjunction of the eighth parable from the others (*Matthew*, 334).

¹³ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 363.

¹⁴ Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 153.

However, these exegetical differences and issues should not cause the interpreter to divorce the eighth parable (the householder) from the rest of the cluster. In the first instance, there is a rather large interruption between the first parable (the sower) and the second parable (the tares) given in verses 10-23. The *disciples* ask a question about the first parable's meaning (v. 10) whereas, before the householder parable (v. 52), *Jesus* asks the question about the disciples' understanding. In both cases, the *subject of understanding* is the issue. Jesus' explanation to the disciples about his parables (v. 11-23) highlights the lack of understanding by the current Jewish nation as a whole (especially the leaders) in comparison to the understanding of Jesus' followers. The householder parable follows the disciples' affirmation that they do indeed understand these teachings of Jesus. The parable of the householder serves as an *epilogue* to the entire cluster on this score in the same way that the parable of the sower serves as *prologue*.¹⁵ The terseness of verse 52 in comparison to the parable of the sower can be accounted for on the basis of the shift from the earlier misunderstanding of Jesus' enemies to the understanding and acceptance by the disciples. It is also reasonable that the wrap-up statement would take up less space than the set-up statement for the entire cluster.

In the second instance, even though the introductions to the second through sixth parables are different than that of the eighth, the introduction to the first parable (the sower) is also different than those parables. There is no initial "the kingdom of heaven is like." Instead, the parable begins matter-of-factly: "Behold, a sower went out to sow" (v. 3). Those outlines that only list the first seven parables cannot, then, rule out the eighth parable (the householder) on the grounds that the introduction is different. In addition, recall that the eighth parable was still related to the kingdom of heaven. This is also true of the parable of the sower. In Jesus' explanation of the parable of the sower, he remarks that it is about knowing the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven (v. 11). The understanding of the meaning by individuals seems to be part of the focus of both the first and eighth parables given in Matthew 13:3-52. This helps to support the idea that they should be viewed together as framing the entire cluster of parables.

In addition, the interpreter must notice verse 53: "And it came about that when Jesus had finished these parables, He departed from there" (NASB). Taken at face value, Jesus seems to be referring to *all* of the preceding parables including the eighth parable of the householder, which was given in the previous verse. Furthermore, He treats them all together seemingly as a unit. It is impossible, therefore, to separate the final parable from the preceding seven. Consequently, one must study its connection to the others within the scheme of the whole.

Finally, it is beyond the scope of this article to evaluate Revelation 2-3 and the proposed similarity to the parables of Matthew 13:3-51. However, in light of the connection between the first and eighth parables as shown above, it must be pointed out such a comparison should, of necessity, include the eighth parable. The comparison to the seven letters, even if it is relevant, does not add much to the understanding of the details of the parables of the kingdom in Matthew thirteen.

One other issue of structure involves the grouping of the parables within the cluster. It has already been suggested that the first and eighth parables go together as

¹⁵ There is also an interruption for explanation in verses 34-36 which must be dealt with later.

bookends to the entire sequence. How should the structure of the middle six parables be understood? Often the middle six are placed in two groups of three in the following way:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Tares (v. 24-30) | Interpretation of the Parable of the Tares (v. 36-43) | Hidden Treasure (v. 44) |
| Mustard Seed (v. 31-32) | | Costly Pearl (v. 45-46) |
| Leaven (v. 33) | | Dragnet (v. 47-50) |
| <i>Spoken to the Multitudes</i> (v. 34-35) | | <i>Spoken to the Disciples</i> (v. 36) |

Such a grouping is validated exegetically on a couple of grounds. First, the leading three parables are all prefaced with a statement that Jesus was speaking another parable (v. 24, 31, 33). The second set of three parables (4, 5, 6) is not introduced in such a manner. More significantly, the first three in this sequence are spoken to the multitudes (v. 34). The last three are declared to the disciples.

Another issue of structure is whether there is a chiasm involving the second and seventh parables in the cluster (tares along with the dragnet). What makes the possibility attractive is the mention of the “end of the age” with respect to both of those parables and nowhere else in the cluster (v. 40—interpretation of the tares, v. 49). The imagery of fire is also present in both (v. 30, 42, 50) as is the end-time picture of angels harvesting the wicked out from among the righteous (v. 39-41, 49). This does not mean that there are no differences. The wheat-and-tares parable does not seem to emphasize in any direct way the gathering of “every kind” as does the dragnet parable. However, both make essentially the same point, although in one the primary image used is tares while in the other the analogy is fish.

What remains unclear, however, is whether there is any chiasmic structure involving the third and sixth parables or the fourth and fifth parables.¹⁶ Their brevity is the strongest similarity among all four. It is also true that a possible understanding of positive elements seems to dominate the presentations. It may be best just to see a pairing of the third with the fourth parable and the fifth with the sixth parable in some way. Nonetheless, the lack of interpretation provided by Jesus for any of these individual parables makes it tough to be dogmatic about the particulars. In that light, it may be best to deal with each of these on its own terms.

One last item of structural analysis involves the fact that between the two sets of three parables stands the interpretation of the parable of the wheat and the tares (v. 36-43). In light of the fact that there exist some chiasmic elements in the cluster of parables and that often the centrally located element of any chiasm is what is being highlighted, the central location of the interpretation of the parable of the tares within Matthew 13:3-52 takes on added weight. If this analysis is correct, what features in the wheat-and-tares parable would be the chief focus of Jesus in Matthew’s presentation?

¹⁶ It may be suggested that the idea of “hiding” is in both the fourth and fifth parables. The woman hides the leaven in meal in the parable of the leaven (v. 33) while there is a treasure hidden in the field found by a man in the parable of the hidden treasure (v. 44). However, the element of “hiddenness” does not seem to be as large a factor in the former as it is in the latter. Furthermore, there does not seem to be any strong descriptive tie between the mustard-seed parable (v. 31ff) and the costly-pearl parable (v. 45ff).

First, it highlights the transition from the multitudes to the disciples in Jesus' explanations. What Jesus had explained earlier in the parable of the sower as a general principle now is the direct experience of the disciples as they alone hear the interpretation of the wheat-and-tares parable and the remaining parables in the cluster. This is in keeping with the larger development in Matthew's narrative concerning the shift away from ministry specifically centered on Israel (e.g., Matt. 10:5-6) to a different focal point.

Second, the centrality of the interpretation of the wheat-and-tares parable in Matthew thirteen causes one to focus on God's judgment of the wicked and the rewarding of the righteous at the end of the age. What may be essential in this is the message that the Pharisees and ruler of the Jews had rejected Christ and were among the tares, weeds similar to wheat in appearance. Yet they would not make it while other "sons of the kingdom," genuine followers of Christ would enter into the rewards of the kingdom. That is, this parable gives continued explanation to the theme of surprise that is current throughout the book of Matthew.¹⁷

In light of the entire discussion about the structure of Matthew 13:3-52, the following chart gives the suggested overview.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---------------------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | The Sower (v. 3-23) | | | <i>Spoken to the Multitudes</i> |
| 2 | | The Tares (v. 24-30) | | |
| 3 | | | The Mustard Seed (v. 31-32) | |
| 4 | | | The Leaven (v. 33) | |
| Interpretation of the Parable of the Tares to the Disciples (v. 36-43) | | | | |
| 5 | | | The Hidden Treasure (v. 44) | <i>Spoken to the Disciples</i> |
| 6 | | | The Costly Pearl (v. 45-46) | |
| 7 | | The Dragnet (v. 47-50) | | |
| 8 | The Householder (v. 51-52) | | | |

¹⁷ A discussion of other elements of the parable of the tares will be given below including the identification of the "sons of the kingdom" in v. 38.

The Parable of the Sower

The connection of the parable of the sower to the other kingdom parables cannot be questioned. The Gospel of Mark gives some information not present in Matthew that is instructive. When Jesus asks the disciples if they understand the parable of the sower, he adds another question: “How then will you understand all the parables?” (Mark 4:13). Thus, it seems appropriate to view this parable as a kind of introduction to the entire cluster as Jesus presents it.

At the outset Jesus is speaking to the multitudes when he teaches about the sower of seed (v. 2). The text also states at the beginning that Jesus was speaking in parables (v. 3). Although in comparison to other Gospels, Jesus had used the parabolic form earlier in his ministry, this is the first occasion that Matthew mentions this form of teaching.¹⁸ Throughout the chapter, the reason for Jesus’ use of this style of presentation is clear. With respect to the interpretation of the parable of the sower, Jesus states plainly that its design was two-fold: to reveal new understanding to His true followers and to hide truth from those who rejected Him (v. 10-17).

The fact that Christ is giving new understanding to His disciples is based upon two lines of thought. First, Jesus says that the disciples are allowed to know “the *mysteries* of the kingdom of heaven” (v. 11; τὰ μυστήρια τῆς βασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν). Although there is a great deal of variance concerning the exact content of the mystery Jesus speaks of, most scholars agree as to the meaning of the word.

Mysteries, a word used of secret rites of various religious cults, refers to truth that was not revealed in the Old Testament but is revealed in the New Testament. More than a dozen such truths are revealed in the New Testament, all following the basic definition of Colossians 1:26, which defines a mystery as that “which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to the saints” . . . It is not necessarily a reference to a truth difficult to understand, but rather to truths that can be understood only on the basis of divine revelation.¹⁹

Thus, the idea of new understanding comes from Jesus’ use of the term *mystery*.

The second line of evidence, which suggests that Jesus is revealing new truth and understanding to the disciples, comes from two occasions later in the passage. Jesus, after announcing the three parables of the tares, mustard seed, and leaven, quotes Psalm 78:2: “I will utter things hidden since the foundation of the world” (NASB). Immediately, he leaves the multitudes and “explains” the parable of the tares to the disciples only. While one must be careful not to read too much into small historical details which could be incidental, the overall structure of the chapter seems to reinforce the notion that this is a shift that is part of the overall message of the parables of the kingdom. The second confirmation of this parabolic purpose to reveal new truth to the disciples comes when, right before the last parable (householder), Jesus’ question about the disciples’ understanding, along with their conscious affirmation of it, leads to the

¹⁸ Carson, “Matthew,” 304. See Luke 5:36; 6:39.

¹⁹ John Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come, A Commentary on the First Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1974), 97.

summary statement about the scribe who apparently possesses both the old and new (v. 51-52). It is hard to escape the conclusion that such a scribe understands the new revelation that Jesus is giving. In summary, the following progression may be seen: (1) Jesus begins by using a parable to hide the truth from those who reject Him and to reveal something new to His followers (part of the interpretation of the parable of the sower); (2) Jesus uses parables to provide opportunity to explain new truth to the disciples (part of the interpretation of the parable of the wheat and the tares given mid-way through the cluster of parables); (3) Jesus ends by using a parable to demonstrate the kind of person who understands both the old truth and the new truth (parable of the householder).

The actual content of the parable of the sower is the well-known picture of a man sowing seed in four diverse situations:

- (1) Seed by the side of the road with birds devouring it so that the plant never grows (v. 4);
- (2) Seed strewn on rocky places with little soil so that the plant grows suddenly but did not last long because of no deep root (v. 5-6);
- (3) Seed falling among thorns so that the plant grows but is choked out by the thorns (v. 7);
- (4) Seed falling on good soil so that the plant grows and produces fruit (v. 8).

Much debate has occurred concerning identification of these occasions with respect to individual salvation experiences. For example, while most would agree that the first category probably refers to those who never respond at all to God's message (i.e., the "lost"), there would be quite a range of opinions concerning whether categories two, three, or four refer to "saved" followers of Jesus. However important such a determination is, it does not seem to be the case that debate over lordship salvation is what Jesus really had in mind as the main point of this section.

Jesus' interpretation of this parable notes, most importantly, that the sown seed is the ***word of the kingdom proclaimed*** (v. 19). One can certainly say (and be theologically correct) that a man or woman must respond to the gospel (good news) of eternal life by faith in Jesus and His work on the cross to be part of God's kingdom. However, that is not the precise intent of Jesus' statement in this context. The kingdom must be clearly understood from the context of Matthean biblical theology. John the Baptist had preached it (Matt. 3:2). Jesus had declared that it was at hand (Matt. 4:17). The disciples had been sent out to proclaim its message (Matt. 10:7). The notion of kingdom that prevails throughout Matthew is that which occupied the Old Testament prophets – the literal, political, ethnic, national kingdom promised to the nation of Israel (e.g., Dan. 2, 7).²⁰ This eschatological kingdom is the one anticipated by Christ even after the shift that takes place in Matthew thirteen. Beacham summarizes:

Perhaps the best approach to the kingdom parables is that which espouses a single, unified, mediatorial kingdom that existed historically under the Mosaic covenant and was predicted by the Old Testament prophets to be restored in its former glory is the same kingdom that John preached and Jesus offered to Israel; it is the same kingdom that the

²⁰ See Stallard, *Matthew 13, Part I*.

Jews spurned in their rejection of Jesus. This singular, mediatorial kingdom—the historic, prophetic, offered, and rejected kingdom—is the kingdom of which Jesus spoke in these parables.²¹

Beacham’s description of mediatorial aspects aside, one thing is clear. The kingdom in view in all of Matthew, including chapter thirteen, is the eschatological kingdom of blessing when the nation will be restored.²² Consequently, what is in view then are the responses to the proclamation of that kingdom.

Jesus never identifies the sower in this parable. Since John the Baptist, Jesus, and the disciples had all proclaimed the message of the kingdom prior to this point in Matthew’s Gospel, he probably means for it to be generalized. *Anyone* who sows the seed will get different responses. In light of the ongoing sowing that takes place in the following parable of the tares (v. 24ff), a sowing that seemingly takes place until the “end of the age” (v. 40-41), it may be best to see direct application of the sowing in the present age until, and including, the events which mark the end-time tribulation events.

However, at this point, it is not entirely clear what it is that is *new* revelation to the disciples. Proclamation of the message of God’s coming kingdom was an integral part of Old Testament teaching (e.g., Dan. 7-12; Amos 9:11ff). How can it be said to be new? The parameters for the answer are fleshed out in the other parables (see below). What can be said at this point is that the flow of the narrative of Matthew has already provided the preliminary elements of an old/new dichotomy. On the one hand are many Jews (not all) who reject Christ, especially the national leaders. On the other hand are Gentiles who surprisingly gain acceptance into God’s favor and/or kingdom. Such teachings in Matthew precede chapter thirteen (8:5-13; 11:20-24; 12:21-41) as well as follow it (15:1-28; 21:23-32). Matthew thirteen and its initial parable of the sower simply formalizes God’s intention to do some new work relative to the eschatological kingdom in light of the rejection of Christ by the nation of Israel.

In correlation to these factors, one must remember the nationalistic context that may be behind the parable, which is often obscured by the individualistic focus that is sometimes brought to the text. The use of the word “fruit” in noun or verb form in various Matthean texts demonstrates the necessity of this outlook. It occurs fourteen times in ten verses. Two of those can be dismissed. In Matthew 21:19, Jesus causes the *fruit* on the fig tree to cease. In Matthew 26:29, Jesus alludes to His drinking of the *fruit* of the vine when His kingdom comes. However, in Matthew 3:8-10, John the Baptist implores the Jewish leaders to produce *fruit* in their lives worthy of their proposed water baptism at his hand. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus refers to the good fruit that appears in the lives of genuine followers as opposed to the bad fruit that emerges in the lives of hypocrites who do not follow Him (7:17-19). This picture is similar to the language of the parable of the sower in Matthew thirteen. Jesus uses comparable terminology when he scolds the Jewish leaders for their rejection of Him in Matthew 12:33. Here there is the presence of bad fruit in their lives, which has national

²¹ Beacham, “Kingdom Parables,” 232.

²² This approach which sees unity throughout Matthew in the way that the term *kingdom* is used is contrary to emphases that allow for a shift within Matthew from one kind of kingdom to another [Mark Saucy, “The Kingdom-of-God Sayings in Matthew,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151 (April-June 1994): 175-97.]

implications as the narrative develops. There is, of course, the bearing of fruit mentioned in the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:23) that is the present focus.

However, one more passage in Matthew's account shows that the term can have a nationalistic bent: "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and be given to a nation producing the *fruit* of it. And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust" (Matt. 21:43-44). Here Jesus talks to Pharisees and chief priests as individuals. They get quite mad when they realize that He is talking about them in all of the parables (v. 45-46). Notice, however, that Jesus in pronouncing judgment upon them talks in a "nationalistic" way. His reference to the removal of the *kingdom* from them means that they would not be privileged to be part of it since they had rejected Him. That kingdom would be given to another nation (ἐθνῶν).²³ Notice that this means that the kingdom would not be established for the entire current generation of Jews. What is the significance for the understanding of Matthew thirteen? In light of the fact that Matthew intertwines throughout his Gospel both individualistic and national truths with respect to the producing of fruit, the interpreter should not focus entirely on individualistic and soteriological issues in the text while ignoring the larger national ones also present in the context. Thus, the parable of the sower can be seen, in its possible connections to these other Matthean passages and themes, to highlight the fact that those who should have accepted the Messiah, i.e., the Jewish leaders, had denied Him, while many Gentiles would surprisingly accept Him and produce the fruit demonstrating their citizenship in the coming eschatological kingdom.

²³ Dispensationalists have debated the identification of this "nation." One leading view is that the nation to whom the kingdom is given is the future Jewish remnant during the tribulation, which will be alive to see the start of the eschatological kingdom when Christ returns. Arno Gaebelein would be one representative of this view. He argues "They had refused not alone the kingdom but the King; the Son they would soon cast out and therefore the Kingdom was to be taken from them. These men who stood there, the generation which had share and part in the rejection of the Kingdom and the King, will *never* see the Kingdom. . . . The nation to whom the Lord promises the kingdom is not the Church. The Church is called the Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ, the Habitation of God by the Spirit, the Lamb's Wife, but never a nation. The nation is Israel still, but that believing remnant of the nation, living when the Lord comes" [Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Gospel of Matthew: An Exposition* (New York: Publication Office Our Hope, 1910; reprint, Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1961), 437. This approach has the advantage of meshing well with the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24-25). It also could then tie in easily to the end-of-the-age scenario that is mentioned in the parable of the tares (13:40-41) as well as keep kingdom truth associated with Israel, the main focus of the Old Testament kingdom idea.

A second prominent view of "nation" in Matthew 21:43 is that it refers to the Church. Toussaint, representative of this view, responds to Gaebelein's argument in the following way: "But the difficulty with this [Gaebelein's] explanation is seen in that 'nation' (ἐθνος) is used and not 'generation' (γενεά) or 'offspring' (γέννημα). Gaebelein also states, 'The Church is called the Body of Christ . . . but never a nation.' This statement can be very seriously disputed. 1 Peter 2:9 and Romans 10:19 definitely refer to the church as a nation" (*Behold the King*, 250-51). Toussaint's positive reasons for his interpretation are mostly theological. What makes this view attractive, however, is that it also appears to fit the flow of Matthew's narrative with the transition from a focus on Israel to the Gentile mission.

The Parable of the Tares

The parable of the tares (Matt. 13:24-30) along with its interpretation (Matt. 13:36-43) is crucial to the overall theme of the chapter as the discussion about the structure of the cluster of parables showed. Here more exegetical details must be explored to flesh out Jesus' teaching. Of special interest for this article will be the introductory phrase *the kingdom of heaven is like*, the identification of the *sons of the kingdom*, and the contrast of these sons to the wicked.

Recall that the phrase "the kingdom of heaven is like" is first used in this parable and introduces the next five parables in the sequence. In each of these opening statements, there is a basic analogy that is outlined as follows:

- "a man who sowed good seed in his field . . ." (v. 24)
- "a mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field . . ." (v. 31)
- "leaven, which a woman took and hid . . ." (v. 33)
- "a treasure hidden in the field . . ." (v. 44)
- "a merchant seeking fine pearls . . ." (v. 45)
- "a dragnet cast into the sea . . ." (V. 47)

The general idea involves a "kingdom" comparison to these images and the statements made about them.

However, even among dispensationalists, several views exist about these Matthew thirteen comparisons and the use of the word *kingdom* relative to them. Toussaint outlines four major views in his analysis.²⁴ Likewise, this present writer, in Part I of this series, furnishes a chart with four different perspectives.²⁵ A more complete discussion of these various theological viewpoints will be handled later in this article. For now, it is important to realize that the language of the comparisons in the parables of the kingdom does not automatically force one to view the kingdom as co-extensive with the present Church Age.

First, one must understand that the entire parable, not just the introductory statement of comparison, is a description relative to the kingdom. As Toussaint notes: ". . . these formulas do not mean that the kingdom of heaven is symbolized by the man, or the mustard seed, or leaven, or any other single object in the parables. It is simply used to introduce narrative which represents truth relative to the kingdom."²⁶ Thus, it is not necessary to take the image as, in fact, the picture of the kingdom itself.

Second, it is instructive that the first and eighth parables (sower and householder) do not use the comparison language in the same way, but do highlight the kingdom (see verses 19 & 52). This lends support to the idea that the focus is on facts that relate to the kingdom and that it is not essential to view the actions described in the parables as occurring during the time of the kingdom. Such a conclusion is strengthened if the

²⁴ Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 172-75.

²⁵ Stallard, *Matthew 13, Part I*, 13.

²⁶ Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 181.

chiastic structure presented in this paper is accurate, since the unity of the parables would be heightened under such a scheme.

Most importantly, however, the actual details of the wheat-and-tares parable support the idea that the events described in the parable occur during a preparatory time to the kingdom and not the actual time of the kingdom itself. This is best seen in its correlation to the Olivet Discourse and the Great Commission passages. According to the details of the parable, the Son of Man (Jesus) sows good seed (wheat) while the devil sows the tares or the wicked (v. 37-38). The “end of the age” marks the harvest performed by the angels, which results in the fiery judgment of the wicked and the reward of the righteous (v. 39-43). The similarity of such language to the Olivet Discourse has already been noted. Yet the “end of the age” question of the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:3) seems tied to Jesus’ responsive teaching about his own Second Coming (24:29-31) that also involves the use of angels in judgment. The judgment language, furthermore, uses the same descriptive elements including fire (25:30, 41; cp. 25:46). There is also the similar teaching on rewards in the Olivet Discourse (25:14-30).

Consequently, the similarities of the imagery in the wheat-and-tares parable of Matthew thirteen to the Olivet Discourse are so clear that one is compelled to believe the time frame of the events which are described are also the same. Yet, the Second Coming is described in Matthew 24:29-31 using the language of Daniel 7:13-14. That means that Matthew’s understanding of the kingdom in the Olivet Discourse is the same as the Old Testament understanding of a restored national kingdom for Israel. Therefore, it is difficult to imagine the kingdom as understood in Matthew thirteen to be any different. The parable of the tares explains to the disciples that, in spite of the rejection of Christ by the current leaders of Israel, the promises and expectations about the coming kingdom would be fulfilled as God had said. However, before that time comes, some other events will take place relative to and in preparation for that kingdom. It is these events and the time frame associated with it that is the mystery unknown in the past and now being revealed in the kingdom parables. The actual nature of the kingdom is not in view.

Such an understanding also harmonizes well with the Great Commission passage of Matthew 28:19-20. There the phrase “end of the age” also appears as it does in the kingdom parables of Matthew 13 and the Olivet Discourse. Yet, the activity prescribed by the commands in 28:19-20 is descriptively the same as that in the parable of the sower and the parable of the wheat and the tares. Therefore, one must interpret the outreach implied in those parables in light of the shift that takes place from a mission exclusively to the house of Israel (Matt. 10) to one encompassing all peoples (Matt. 28). In the end, Matthew 28:19-20 may be a command to carry out the description inherent in the kingdom parables of Matthew 13.

Bailey has objected to this interpretation on the basis of the verb tense in Matthew 13:24.

The parable of the tares of the field is also the first parable in a series that utilizes the likeness formula in reference to the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 13:24). In this formula of comparison the verb “to be like” (*ὁμοιῶ*) is used, while in the next five parable introductions the adjective “like” (*ὁμοίως*) is used. The aorist passive form of the verb (*ὁμοιῶθη*) indicates that Jesus viewed the kingdom of heaven as having present reality. This parable describes a stage in God’s kingdom program that has already begun—the

present form of God's rule, which is explained as "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (v. 11).²⁷

Bailey does not give any argument to justify this claim, but assumes that it has been demonstrated in scholarly debate elsewhere. On the face of it, an aorist passive would not be enough to justify the conclusion he gives. However, D. A. Carson has claimed that Matthew conscientiously shifts back and forth from a future passive to an aorist passive in use of the term in the kingdom parables. He argues that this particular scheme can be mapped consistently with the already/not yet tension concerning the kingdom. In this view, the aorist passive is used in contexts to suggest that the kingdom being referred to is the inaugurated form of it while the future passive is used to focus more precisely on those elements that refer consciously to the consummation of the kingdom.²⁸ Such a linguistic analysis is preferable to Bailey's terse comments because it leaves the better impression that the ultimate proof for the view is found in the context of the biblical theology of Matthew rather than in the tense of one word.²⁹ Its conclusion with respect to the parable of the tares is that some present form of the kingdom is being discussed since the aorist passive carries the weight of "the kingdom of heaven has already become like."³⁰

However, this approach stumbles on a couple of points. For one thing, it unduly minimizes the eschatological elements in the parable that suggest a forward look to the kingdom. Carson notes "even though there is mention of the eschatological 'harvest', the focus remains on the mixture of the tares at present."³¹ However, the present problem of the tares is not to be dealt with in the here and now. A main point of the parable is that the tares are dealt with in the future end time. Even the discussion of the present events leads to a question about the later time. It is also true that more than half of the interpretation of the parable of the tares consists of the "end of the age" elements. Furthermore, if the analysis given above is correct that unites the description of the Olivet Discourse to this parable, Carson's analysis does not hold up since the future passive is used in that particular setting (Matt. 25:1).³² Consequently, one should dismiss the

²⁷ Mark L. Bailey, "The Parable of the Tares," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155 (July-September 1998): 266-79.

²⁸ D. A. Carson, "The ΟΜΟΙΟΣ Word-Group As Introduction to Some Matthean Parables," *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985): 277-282.

²⁹ Bailey no doubt did not mean to imply that the tense of the word was all that was involved in light of the sources that he footnotes for his view. He simply does not deal with the issues comprehensively.

³⁰ Carson, "The ΟΜΟΙΟΣ Word-Group," 278.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 279.

³² The present writer is not a grammarian, but a systematic theologian. Nonetheless, Carson's well-crafted argument is based upon his own understanding of contextual development within the book of Matthew. The particular example cited above is his belief that the parable of the tares deals with the present age more than the eschatological end-time events. This view of the passage must be true before the correlation is made to justify the conclusion about the aorist passive. What is being suggested here is that

objection that a present form of the kingdom is in view due to the aorist passive tense in the introductory phrase of the parable.

Another possible objection to the idea that the parable of the tares speaks of a present time leading up to a future kingdom comes from the other end of the spectrum. Some interpreters have suggested that, not only is the kingdom spoken of in this parable (and all the parables) the future eschatological kingdom, but the sowing and growth of the wheat and the tares et al are also to be assigned to the future age. Ronald Glass generally argues

. . . the new truth not revealed by the Old Testament, but for the first time explained by the Lord Jesus Christ, is that the messianic kingdom will witness the parallel development of good and evil. Throughout the Old Testament, the kingdom over which Messiah reigns is pictured as a time of peace and prosperity under the rigidly enforced righteousness of the King.³³

In the parable of the tares, he views the details as referring to events during the millennial kingdom. For example, the sowing of the seeds, both good and bad, are during the one-thousand-year reign of Christ. The reaping that is done at the end of the time under discussion is that done at the end of the millennium. It is at that time that Jesus will send His angels to gather “out of His kingdom” (Matt. 13:41) all that offends.³⁴

This particular interpretation falls on the same sword as the earlier objection. The language of the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24-25) that matches that found in the parable of the tares suggests the same topic. However, it is impossible to see its judgment and reward events, including the kingdom parables of Matthew twenty-five, as occurring at then end of the millennium since events leading up to those are, in fact, the Second Coming of Christ, which immediately precedes the millennium. Moreover, the phrase “gather out of his kingdom” (13:41) does not have to be taken to mean a kingdom is already in place and operational for the language to make sense. Other kingdom parables suggest that Jesus will come to set up His kingdom, at which time, he will remove the negative elements at the start (Matt. 25). Those who are being removed are those who are trying to enter the kingdom but will fail to do so. This approach does not deny that negative elements will exist and rise up against Christ during the millennial kingdom. However, Glass’ assertion that the Old Testament did not teach the truth that the messianic kingdom will have both good and evil in it cannot be held. Isaiah 11:4 predicted that Christ will firmly put down the rebellion of the wicked during the kingdom. Furthermore, the existence of death within the kingdom implies that the curse has not been removed during the millennium (see Is. 65:20). Therefore, one cannot argue, as Glass does, that the new truth being revealed in the Matthew thirteen parables is that the millennial kingdom would contain both good and bad.

Carson has underemphasized the eschatological elements in this parable to a degree that leaves his final conclusion about the role of the verb tenses in dispute.

³³ Ronald Glass, “The Parables of the Kingdom: A Paradigm for Consistent Dispensational Hermeneutics,” *Michigan Theological Journal* 5 (Spring/Fall 1994): 105-27.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 116-117.

Another interpretive issue in the parable of the tares is the identification of the *sons of the kingdom*. Christ classifies these sons as the *good seed*, which are sown by the Son of Man or Christ Himself (Matt. 13:37-38). However, in light of the scope of the entire parable, which extends to the end of the age, it is unlikely that this sowing should be limited to something that only Jesus has done. More likely, the message of Jesus, the *word* of the kingdom in the previous parable, produces followers who also sow the message. They in turn would produce followers who would continue the chain throughout the entire age as an extension of Christ's work.³⁵ This is in keeping with the previous missionary thrust the immediate disciples had been assigned (see Matt. 10) although it is being expanded. As Blomberg notes, "He [Christ] specifically identifies the farmer with himself . . . This suggests that a similar equation would be legitimate in the parable of the sower. But, derivatively, the farmers in both passages can stand for all who sow God's Word."³⁶ The message is similar to the parable of the sower although the imagery is slightly different (seed refers to the message rather than to people).

The use of the term *sons of the kingdom* occurs only one other place in Matthew although the word *son* is used almost eighty times.³⁷ The immediate sense that comes to mind is that the phrase refers to those "who belong to something," in this case, the kingdom.³⁸ However, to belong to the kingdom is to belong to the King. This seems to be in the foreground since the bad seed are referred to as sons of the devil (v. 38-39). Again, this should remind the interpreter of the context of the King's rejection so that His kingdom is taken away from the contemporary generation of Jews.

However, the other occurrence of the phrase *sons of the kingdom* raises a problem for this approach. In Matthew 8:11-12, Jesus makes a remarkable statement:

I say to you, that many shall come from the east and west, and recline at table with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven; but the sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

This follows on the heels of Jesus' surprising affirmation that the Roman centurion whose servant was healed had greater faith than anyone in Israel (v. 8-10). Some view the sons of the kingdom here as genuine believers while others view them as Jews who only think they are sons of the kingdom. The latter view would see Jesus as almost sarcastically speaking to the expectations of the Jewish leaders in His day who are

³⁵ Note that there is no differentiation within this age of a "church age" followed by a "tribulation." No doubt, posttribulationists are pleased with this, but pretribulationists would simply point out that Matthew does not deal with such matters. What is in view is anyone who is following Christ and spreading His message versus those who are not. This, of course, comes to a head during the tribulation period immediately prior to Christ's Second Coming.

³⁶ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 222.

³⁷ It is beyond the scope of this article to evaluate the term *son* as it occurs in all of Matthew's Gospel, although such an analysis would inform to some degree the discussion about the sons of the kingdom.

³⁸ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 222.

increasingly hostile to His message.³⁹ The exegetical decision hinges on the way that the expressions “outer darkness” and “weeping and gnashing of teeth” should be interpreted. Interestingly, these terms also occur in Matthew 25:30 in the parable of the talents, a section that has frequently been tied to the kingdom parables in Matthew thirteen in the preceding discussions. Traditional understanding of this language in Matthew 8:11-12 views it as a reference to the judgment upon unbelief that can be associated with hell. If this stance is correct, then Jesus’ statement would be that many Jews, who expect to be in God’s kingdom, will not be accepted into it. On the other hand, many Gentiles, who the Jews were not expecting to be in the kingdom, will be citizens of that coming kingdom. The association of the terms “outer darkness” and “weeping and gnashing of teeth” with popular images of hell may be justified based upon the contextual reference to eternal fire in the Olivet Discourse (see Matt. 25:41).⁴⁰

Some interpreters might suggest that this approach makes *the sons of the kingdom* have a different meaning in the two places, believers in 13:38 but unbelievers in 8:12. However, the presence of an ultimate distinction does not eliminate the fact that the terms meant the same to the audience in both places (Jews in 8:12 and disciples in 13:38). Both groups listening to Christ viewed themselves as sons of the kingdom. It is the possible sarcasm of Jesus that changes the ultimate referent of the term, not the meaning of the phrase itself. Second, there is a similar shift of terms later on in the parables. For example, before Matthew thirteen, many scribes were often those who were weak spiritually and who opposed Christ (5:20, 9:3, 12:38). However, in the parable of the householder, the term is used in a more positive context to distinguish such a scribe from these others. The same may be true for the expression sons of the kingdom in Matthew 13:38.

In summary, the parable of the tares suggests that Jesus, in light of the rejection of Him by the leaders of the nation of Israel, is teaching that the kingdom will not happen immediately. Instead, there will be a time of sowing in preparation for the future kingdom. Furthermore, the kingdom will be preceded by a pronouncement of judgment upon unbelievers and the rewards for the followers of Christ, which takes place at the end of the present age. In the end, many kingdom citizens will be produced, who the Jews were not expecting.

The Parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven

The lengthy discussions above for the parable of the sower and the parable of the tares are justified due to the significant role each plays as prologue and centerpiece, respectively, of the cluster of parables in Matthew 13:3-52. The remaining parables, though shorter and less complicated, are significant in their own right. However, since neither Christ nor Matthew interprets these parables (with the exception of the terse

³⁹ Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 123-24.

⁴⁰ This does not mean that the traditional view does not have problems. See Michael G. Huber, “The ‘Outer Darkness’ in Matthew and Its Relationship to Grace,” *Journal of the Grace Theological Society* 5 (Autumn 1992): 11-25. As stated earlier, a full-blown discussion of the lordship salvation debate is beyond the scope of this paper. While the present writer does not hold to the lordship position, it is not at all clear that Huber’s approach to these Matthean images is compelling.

interpretation in v. 49-50), the interpreter should be more cautious and perhaps less dogmatic about his conclusions.

In particular, the two parables (mustard seed, 13:31-32; and leaven, 13:33) are grouped together with the parable of the tares in the structure of the chapter and precede the explanation of that parable. They are spoken to the multitudes, which would also include the disciples. The essential meaning of the parable of the mustard seed is that the period of preparation leading up to the kingdom will be one in which many would come to accept Christ as the Messiah. Even though the work during this time starts small, as a mustard seed, it ends up becoming large or having an impact upon the entire world. One must be careful here not to accept the postmillennial understanding that these verses suggest the success of the Church in ushering in the kingdom.⁴¹ The disciples could hardly have missed the rejection that Christ was experiencing. It was surely disheartening for them to notice the leaders of the nation not following the King. Jesus' words serve the dual purpose as a warning to the multitudes and an encouragement to the disciples that their (or any follower's) work for Him will not be in vain.

The parable of the leaven has generated more controversy due to the debate over the word *leaven* itself. One main view would be that the parable gives a positive picture that is identical to the parable of the mustard seed. A small pinch of leaven or yeast ends up expanding and producing much that is good. This can then be associated with the producing of sons of the kingdom that is crucial to the parable of the tares in the context. Such a view ignores the use of leaven elsewhere in Scripture as a picture of sin and evil (Matt. 16:6-12). Blomberg suggests that the immediate context (the close association of the two parables) overrides these associations.⁴²

However, the immediate context supports an understanding of the parable of the leaven as distinct from the parable of the mustard seed and in harmony with Matthew's association of the term *leaven* with the evil of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 16:6-12). The controlling factor here is the parable of the tares, whose presentation introduces the group of three parables and whose interpretation concludes them. That parable has two key elements with respect to the activities of the present time, one good and one evil. It is not a stretch exegetically to see that Jesus gives these two parables (mustard seed and leaven) to illustrate the two elements of good and evil.⁴³ In this light, the period leading up to the kingdom will see many come to Christ, but will also see many reject Him as well. Each of the two parables illustrates one-half of the description given by the parable of the tares. The disciples would need to be cautious as well as encouraged.

⁴¹ For example, see Lorraine Boettner, *The Millennium* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1957), 131. This view depends upon the idea that the kingdom as presented in this passage is associated with all or part of the present age. However, as has been shown, it is not necessary to view the time of the events described in this chapter as the actual kingdom. Even if it were, as many non-postmillennial theologians hold (including dispensationalists), there are alternative explanations available. In fact, premillennialists do not reject the idea of great success in outreach although they usually reject the idea that society will be overwhelmed by Christianity – an idea that the tares in the previous parable bear out.

⁴² Blomberg, *Matthew*, 220.

⁴³ Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 182.

The Parables of the Hidden Treasure, Pearl, and Dragnet

These three parables are also grouped together following the interpretation of the parable of the tares. They are spoken only to the disciples. There is also some question as to whether the first two parables (treasure, pearl) go together. Bailey adroitly describes the issue in the following way.

The parables of the hidden treasure and of the pearl merchant are parallel in five ways: a reference to something of value, the finding, the going, the selling all one has, and the buying. They also have some significant differences. The treasure parable speaks of hiding, joy, and the location of the treasure that is found and hidden again in a field. It also contains historic-present tenses (“goes,” “buys,” and “sells”), whereas the pearl merchant parable has all these verbs in the past (“went,” “sold,” and “bought”). In the first the discovery is accidental, while in the second the person was in the business for just such a find. Obviously, then, the parables, while similar, are not the same, as some have suggested.⁴⁴

Consequently, it is plausible to see the two parables as distinct in some way.

One common dispensational approach is to view the hidden treasure as referring to the nation of Israel and the pearl merchant as Christ who dies for the Church. In this view, the parable of the hidden treasure focuses on Israel, the pearl on the Church.⁴⁵ While it is not possible to interact with all views on these parables, one should notice that the overall flow of Matthew’s narrative does lend itself to the above interpretation. This is especially true in light of the fact that the parable cluster is moving toward its wrap-up with the mentioning of the new and old together (see below). One of the transitions taking place in the text is that Israel, due to its rejection of Christ through its leaders is being rejected for a time, while Christ does some work that is unexpected, namely the calling out of many unanticipated sons of the kingdom throughout the world. It is not a stretch to see the language of “hiding” to refer to this temporary rejection by Christ. However, the focus of joy by the man in the parable (Christ) shows that He has a heart for the world (the field) in light of the treasure itself. This is in keeping with the theological understanding of the mission of Israel as a light to the world (e.g., Is. 49:6) and the Pauline portrait of Israel’s judicial blindness as a boon to the Gentile mission (Rom. 11). If this way of taking the passage is valid, it would harmonize well with Matthew’s own comprehension of the shift from the focus on Israel to the Gentiles. In

⁴⁴ Mark L. Bailey, “The Parables of the Hidden Treasure and of the Pearl Merchant,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156 (April-June) 1999: 176.

⁴⁵ Barbieri, “Matthew,” 51-52; Cp., Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 183-84. It must once again be pointed out that Matthew’s understanding of the Church is sketchy and anticipatory. In general, Matthew’s focus in chapter thirteen is on the new, unexpected work Christ is doing after the First Advent and before the Second Advent in light of Israel’s rejection of Him. Matthew does not formalize it as the Church although in later chapters he begins to move in that direction (Matt. 16:18, 18:17). The Church was not in all respects a new revelation given to Paul although it was entirely unknown in the Old Testament. Paul himself states that it had been revealed to the apostles and prophets (Eph. 3:5). The details of Jew and Gentile together in one body (the Church) are fleshed out most comprehensively, however, in Pauline theology.

fact, Jesus' teaching would be timely with respect to the experience of the disciples themselves at this time.

The parable of the dragnet, third in this group, must somehow make sense within such a scheme as well. It is tempting to read the three Pauline categories of Jews, the Greeks, and the Church (1 Cor. 10:32) into Matthew's three parables here. That is especially true since a key phrase in the parable of the dragnet appears to be the gathering of fish of "every kind" (v. 47). This brings to mind the teaching from Daniel's vision that when the kingdom comes there will be saints who will enter it from every people, nation, and language (Dan. 7:13-14). Even though this passage was known to the first-century Jews, they do not seem to have grasped its significance as seen by the way they treated the Gentiles. However, one must not read too much of the Pauline distinctions into the Gospel. Matthew's account must stand on its own before being correlated to other biblical authors. At the least, one can say that the parable of the dragnet repeats the core message of the parable of the tares concerning a judgment to come as seen by its appeal to the "end of the age," the angels who reap, the fiery furnace, and the "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (v. 49-50). The good fish and bad fish are separated in the same way that the wheat is to be separated from the tares.

The Parable of the Householder

Although the parable of the householder (Matt. 13:51-52) has been discussed above in its connections to the parable of the sower and the rest of the parables, there are some other issues that need to be resolved. First, the Bible student must take note of the fact that the old as well as the new things are considered part of the treasure. The old is not something that has been done away with in any complete sense. What is old in the context of Matthew's narrative is the traditional understanding of the kingdom relative to its Jewishness in light of the nation's expectations. Jesus seems to be saying that Israel's place in the coming kingdom is assured and that the straightforward understanding of its kingdom hopes as offered to them by Christ earlier in the Gospel has not been set aside in any permanent way. Israel continues to be and will always be a part of God's kingdom treasure (cp. Matt. 19:28). The old understanding of the kingdom should be reinforced. However, what is the new understanding concerning the kingdom is that which the preceding parables have introduced and outlined, namely, that kingdom citizens are going to be produced which the Jewish leaders of Christ's day did not anticipate as part of the kingdom. This new element of the treasure anticipates God's work in and through the Church. This entails the fact that there is a time period that will exist before the kingdom begins when the new aspect of treasure is brought to light.⁴⁶

In other words, the parable of the householder, like the other parables in the chapter, does not require an understanding that the kingdom has already been inaugurated with the advent of the new treasure. The parable describes a scribe who follows Christ as having a correct understanding of both the old and new things relative to the kingdom. That the issue of understanding is in the forefront is seen by the preceding question of Christ about the disciples' understanding of the previous parables (v. 51). Thus, the main

⁴⁶ In this light, the parable may be related in some way to Jesus' teaching in Matthew 21:43.

question is not the timing of the kingdom. The issue is facts about the kingdom, especially who will be entering it.

Conclusion

Matthew chapter twelve had preceded the parables of the kingdom in 13:3-52 with a serious presentation of the rejection of Christ by the Jewish leaders. At the end of chapter twelve there is the hint of His rejection of them as well. He does not immediately receive his mother and brothers and mentions his acceptance as brothers those who do His will (12:46-50). This surprising statement by Christ is meant to underscore the transition that the parables of the kingdom in chapter thirteen are all about. The verses immediately following the kingdom parables of Matthew 13:3-52 pick up where Matthew chapter twelve had left of – with the rejection of Christ (v. 53-58). In this particular instance, Jesus does not perform many miracles in Nazareth due to the unbelief of the people who took offense at His teaching concerning Himself. Within the framework of Matthew's narrative the kingdom parables of chapter thirteen serve to give us Jesus' response to that rejection.

This article has generally rejected any view of an inaugurated form of the kingdom with respect to Matthew thirteen. This would include also a rejection of the highly-respected position held by many dispensationalists that the chapter refers to a present mystery form of the kingdom that reveals the developments of Christendom that includes our own day and time.⁴⁷ Instead, what has been argued for is a consistency within Matthew concerning a singular use of the word *kingdom*, which is seen as relating to the coming eschatological kingdom beginning at the Second Advent. This is the kingdom in view in Matthew 13:3-52. However, the events described in the parables are related to this coming kingdom as a kind of preparatory time when Christ produces new kingdom citizens that the Jews were not expecting. These general framework flows out of the shifts that take place in the book of Matthew such as the transition from a concentration on outreach to Israel to a focus on outreach to the Gentiles and from an offer of a victorious kingdom by Christ to the predictions of His death.

Furthermore, many other transitions and factors could be brought into this discussion for which there simply was not time and space. One such issue is the relationship of the tribulation period (with its focus on the Jewish remnant) to the present age as revealed in the kingdom parables of Matthew thirteen. This is especially noteworthy to dispensationalists since the Olivet Discourse deals specifically with that time frame. It is important particularly to this presentation since so much of the argumentation came back time and again to the relationship between the kingdom parables in Matthew thirteen (especially the tares) and Matthew 24-25. Dispensational interpreters must do more work on this subject. As we do so we can all take heart that there is one clear component of Jesus' teaching in this section. We have a task to do in sowing the word of the kingdom and we should do so in light of His Second Coming.

⁴⁷ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 138-49.