

THE PARABLES OF JESUS

Matthew's Collection of Kingdom Parables

Jesus' parables about the kingdom of God did not come without a backstory. That backstory begins with John the Baptist. All the gospels begin with the ministry of John, who began preaching the message that the kingdom of God¹ was near and that people should prepare themselves for the One soon to come (Mt. 3:1-12; Mk. 1:4-8; Lk. 3:1-18; Jn. 1:19-28). Shortly, Jesus began his messianic ministry, and he also heralded the advent of the kingdom of God (Mt. 4:17; Mk. 1:14-15; Lk. 4:42-44). Jesus seems to use the language of the kingdom to refer to the outcomes of his own ministry, for he introduces his ministry by saying, "The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news" (Mk. 1:15). Given the variety of Jewish opinions about the kingdom of God, it must have been the case that people naturally would wonder about Jesus' own views on the long-hoped-for kingdom of God, since the message of the kingdom was at the heart of his teaching. How would it come? What was its essential character? What did God intend? How did Jesus' own understanding compare to some of the other ideas that were current? To a large degree, Jesus addressed these questions in his kingdom parables. In doing so, he often used the introductory phrase, "The kingdom of God is like..." (Mt. 13:31, 33, 44, 45, 47, 52), or on one occasion, by the question, "What is the kingdom of God like?" (Lk. 13:18).

Matthew's Collection of Kingdom Parables (Mt. 13)

Matthew conveniently collects seven kingdom parables in a group. Three of them, the Parable of the Sower, the Parable of the Mustard Seed, and the Parable of the Leaven, are found in all three synoptic gospels. He begins with the **Parable of the Sower** (Mt. 13:3-9; cf. Mk. 4:3-9; Lk. 8:5-8), one of the most famous of his parables.²

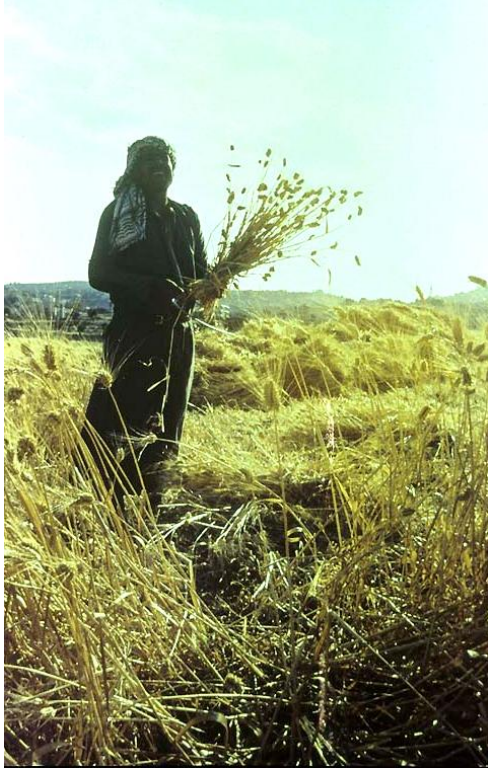
This parable describes a farmer scattering seed, and it assumes the typical practice in the Middle-East of sowing after the first rains, while the soil is soft, but before plowing (cf. Jubilees 11:11). Barley was sown in November and wheat in late November or December. Unlike modern practices, sowing preceded plowing. This helps the modern reader to understand how the seed fell on the different types of soil, whether on a pathway, where the villagers have walked through last year's stubble, or rocky ground, where the soil is only a thin layer over the underlying limestone, or thorny ground, where the withered plants stand in fallow. All will be plowed under along with the newly scattered seed.³ Some seed, of course, fell upon good ground as well and produced a bumper crop. A yield of 10% was considered good, and higher yields of 30% or 60% or 100% were extraordinary.

¹ For the most part, Matthew uses the term "kingdom of heaven," while parallel passages in Mark and Luke use "kingdom of God." The term "kingdom of [the] heaven[s]" is a circumlocution for "kingdom of God," the word "heaven" functioning as an alternative to "God," possibly due to Jewish sensitivities (cf. 1QSb3.5).

² The Parable of the Sower also appears in the Coptic Gospel of Thomas (logia 9) with little variation from the canonical gospels.

³ J. Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables* (New York: Scribner's, 1966), pp. 9-10.

Fortunately for us, Jesus explained this parable in detail to his disciples (Mt. 13:18-23). The parable speaks of the difficulties in preaching about God's reign, a difficulty that would be evident in Jesus' own ministry. Some would receive him, and some would turn away. The story begins with sowing, ends in the harvest, but focuses on the condition of the soil, representing the



varied responses to the message of the kingdom. While many of Jesus' parables seem to have one central point, this one has multiple points. Not everyone who heard Jesus would respond in the same way, and some seed seemingly will be wasted. It is snatched away by the evil one, or it lasts only a short while because of opposition, or it is overwhelmed by the competing interests of the present life. There is an emphasis in this parable on a listener's understanding, which is anticipated in Jesus words, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (13:9; cf. Mk. 4:9; Lk. 8:8b). The seed that fails represents those who hear the message but do not understand it (13:19a), while the seed that yields a good crop represents the one who both hears and understands, or as Luke's version puts it, they "have a good and noble heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop" (Lk. 8:15). The listeners are left with an implicit question, "What kind of soil am I?" Ultimately, the parable stresses the success of the kingdom. Though there will be rejections, failures, and setbacks, the message of the kingdom, in the end, will triumph bountifully!

The second parable in Matthew's collection, the **Parable of the Tares**, is also a farming story and occurs only in Matthew in the canonical gospels (Mt. 13:24-30).⁴ Whereas the Parable of the Sower focused primarily on the condition of the soil, the Parable of the Tares focuses on the results of the harvest after an enemy attempted to spoil the crop with poisonous weeds. The weeds are not merely incidental grasses, but darnel (the Greek ζιζάνιον, or *lolium temulentum*), which looks very similar to wheat and can only be easily identified when it is ripe. If it is harvested with the wheat and milled, the flour will be spoiled, since the weed is host to a poisonous fungus (13:37-43).

Once again, Jesus offered a detailed explanation to his disciples (Mt. 13:36-43). A critical factor is that since it is difficult to separate the wheat from the darnel during the growing season, because their roots would be intertwined, both would be allowed to grow until the harvest, when they could be separated in the reaping process. When reapers cut the grain, they can allow the darnel to fall to the ground, where it could be left to dry and eventually be bundled up for fuel. The farmer is Jesus himself, the Son of Man.⁵ The field is the world, the good seed are those who

⁴ There is also a version of it in the Coptic Gospel of Thomas (logia 57).

⁵ Only Jesus uses the title Son of Man to refer to himself. Generally, it is a Hebraism for "son of Adam," used in the Hebrew Bible to refer to a human being, though in the Book of Daniel it refers to a heavenly figure. Jesus never explains his usage, leaving it up to his audience to decide which of the two he meant.

belong to the kingdom, and the weeds are the evil ones in league with the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. At the end, the angels will remove from God's kingdom all those causing sin and evil, pitching them into the fire (cf. Rv. 14:14-20). Only then will the wheat—the righteous ones—shine as the true members of the kingdom. Hence, God's kingdom comes into a sinful world. It exists side-by-side with alien elements that are very much not part of it. One cannot always tell the difference, so as St. Paul will later say, "Judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts" (1 Co. 4:5).

The next two parables, the **Parable of the Mustard Seed** and the **Parable of the Yeast**, are both in Matthew and Luke, while the Parable of the Mustard Seed also appears in Mark (Mt. 13:31-33; Mk. 4:30-32; Lk. 13:18-21).⁶ Both parables have a common theme, the exponential growth of the kingdom. They assure Jesus' followers that the kingdom of God, while it might seem to begin in quite a small way, would have a great outcome. Just as a tiny seed (a mustard seed is about the size of a pinhead) grows to be a substantial tree (Palestinian mustard trees reach 8'-

10'),⁷ and just as a pinch of yeast will serve to leaven a large batch of dough, so the kingdom will expand and grow as God mysteriously causes it to grow. This, in turn, is a powerful assurance



Mustard seed



Palestinian mustard tree

that, as scholar Archibald Hunter described it, can be summarized as "unremarkable beginnings" and "unimaginable endings."⁸ The coming of the kingdom was like a new energy released into the world through the

ministry of Jesus, and it would grow slowly but incredibly. In popular thought, the rule of God would come in a sensational blast of divine intervention. Could this rag-tag bunch of fishermen and workers making their way through Galilee be the beginning of God's reign? Jesus said it was! The two parables contrast the meager beginning and the glorious end. The kingdom of God would spread silently but thoroughly, just like yeast in flour.

Two other short kingdom parables are the **Parable of the Hid Treasure** and the **Parable of the Pearl**, both in the Gospel of Matthew (Mt. 13:44-46).⁹ Though these parables are brief and in the original telling might have included more local color, they also have a common theme, the deep value of the kingdom. It is worth more than anything else, and its discovery leads to incredible joy. In the story of the hid treasure, probably what is envisioned is a buried clay jar with

⁶ Both are also in the Coptic Gospel of Thomas (logia 20, 96).

⁷ In the parable of the tree, Jesus may be drawing from Ezekiel's vision of the cedar top, cf. Eze. 17:22-24.

⁸ A. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 45.

⁹ Both are also in the Coptic Gospel of Thomas (logia 109, 76).

valuable coins or jewels. Costly pearls, on the other hand, were fished up by divers in the Red Sea, and we know of ancient pearl necklaces that were worth millions.¹⁰ Both seekers discover these costly items in different ways. The one, totally by accident, stumbles upon the treasure in a field where someone in the past had hidden it; the other finds a single pearl of surpassing value, but only after a long search. The one liquidates his wealth in order to buy the field. He is no thief, but he acts in a legally responsible way. The other also liquidates his wealth in order to buy the costly pearl. Both, however, are willing to give up everything. Likewise, people discover God's kingdom in different ways. Some blunder into it without any expectations. Others are in a life-long search for truth. Either way, the point is that one must be willing to surrender everything in order to gain the kingdom.

The seventh in this cluster of kingdom parables, the **Parable of the Dragnet**, takes its background from the Galilean fishing trade, where several of Jesus' disciples were employed and probably some his audience as well (Mt. 13:47-50). This fishing technique employed the use of a



Much as did Jesus' disciples (cf. Mark 1:16; Luke 5:1-11; John 21:1-8), fishermen still use small boats and nets to catch the fish that abound in the Sea of Galilee. Of the 43 species of fish found in this lake and in the adjacent Jordan waters, 14 live only here, surviving unchanged since prehistoric times.

seine or dragnet, a massive net 750-1000' long, about 25' high at the center, and about 5' high at the wings. The footrope was anchored with sinkers, while the headrope had cork floats. The dragnet was spread some hundred yards or more from shore with towing lines attached to each end. Egyptian tomb paintings from the 3rd millennium BC give us some visual clues, and we also have written descriptions in the Talmud. There are brief references in the Hebrew Bible as well (Hab. 1:15; Eze. 26:5, 14; 47:10). The technique is to spread this net into the sea and then drag it to shore. In doing so, all sorts of fish are caught and then

sorted. The unacceptable ones (here, probably referring to the scaleless catfish, which were forbidden by kosher law) were thrown back.¹¹ The good fish were saved in baskets.

Jesus briefly explained the meaning of this parable, and it is similar to the meaning of the Parable of the Tares. During the preaching of the kingdom of God, many will be brought in, but not all will be saved. Only at the end will a separation be made. In the meantime, Jesus' disciples must reach out as far as possible.

¹⁰ According to Pliny, the Elder (1st century Roman writer), Cleopatra wagered with Mark Anthony that she could spend 10 million sesterces on a single dinner (about 5 million U. S. dollars). To win the bet, she dissolved a pearl from her necklace in vinegar and drank it, cf. *Natural History*, Book IX.

¹¹ Mendel Nun, "Cast Your Net Upon the Waters: Fish and Fishermen in Jesus' Time," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 19.6 (1993): 46-49, 51-56, 70.