

Critical Reflection on the Parables of the Leaven and the Mustard Seed as Foundational for Postmillennialist Eschatology

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Summary

This article analyzes one part of postmillennialist eschatology which claims that the kingdom of God before Christ's second coming will be victorious in transforming every aspect of all societies of this world. Evil will not be completely destroyed, but Christian values and principles will be predominant. Some critics of postmillennialism think that support for such a view can only be found in the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven. Therefore, this article explores the meaning of parables and the history of their interpretation, and briefly analyzes the nature of the kingdom in an attempt to show the difference in interpretation of parables as allegories, metaphors and similes. The author's position is that the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven are similes, and though they explicitly compare two elements (kingdom with the seed and kingdom with the leaven), the key to their correct interpretation is to realize that each parable as a whole reveals something about the nature of the kingdom and not just one point of identification or some detail.

Key words: *allegory, eschatology, Kingdom of God, Church, Jesus Christ, parable, postmillennialism*

Introduction

The topic of the kingdom of God has many facets and is multidimensional. Christians in general believe that the kingdom of God came on earth with Jesus,

and that after his ascension to heaven, the Church started to proclaim the kingdom of God and Jesus as king. But opinions differ as to whether Jesus' kingdom is present or future, and whether it is religious, moral or just ethical in its character. Some say it is present only in the hearts of people, others that it is something that transforms society. If it transforms society, in what ways does it do so? Did it come in fullness with Christ's first coming or does it still await consummation? Does the kingdom of God equal the church or is it something different? These are only some of the questions connected with the topic of the kingdom of God.

The focus of this article will be on one dimension of the kingdom, namely, that with Christ's coming, the kingdom was inaugurated, and now, through the church, the kingdom will be spread throughout the world by human effort (through preaching and God's supernatural activity), and will eventually overcome all other kingdoms and transform societies according to God's will. When this happens, then Christ will return to earth. This idea is part of a postmillennialist view of eschatology and it is present in movements like Christian Reconstructionism and Kingdom Now Theology. However, this article is not about postmillennialism, Christian Reconstructionism, Kingdom Now Theology, the nature of the millennium,¹ or about possible differences between the millennium or the age to come (Mt 12:32).² This article analyzes the postmillennialist idea that the all-transforming effect of God's kingdom on this world will come as a result of believers' effort and not as a result of Christ's second coming. Postmillennialism finds support for its position in several Old and New Testament passages, part of which is found in the kingdom parables of the leaven and the mustard seed.³ Therefore, the focus of this article will be on these kingdom parables and will show the inaccuracy of the postmillennialist position. To do so, I will explore the meaning of the parables, the history of their interpretation, and the nature of the kingdom. In the end, I will offer what I think is the correct interpretation of these parables.

- 1 For different ideas about the millennium (Premillennialism - Amillennialism - Postmillennialism) see Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 1109–1139.
- 2 For more on this idea see George Eldon Ladd, *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 70–73.
- 3 Ladd claims that the parable of the leaven is actually the only proof text that can be used to support the concept of the kingdom that transforms the whole world and brings all of life into harmony with the will of God (1961:170–71). Although, support for this concept can also be found in the Great commission from Mt 28, according to the proponents of the idea, I am inclined to agree with Ladd that the parable of the leaven is actually the only proof text for this idea. That is why this paper is primarily about the parables of the leaven and the mustard seed.

Parables – The History of Interpretation

In church history, parables were interpreted as theological allegories for a long time. An allegory is understood as the story in which “each detail of the story is a separate metaphor with a meaning of its own which needs to be discovered” (Hunter, 1971:16). In other words, in allegories, every character and event stands for something else so they should not be interpreted literally, but the interpreter must find some deeper spiritual or symbolic meaning (Strauss, 2007:447). Jeremias thinks that reasons for such an approach can be found first in the unconscious desire to discover a deeper meaning in the simple words of Jesus; second, in Hellenistic world myths which were understood as vehicles of esoteric knowledge; and also because allegories were highly esteemed in Hellenistic Judaism. Furthermore, Jesus himself said that parables are intended to conceal the mystery of the kingdom of God which probably led to allegorical interpretation (Jeremias, 1963:13).

A change came in the nineteenth century when Adolf Jülicher argued that the allegorical approach is wrong and that parables were intended to convey only one main point. He rejected any allegorical elements in parables, claiming that they were added later by the church, and he saw details in the story as part of the dramatic machinery of the story. In other words, one main point is what is important; details are irrelevant. With Jülicher came the distinction between parables and allegories. The third approach to interpretation is the existential approach. Existentialism is a philosophy which is concerned with human experience and tries to understand it out of the concrete experience that we all share as humans. Learning from experience, making decisions and seeking the truth are things that existentialism apostrophizes. Hunter observes that although parables give an invitation to decision, they are concerned with human existence and are still relevant messages for us today, but such an approach tends to eliminate theological and evangelical aspects from parables (Hunter, 1971:26–8). Today, many scholars recognize that parables can have more than one point and often contain allegorical elements, but they are not allegories as such.

In this brief survey of the history of interpretation, the complexity of approaches to parables is obvious, but even more, the complexity over the issue of details, that is, in what way details relate to the main point/s of a parable can be seen. In other words, to interpret parables correctly, it is crucial to understand the relationship between the main point/s and the details in the parables. For example, with the allegorical approach, all sorts of “deeper spiritual meaning” can be found in every detail of the parables. The problem is that there is no limit to the imagination, and in this approach we can usually find meaning that corresponds to our understanding of the “things of God.” With Jülicher’s approach, we would

say that the two parables of the leaven and the mustard seed teach only that the kingdom will grow more and more, but we would not create any conclusion from the details, i.e. how the kingdom grows, or in what way. Existentialists would probably find some deeper experience common to all people and argue for such an explanation. But can the parables be interpreted if they can have more than one point and contain allegorical elements as well? To find the answer to this question, we must explore the meaning of the parable and the difference between the various kinds of parables and allegory.

Parables and Allegories – Meaning and Some Rules of Interpretation

Parables were categorized by the form critique and distinction was made between metaphor, simile, parable, similitude, allegory, illustration, etc. The Hebrew word *mashal* and the Aramaic word *mathla* contain all these meanings. Therefore, in the common speech of postbiblical Judaism, these words can mean: parable, similitude, allegory, fable, proverb, apocalyptic revelation, riddle, symbol, pseudonym, fictitious person, example, theme, argument, apology, refutation and jest (Jeremias, 1963:20). In the New Testament, the word is a translation of the two Greek terms *parabolē* and *paroimia*. The former is used in the sense of “symbol” or “type” (Heb 9:9; 11:19), and it is used in the synoptic gospels to denote “a characteristic form of the teaching of Jesus,” and the latter word is used by John (Jn 10:6) as a “dark saying” or “figure of speech”, and by Peter (2 Pe 2:22) as a “proverb” (Doerksen, 1970:4). Therefore, *parabolē* and *paroimia* can mean parable, allegory, simile, metaphor, comparison, symbol, proverb, and riddle. The intention of this paper is not to offer a complete guide on how to interpret parables,⁴ but such a variety of categories which *parabolē* and *paroimia* embrace should draw attention to two things: first, in our attempt to define parables, we have to be aware of their breadth and rich usage of speech. Secondly, as an application of the first, my suggestion is that we should approach each parable individually to grasp its correct meaning.⁵

We also need to understand the relationship between various kinds of parables (parable as simple story parable, as simile or as metaphor) and allegory. This is important because that will help decipher the relationship between the kingdom

4 For more information in Croatian on how to interpret parables see Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, *Kako tumačiti Bibliju* (Osijek: Izvori, 1999), 145–60.

5 For example, some parables have allegorical elements, and some do not. If we define parables as containing allegorical elements, then we should not try to force allegorical elements in parables that do not have them. Also, if one parable does not have allegorical elements that does not mean that some other parable will not have them.

of God and the leaven and the mustard seed in the parables, and give some guiding principles for interpretation. Since the word *parable* can mean a variety of things, the parables of the leaven and the mustard seed must be categorized. It must be decided if they are allegories, metaphors or similes. Based on this understanding, different levels of similarity between these three concepts will shine through: the kingdom of God, leaven, and the mustard seed.

Doerksen says that metaphor equates one object or person with the other while simile does not equate the two, but it does draw out a comparison. Similarly, allegory is a story where every point is important, every detail of the story has its counterpart and as such, allegory contains its interpretation within itself (1970:4–5). While this explanation about allegories is helpful, more needs to be said about metaphors and similes. N. T. Wright says that “metaphor consists in bringing two sets of ideas close together, close enough for a spark to jump, but not too close, so that the spark, in jumping, illuminates for a moment the whole area around, changing perceptions as it does so” (Wright, 1992:40). It could also be said that metaphor is an implicit comparison between two unlike things (Strauss, 2007:534), but as Brown points out, there must be correspondence and understanding between two or more modes of perception as they are juxtaposed and fused. In other words, similarities emerge from what had previously been regarded as dissimilarities (2002:6). Therefore, metaphor creates a connection between two elements that were previously seen as unconnected or without existing relationship. In this way, the proverb “You are the salt of the earth” is an example of metaphor since the characteristic of salt is transferred into the new context (a quality that should now be the mark of believers) and receives the new (transferred) meaning.⁶

Based on these definitions, the difference in interpretation of the parables as metaphors and parables as allegories are more obvious. Metaphors are ideas/pictures drawn from nature or common everyday life which illustrate a moral or some spiritual lesson and the key point is this: when the storyteller tells a metaphor, he/she uses already existing pictures or ideas (with all its limitations, meanings and details) to make some point/s. However, the storyteller is not *free* to create the story because of all the details that come along with these pictures/ideas. In other words, details can correspond to a metaphors’ point, or they can be irrelevant, but either way, they are part of the story because they are connected with the picture or idea being used.⁷ The author has no control over every detail

6 As Janet Soskice says, “The metaphor is that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms [that] are seen to be suggestive of another” (Brown, 2002:5).

7 Hunter says, “The details simply make the story realistic and serve the main trust of the parable,” while in allegory, “. . . each detail in the story has its counterpart in the meaning,” and “allegory has to be deciphered point by point like a message in code” (1971:11–12).

of the story (Ladd, 1994:90). This is not so with allegory. In allegory, the storyteller is totally free, or in control, over every detail of the story to make the desired point/s. Thus, every detail plays some role in the overall idea of the story.

The last category is simile. Again, Brown is helpful in his observation that the best way to classify a simile is as a form of metaphor because while textually different, they are functionally the same. The only difference is that similes, unlike metaphors, make the object of comparison more explicit, and in doing so, similes limit the range of association and narrow the interpretive possibilities (Brown, 2002:7). Accordingly, Fee thinks that the parables of the leaven and of the mustard seed are similes because that which is said about leaven and mustard seeds always refers to leaven and mustard seeds (Fee & Stuart, 1999:148).

A Summary on Parables

If these two parables (the leaven and the mustard seed) are regarded as allegories, then it can be claimed that every point in these stories is important and every detail has its counterpart (every detail in the text represents some reality that exists outside of the text). The secret of interpretation, then, is to match the kingdom with the leaven or the mustard seed in every way. But if these two parables are taken to be metaphors or even similes, then we have every right to argue that while the kingdom of God is like the leaven, that does not necessarily mean that the kingdom of God corresponds to the picture of leaven in bread making in every detail. Still, the parables of the leaven and the mustard seed are best understood as similes.⁸

Although it seems at first that the kingdom in these parables is compared with leaven and a mustard seed because it is said that “The kingdom of heaven is like...”, Fee thinks that the kingdom of God *is not* like leaven or a mustard seed. The kingdom is not compared *only* with the first word of the parable. The expression actually means “With the kingdom of God is like with...” because the whole parable reveals something about the nature of the kingdom, and not just one point of identification or some detail (Fee & Stuart, 1999:155). Accordingly, postmillennialist arguments about the millennium that are deduced from these parables are without foundation. It is correct that the kingdom of God is compared with leaven (or a mustard seed) but that does not mean that the kingdom is spreading to its fullness equally in *every detail just like leaven* works

8 Everything that is said of the leaven and mustard seed always refers to the leaven, the mustard seed and the object with which they are compared. Metaphor, on the contrary, creates a connection between two things that were previously seen as unconnected.

its way through all the dough.⁹

Nature of the Kingdom

If these two parables are similes, and not allegories or metaphors, then the idea that God's kingdom will take dominion in this world based on believers' effort is wrong. But before I offer my interpretation of these two parables, I want to briefly explore the nature of the kingdom to which Jesus is referring.¹⁰

Jewish expectations of the kingdom correspond to the idea that I am trying to dispute in one way – the coming of the kingdom would transform existing power structures. The difference between these two is that Jews expected the coming of the kingdom to be a *one-time event* that would transform the whole world, while this modern idea of transformation views this goal as achieved as a result of human effort *step by step*. The problem is that neither view can gain support from Jesus' ministry.¹¹ Jesus did not bring the kingdom as a one-time event, nor did he change the existing power structures (political, religious or social). So can we imagine how puzzling this was for Jesus' followers to hear Jesus constantly saying "the kingdom of God has come?" For Jews, the kingdom of God had not yet come if Pilate was still the governor of Judea, if the Temple was not rebuilt, if the Messiah was not present, if Israel was not observing Torah properly, if pagans were not defeated and judged, or if they were not coming to Zion to be instructed in the ways of the Lord (Wright, 1996:223). Even John the Baptist was questioning

- 9 According to Doerkson's understanding of metaphor, metaphor equates two objects - ideas. But the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven are not metaphors. According to Wright's definition, metaphor connects two ideas, but not too close. If that is the case, then the postmillennialist argument is without foundation since these two parables are similes, and similes compare two objects or ideas more explicitly. But similes do not compare kingdom with these two elements based on just one detail, rather these parables as a whole teach something about the nature of the kingdom.
- 10 At this point, it is important to realize something that Strauss says, namely that we must interpret parables in the context of Jesus' ministry. Secondly, parables are closely associated with the proclamation of the kingdom since most parables illustrate or illuminate various aspects of the kingdom (2007:449–51). That means that the nature of the kingdom present in Jesus' ministry will not be something different today. In other words, if we want to claim a human role in subduing all earthly kingdoms to the dominion of God's kingdom, we must trace such kingdom characteristics to Jesus' ministry.
- 11 Mark Saucy claims something different in his article. He says that at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus offered a kingdom that would be physical, glorious, and powerful, compelling the wicked to either repent or to feel its wrath. However, Israel refused it and Jesus withdrew his offer of the full manifestation and instead he established the kingdom which is secret, hidden and unknown to the world (Saucy, 1994:192).

Jesus' ministry because his political impact (can we say social, economical or even moral as well?) was so small. Jesus responded by quoting the text from Isaiah 35, claiming that in his ministry a new exodus and a new creation was coming into being (Schreiner, 2008:56).

Interpretation - Parables of the Kingdom (Matthew 13)

Before we look at the parables of the leaven and the mustard seed, I will briefly survey other parables in Matthew chapter 13. I think that these parables clearly teach that the progress of the kingdom is the result of God's activity and final consummation will happen as an apocalyptic, powerful act at the end of the ages.

The parable of the four soils (Mt 13:3-9; 18-23) reveals the mystery of the kingdom. Jesus compares the coming of the kingdom in his ministry with a sower, that is, the kingdom comes as seed sown in the field and brings change only to those who have ears to hear. It does not impose itself or spread itself by force to the point of being irresistible. But it does transform the individuals, families and even communities who respond to it and accept it. The mystery of the kingdom, then, is in the fact that the kingdom has come, but not in its apocalyptic (as Jews expected) power, but in its secret work in a hidden form without disrupting the society.

The parable of the tares (Mt 13:24-30; 36-43) supports the idea that the consummation of the kingdom occurs at the end of the ages (harvest) even more. The "sons of the kingdom" must continue to live in this world together with the "sons of the evil one" and final separation and victory (cleansing) over evil occurs at the end by the activity of angels. Furthermore, this parable does not support the idea that the Church, as an instrument of the kingdom, brings transformation to world societies, but it testifies that somehow even the kingdom in itself will not be spared of evil and depravity. The kingdom of God prevails over evil at the end, but not as the result of Christian activity, rather as the result of God's activity.

Finally, the parable of the net (Mt 13:47-50) emphasizes the idea of the continual existence of good and evil side by side until the "end of the age" even more. If Jews expected the Messiah to destroy godless nations and people, and to gather together the holy people, Jesus as the Christ invited all the *wrong people* into his community. As in the parable of the tares, the separation between the wicked and the righteous occurs because of angelic activity.¹²

12 Postmillennialists agree that the final victory and termination of evil will come as a result of the second coming of Christ. However, the problem is that in these parables they cannot find support for their position that God's kingdom before the second coming of Christ will achieve overall transformation of the world's societies (politically, economically, ethically and morally, religiously, etc.).

Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven

Finally, what is the best way to understand the message that the parables of the leaven and the mustard seed teach? If Jesus, in previous parables, did not give any support to the idea of his kingdom dominion through human effort, but proclaimed that the consummation of the kingdom will occur as a supernatural act, why should we expect that the parable of the mustard seed, and particularly the parable of the leaven, would teach something opposite? I must say that the context of these parables clearly shows that the mustard seed and the leaven have a positive connotation, a connotation that clearly compares the positive and powerful influence of the kingdom of God in the world with the leaven and the mustard seed.¹³

What the parable of the mustard seed (Mt 13:31–32) teaches is the insignificant beginning of the kingdom of God and its glorious ending. What starts as a small seed will eventually grow into a big tree that dominates the whole earth. As Wright reminds, this parable was not originally told about the influence of Christianity on the world, but about the effect of the kingdom's inauguration within Israel (Wright, 1996:241). In the context of Jesus' ministry, this parable answers the question of how something glorious like the kingdom of God (keep in mind the Jewish idea of the kingdom's coming) can start so insignificantly with Jesus and his disciples. Jesus answered by comparing the kingdom with seed, saying that although the kingdom starts insignificantly, it will eventually dominate the whole earth. Notice that although the parable contains the idea of the gradual growth of the kingdom (from something small to something big), the parable does not provide us with the answer of *how* or *when* the kingdom will dominate over the whole earth.

It is tempting to interpret the parable of the leaven (Mt 13:33) as the proof text that the kingdom will slowly, gradually but persistently influence all of human society until all the world is transformed, yet it gives no clues as to *when*, *how*, or in *what way* this will happen. We are only assured that God's kingdom, like leaven, will eventually triumph completely and everything will be affected by the kingdom of God. As Laad says, this parable does not describe the *process* of kingdom growth nor the *means* by which the end is accomplished (Ladd,

13 Schellenberg clearly shows the inadequacy of determining the meaning of the leaven and the mustard seed simply based on the cultural repertoire (where both items have positive and negative connotations). He concludes that "... in both parables the significance of the symbols must be derived from the parabolic narratives in which they are embedded, not only or even primarily from an established cultural repertoire. Despite potential metaphorical valences, mustard seed is simply mustard seed and leaven is simply leaven until these symbols are given figurative value by their parabolic contexts." (Schellenberg, 2009:541).

1961:129), and this is usually where mistakes get made. Yes, the dough (the world) is eventually completely transformed, but we are not told how that happens.

Conclusion

In hermeneutics, we know that one passage cannot tell us everything about any given topic, and this is the case with these two parables. They do not tell us everything about the influence of the kingdom; namely, they do not describe *how, when, why, in what way, and by which means* the kingdom grows and eventually prevails. What they say is that the kingdom starts as something insignificant and eventually will affect everything and rule over the whole earth. Hence, nowhere in the New Testament do we find the idea that the kingdom of God gradually grows to its fullness and transforms this world. On the contrary, Jesus taught that the fullness of the kingdom will be materialized with his second coming. Furthermore, this idea is supported by the parables of the weeds and the net in which the final separation between good and evil comes by divine intervention.

Ladd rightly comments that if someone wants to give evidence for the idea of the kingdom's gradual transformation into its fullness, the only proof text that can be used for that purpose is the parable of the leaven. However, that idea cannot be deduced from this text because there is no basis for it, and it is also important to realize that this passage of scripture is part of parabolic language where the similarities between two objects of comparison do not always exist. So to say that the kingdom will grow to its fullness *just like* the leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal until it was all leavened, is a serious misreading of the text. Yes, God's kingdom is growing secretly in our world and transforms people's lives, but it is not irresistible or all-conquering. In the end, it will prevail, but not as a result of believers' activity, rather as a result of the second coming of Christ.

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Kritički osvrt na parabole o kvascu i gorušičinom sjemenu kao temelju za postmilenijalističku eshatologiju

Sažetak

Članak analizira shvaćanje postmilenijalističke eshatologije da će Božje kraljevstvo prije Kristova drugog dolaska biti pobjedonosno te će preobraziti svaki aspekt svih društava ovoga svijeta. Zlo time neće biti konačno pobijeđeno, ali će kršćanske vrijednosti i principi prevladavati u svijetu. Neki kritičari postmilenijalizma

smatraju da se potpora za takvo shvaćanje jedino može naći u parabolama o kvascu i gorušičinom sjemenu. Stoga članak istražuje značenje parabola, povijest njihova tumačenja i ukratko se bavi pitanjem naravi kraljevstva te nastoji pokazati razliku između tumačenja parabola kao alegorije, metafore i usporedbe. Autor smatra da se parabole o kvascu i gorušičinom sjemenu ubrajaju u grupu usporedbi u kojima, iako postoji izričita povezanost dva elementa koja se uspoređuju (kraljevstvo sa sjemenom i kraljevstvo sa kvascem), ključ je za ispravno tumačenje u shvaćanju da cijela prispodoba otkriva nešto o naravi kraljevstva, a ne samo jednu od točki postovjećenja ili neki detalj.

Ključne riječi: alegorija, Božje kraljevstvo, Crkva, eshatologija, Isus Krist, parabola, postmilenijanzam