

Introduction

Matthew 13 is among the most distinguishable chapters in the Bible. Like 1 Corinthians 13 (the famous love chapter), Matthew 13 is the famous kingdom parables chapter. Three things set this passage apart: 1) First, it is a rare passage in that it takes us behind the parables to explain their purpose. 2) Second, the chapter overflows with parables; it contains a cluster of parables, not just a few here and there, as we find elsewhere. 3) Third, everything in this cluster develops the kingdom theme. Hence, this is a kingdom parables chapter in a distinct way (cf. Mk 4 covers most of the same ground and adds some details, especially, the kingdom parable of the growing seed).

Apparently, parabolic teaching so characterized our Lord's ministry that at times He would spend an entire teaching occasion relating one parable after another (as 13.34 states, speaking to the crowds in parables, "**he said nothing to them without a parable**"). Thus, speaking in the kind of cluster that we have in Matthew 13 was characteristic of our Lord's teaching though intermittent. For example, the Sermon on the Mount has no parables; in it the Lord used analogy, metaphor, and exaggeration. For Him to speak only in parables was selective. It was intermittent, but often enough and forceful enough to earmark His teaching ministry. No doubt if you asked in public, "What famous teacher taught in parables?" most people would know the answer.

Clearly then, the selective concentration of the Lord on parables was intentional. Therefore, before treating the specific parables, I want to approach this account by beginning with the purpose of parables, a theme that comes up at different points in the chapter. Matthew begins with the parable of the sower sowing seed (vs. 1-8) and an exhortation (v. 9) without explanation. Then we have a statement of purpose (vs. 10-17) followed by explanation of the sower (vs. 18-23). Thus, I could easily begin with verses 10-17, except for the fact we have another statement of purpose by the narrator, by Matthew, in verses 34-35. That is where we will focus today on "The purpose of parables: to manifest kingdom presence."

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ² And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow..." (1-3).

All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. ³⁵ This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet: "I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world" (34-35).

The key is verse 35, which tells us that Jesus spoke in parables to fulfill prophecy: one of the things the Messiah will do in His coming is open His mouth in parables. This very method of teaching shows that the promised king and kingdom are here. Thus, parables serve the purpose of kingdom manifestation; they are signs of the coming of the kingdom.

Matthew's point seems undeniably clear, but there is a problem here in his use of the OT. Therefore, the outline for today will follow a problem-solution pattern.

1A. Problem

According to Matthew, the very fact that Jesus spoke in parables is itself fulfillment of Scripture. He tells us that when Jesus spoke in parables He was fulfilling the words of the prophet who spoke the words of Psalm 78.2. To understand how Matthew uses this reference, we have to dig again into the fabric of the OT, remembering that we are not to be ignorant of the Scriptures as the Pharisees were.

This Psalm as a whole outlines the disobedience of the covenant people of God as a basis for remembering the works of God and keeping His commandments. The prophet reminds his listeners that the Lord commanded the fathers to teach their children generation by generation to

“set their hope in God and not forget the works of God” (78.7). He recounts the works of God, the unfaithfulness of “a stubborn and rebellious generation” (78.8), the Lord’s judgment, and the Lord’s faithfulness throughout the Psalm (**Their heart was not steadfast toward him; they were not faithful to his covenant. Yet he, being compassionate, atoned for their iniquity and did not destroy them; he restrained his anger often and did not stir up all his wrath, vs. 37-38).**

Turning to the opening verses of the Psalm, we have to wonder how Matthew could go there for his explanation of the purpose of parables:

A MASKIL OF ASAPH. Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth! ² I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, ³ things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us. ⁴ We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done (vs. 1-4).

At first glance, we might think that we have a problem here with the wording of the text when we compare Matthew with the Psalm:

<u>Psalm</u>	<u>Matthew</u>
Parable	Parables
Dark sayings	Things hidden
Of old	From the foundation of the world

However, the plural (parables) simply reflects the parallelism of the Hebrew text between “parable” and “dark sayings,” and Matthew follows the Greek OT on this point. “Dark” and “hidden” are ways of saying the same thing. As to “old” in relation to “the foundation of the world,” the Evangelist interprets “old” as reaching back in OT history beyond Abraham to Adam, to the very beginning. Here again, Matthew follows the Greek OT (from the beginning).

Accordingly, the problem is not in Matthew’s translating, paraphrasing, and interpreting of particular words into Greek from the Hebrew OT by means of the Greek OT. Nor is the problem how various translators render Matthew’s Greek in English. Word for word transfer from one language to another is a practical impossibility because languages have unique things about them, as well as parallel things. Thus, we know what these texts say, and we have no problem with details: singular versus plural reflects context, dark versus hidden reflects richness of vocabulary, and old versus foundation of the world reflects fullness defining how old, as back to the beginning of time. (Note: that some copies of the Greek NT have “the prophet Isaiah” in Mat 13.34; this is an example of a resolved variant; omission of the word Isaiah has the best attestation by far; also though the word “world” does not follow the best attestation and though it does not have a parallel in either the Hebrew or Greek of Ps. 78, the idea that old goes back to the very beginning is not problematic, even though the time periods Asaph cites pertain to Israel’s ancient history, especially, the deliverance from Egypt, cf. 78.13, 51-52).

The problem here is in the reference to Christ that Matthew makes. How does Matthew get his point from Psalm 78 where Asaph is the speaker? This may be a difficult problem but we need to solve it in order to draw from the richness of the text before us.

2A. Solution

As we begin to work toward a solution, this question comes up, “If you read through the Psalms, noting that there are messianic Psalms, would you conclude that Psalm 78 is messianic? I dare say, “No, you would not,” unless you looked first through Matthew’s eyes. Let us ask the question this way. Are there some hints that point us in the direction that Matthew takes us? Are there hints that, if pondered carefully, take us down the same road that Matthew goes down? Yes. If we observe and study the nuances of Matthew’s use of Psalm 78, then we will find the solution to the major problem of how He applies the text to Jesus. In this light, there are a number of hints for our consideration.

1) First, Matthew cites a Psalm

The first hint that we should consider is the fact that the Psalmist is an Israelite that represents all Israelites, and all Israelites represent *the* Israelite, *the* seed of Abraham, the coming Isaac. The birth of every Israelite was a partial fulfillment of the covenant to Abraham that looked ahead to the birth of the coming Messiah. Just as Scripture tells us that circumcision of

newborn children is the covenant (Gen 17.10), likewise, it tells us that Christ is the covenant (Isa 42.6). When you think this way, then you realize that we do not have just a few messianic Psalms. Instead, all the Psalms voice the worship, prayers, and laments of the true Israelite; they are all anticipatory of the Israelite, the Lord Jesus. For example, recall how naturally and fittingly Jesus spoke the words of David in Psalm 31.5; it was the greater David on the cross who said, **“into your hand I commit my spirit.”** To find Christ in the OT, Matthew goes to a Psalm.

2) A second hint leading to a solution is the fact that Matthew calls Asaph a prophet **“to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet”** (Mat 13.35). This accords with the statement of Asaph that he teaches (Ps 78.1a), which indicates his prophetic office.

Asaph speaks in order to reveal the wondrous works of God that he and other prophets narrate from generation to generation, from the fathers to the children (Ps. 78.5-7). Then he records Israel’s failure and sin while God remained faithful and forgiving. They forgot the miracles in Egypt, but God cared for them. They rebelled when they lacked water and food; while God remembered that they are but flesh (78.39). Israel was abhorred, but not abandoned; judged, but not destroyed (78.67-72). Thus, Matthew calls Asaph a prophet as he explained Israel’s past (cf. Ps 78 is a remembrance Psalm that informs communion-covenant remembering).

3) Third, Matthew tells us not only that the Psalmist is a prophet, but also that his method of teaching will be in the form of wisdom parables (cf. Prov 1.1, 6; the Greek OT uses “parable” in verse 6 for proverb). The parables in mind in Psalm 78 are wisdom parables, either the short pithy sayings that we usually think of as a proverb or the extended “story” of two women, wisdom versus folly (Prov 7-9). In other words, Matthew tells us a) that parables of Jesus are wisdom-parables; they convey wisdom like Solomon’s proverbs. b) Matthew expands our understanding of the meaning of a parable; these stories (sower, mustard seed, drag net, etc) are wisdom sayings. Like proverbs, they have a puzzling quality and they require strenuous effort to grasp what they mean.

4) Fourth, Matthew interprets Asaph’s words about ancient Israel “from old” to mean “from the foundation,” by which he clearly means from the beginning of the world. This goes well beyond the things that Asaph refers to in his speech regarding Israelite history. If you read the entire Psalm, you will see how the prophet reaches back to Israel’s past with concentration on the departure from Egypt. Matthew tells us that what the prophet set out to do is much bigger than his teaching about the ancient history of Israel because the utterances pertain to things that go back to the beginning of the world (**I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world, 13.35**).

5) Fifth, Matthew says that Jesus fulfilled what the Israelite prophet set out to do. Reading the Psalm carefully, we note that Asaph does not do what he set out to do. That is, he does not gush forth in parables! The Hebrew for “utter” (Ps 78.2b) carries the idea of pouring out or gushing forth. When I read Psalm 78, I do not find a concentration of pithy wisdom sayings that pour out in abundance from Asaph’s mouth. The closest we get to parabolic story telling is Asaph’s redemptive history story telling, as he reaches back to God’s dealing with Israel from ancient times. We thus learn that the history of Israel is an extended, enigmatic, parable written across the pages of the OT that Jesus explains in parables.

6) Finally, Matthew interprets “dark sayings” (Ps 78.2b) as things “hidden” (Mat 13.35b). In this way, he is telling us that what the coming Israelite prophet was supposed to do, Jesus did, namely: He brought the dark sayings into the clear light of day.

By comparison with passages like Romans 16.25-26, we learn that “hidden” (v. 35b) does not mean, “not revealed” because disclosure of hidden secrets is through the prophetic writings:

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages²⁶ but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith-

The things hidden from the beginning and underlying all of Israel's history were *revealed things hidden from realization or manifestation*. They were hidden in promise that awaited fulfillment. By parabolic teaching, Jesus brought the "hidden" to realization. He uttered what the OT promised.

We learn that Jesus, through parables, will explain the meaning of Israel's past. With great wisdom, He will gush forth with parables that tell us about God's purpose that goes back to the very beginning of time and that includes His redemptive actions with regard to the descendants of Adam and Abraham.

The point is similar to Matthew 13.17 in the reference to things not seen. Hidden means hidden from view or not seen in the reality that was yet to come. Thus, when Jesus spoke in parables, He uttered things hidden since the beginning in the purposes and promises of God. The prophets knew of them but the realization was hidden from their eyes and ears. Now by the parables, the kingdom is manifested in its reality, presence, and fulfillment.

Summary

These six observations or hints put us on the same track with Matthew. God's prophet, the true Israelite, will gush forth in parables, but Asaph does not do so! In other words, this is a promise or a prophecy of what the coming prophet and true Israelite will do. The Psalmist anticipates the coming of the great future. Thus, our thoughts move from promise to fulfillment. Jesus fulfilled the promise that Asaph gave in anticipation of prophetic pouring out of parables. The OT Israelite began a prophetic work that he could not complete; it could only be completed when Messiah comes. Israel's history was shadowy and anticipatory on a mega scale, so when the Messiah comes, He will explain the shadows of Israel's history within the unfolding of history from the beginning of the world! Israel's Messiah will shine the light of the sun on the dark pathways of ancient Israel; He will explain the Israelite parable in a gush of parables!

From the OT, Matthew shows that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus spoke in clusters of parables, at times saying nothing to the people without a parable to fulfill the promise of Psalm 78:

Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth! ² I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, ³ things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us. ⁴ We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done (vs. 1-4).

It is amazing that the choice of this teaching technique, and the concentrated way that the Lord Jesus used it show His obedience to Scripture and His commitment to doing the Father's will. No wonder the Father is so pleased with Him and calls Him "my servant...in whom my soul delights" (Isa 42.1).

There is evidently a parallel between miracles and parables. Just as miracles indicate the presence of the kingdom of God, so do the parables. The prophet to come that was to be like Moses in doing many signs is also the prophet that will have the word of God on His lips as His speech gushes forth or pours out parable after parable. The coming prophet will explain the meaning of Israel's history in the context of history writ large. He came to do the Father's will; that was the bread of His life, the air He breathed, and the breath behind every word he uttered.

Conclusion

Parables reveal the presence of the kingdom of God. The long expected prophet has come; He is David's Son, yet David's Lord. He is the Asaph to come, the greater than Asaph, prophet of prophets. He is the Messiah, the king. His presence, His teaching, and His use of clusters of parables reveal that the kingdom is present.

Parabolic method reveals that Jesus is the Son of God, the obedient Son and servant who teaches the things God taught Him in the way that God commanded Him.

Per Psalm 78, we know that Jesus used parables to teach the purpose of God that is the redemption out of Egypt by the Passover Lamb anticipates. The parables will unravel things hidden from the beginning. They will tell us why God continually restrained His wrath and how He could do so in justice and holiness.

Thus, parable clusters teach us about the kingdom that has come, the person of Christ in His obedience, and the work of Christ anticipated in the promises of Israel's past. Furthermore, they teach us that it takes strenuous effort to learn the wisdom of God's purposes from the beginning.

All these facts encourage us to follow our Lord's example of obedience in the total fabric of all that we do and say. They encourage us to learn obedience from His teaching in parables. In other words, we have great motivation here to study the parables of Matthew 13.

a) We find motivation in knowing that the parables reveal the presence of the kingdom God promised from ancient times; they do this in the way the Lord Jesus used them and they do this in how they take us to the content of our Lord's teaching.

b) Most importantly, like icing on a cake they take us to the Lord of the covenant Himself and teach us about His obedience as one with us, the Israelite of Israelites, and the prophet of prophets because He is the long expected prophet Son of Man and Son of God.

c) Finally, Jesus says, "**give ear to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth**" as I speak to you in parables (Ps 78.1-2). He says, "**He that has ears, let him hear**" (Mat 13.9). Therefore, we should give careful study to the parables because our Lord summons us to attend to them with inclined ear!

Now may we fall down before the majesty of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and before the majesty of the Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten God, the covenant of God embodied, and the prophetic light to the nations. For Him, let us study the parables. To Him be the glory both now and forevermore. Amen.