



Sunday School Lesson
Matt. 13:31-33
by Lorin L. Cranford
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**Parables of the Mustard Seed
and of the Leaven**



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Quick Links to the Study

I. [Context](#)

- a. [Historical](#)
- b. [Literary](#)

II. [Message](#)

- a. [Mustard Seed, vv. 31-32](#)
- b. [Leaven, v. 33](#)

In a continuation of the study of Jesus' parables begun last week, we focus this week on two very short parables in Matthew's collection in chapter thirteen. These also have parallels in Mark 4:30-32 and Luke 13:18-21, thus enabling a comparison among the synoptic gospel accounts of this teaching of Jesus.

The [same extra procedures](#) for interpreting parables that were introduced [last week](#) will again be applied to these two parables.

I. Context

Since the contextual settings for these two parables is the same as the previous study, we will merely summarize the details from [last week's study](#) of Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43.

a. Historical

First is the issue of the compositional history, the **external history**, of the Matthean Gospel. Because we have been studying Matthew's gospel for several studies over the past several weeks, I will simply allude to [one of those lessons](#) for the details, Matt. 3:1-12. Here is the conclusion reached in that study, which also serves as the viewpoint on this topic for this study:

For me, it's better to speak of the Matthean community, without fully assuming the early church tradition, as the source of this document. This divinely inspired document arose out of a desire to defend the belief in Jesus as the promised Messiah prophesied in the Hebrew Bible. Evidently this need was occasioned by the First Jewish War (appx. 66-70 AD), which resulted in the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and a huge fear among Jewish people for the continuing existence of their way of life and religious heritage. The religious community of mostly Jewish believers, possibly in the Roman province of Syria in either Damascus or Antioch -- or both -- came under strong pressure to abandon their Christian faith in favor of the synagogue tradition of Judaism as a way to help preserve that threatened heritage. God inspired this community -- along with individuals within it -- to produce the Gospel of Matthew in order to demonstrate just the opposite. In order to be consistent with what God had begun in the Old Testament faithful Jews should accept Jesus as their Messiah, since Christ represented the culmination of the Old Testament revelation and promises for His covenant people.

Regarding the **internal history** of this passage, several considerations need to be given attention. Those are closely connected to the literary setting of the passage as well. Matthew's Gospel sets up a historical setting for this passage that includes 13:1-52. The narrative introduction is verses 1-3a (NRSV:

1 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 2 Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. 3 And he told them many things in parables, saying:

Chapter thirteen is paralleled by Mark 4 and Luke 8 in most aspects. Both contain a narrative introduction to their respective collection of parables that Jesus taught; see [Mt. 13:1-3a](#) paralleled by [Mk. 4:1-2](#) and [Luke 8:4](#). Donald Senior ("Matthew," *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries*, iPreach) has a helpful summation of the narrative significance of Matt. 13:1-3a:

In the immediately preceding scene Jesus was with his disciples and the crowds in a house and had pointed to his disciples as his true family, as those who did “the will of my Father” (12:46-50). At the beginning of the discourse he leaves the house and sits in a boat along the shore in order to address the great crowds that had gathered on the beach (13:1). As the discourse continues, both the “crowds” (13:34) and the “disciples” (13:10) are present. But in 13:36 Jesus moves away from the crowds and back into the house with his disciples, and the remainder of the discourse appears directed exclusively at them. Thus the overall movement of the discourse is from a general interaction with the crowds to a focus on the disciples alone.

The geographical location for this episode is the Sea of Galilee in the northern part of Palestine, most likely near the town of Capernaum. The chronology of the setting is during the [second phase of Jesus' extended ministry](#) in the Roman province of Galilee, where he had been raised since childhood. From the boat, Jesus addressed the large crowds that wanted to hear him speak. As noted above by Donald Senior, the scene shifts from the seashore to a house in [13:36](#) (NRSV): “36 Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying,...” Although not absolutely certain, it very likely was the house where Jesus had been previously, that is mentioned in 13:1 and [12:46-50](#).

The parables of the mustard seed and the leaven are a part of the material addressed to the crowds on the seashore. The Matthean concluding narrative statement terminating this episode is stated clearly in [13:53](#) (NRSV): “When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place.” [Mark 4:33-35](#) provides an interpretative base for terminating this episode (NRSV): “33 With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; 34 he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples. 35 On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, ‘Let us go across to the other side.’” Matthew made use of the Markan interpretative statement in [13:34-35](#) as he wove it into his narrative earlier in the episode: “34 Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. 35 This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: ‘I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.’” To be sure, the sequence of events in Matthew differs from that in Mark, as [a comparison of the pericopes](#) reveals:



Matthew

79. [Teaching in parables](#) 13:1-2

80. [Parable of the sower](#) 13:3-9

81. [Purpose of parables](#) 13:10-17

82. [Parable of the sower explained](#) 13:18-23

83. [Parable of the tares](#) 13:24-30

84. [Parable of the mustard seed](#) 13:31-32

85. [Parable of the leaven](#) 13:33

86. [Use of parables](#) 13:34-35

87. [Parable of the tares explained](#) 13:36-43

88. [Parable of the buried treasure](#) 13:44

89. [Parable of the costly pearl](#) 13:45-46

90. [Parable of the net](#) 13:47-50

91. [Parable of the householder](#) 13:51-52

92. [Rejection at Nazareth](#) 13:53-58

93. [John's death](#) 14:1-12

94. [5,000 fed](#) 14:13-21

Mark

19. [Teaching in Parables](#) 4:1-2

20. [Parable of the sower](#) 4:3-9

21. [Purpose of parables](#) 4:10-12

22. [Parable of the sower explained](#) 4:13-20

23. [Candle under a bushel](#) 4:21-25

24. [Parable of the seed growing secretly](#) 4:26-29

25. [Parable of the mustard seed](#) 4:30-32

26. [Use of parables](#) 4:33-34

27. [Calming the storm](#) 4:35-41

28. [Gadarene demoniac healed](#) 5:1-20

29. [Ruler's daughter and a woman healed](#) 5:21-43

30. [Rejection at Nazareth](#) 6:1-6

31. [Twelve sent out into Galilee](#) 6:7-13

32. [John's death](#) 6:14-29

33. [5,000 fed](#) 6:30-44

Luke

46. [Parable of the sower](#) 8:4-8

47. [Purpose of parables](#) 8:9-10

48. [Parable of the sower explained](#) 8:11-15

49. [Candle under a bushel](#) 8:16-18

50. [True kinship](#) 8:19-21

51. [Calming the storm](#) 8:22-25

52. [Gadarene demoniac healed](#) 8:26-39

53. [Ruler's daughter and a woman healed](#) 8:40-56

54. [Twelve sent out in Galilee](#) 9:1-6

55. [John's death](#) 9:7-9

56. [5,000 fed](#) 9:10-17

Matthew inserts the **Rejection at Nazareth** (#92) as the next episode, while Mark has the **Calming the Storm** (#27) as the next episode. Luke pretty much follows the Markan sequence here. This emphasizes the distinctive approach of each gospel writer, and how each made use of his sources, especially how Matthew and Luke made use of Mark as one of their sources. One good internet gateway into several sources for additional study is Mark Goodacre's [New Testament Gateway](#).

b. Literary

Several aspects of the literary side of our pericope now need to be considered. Since both are parables, the interpretive process will need to take into consideration the additional steps for parable understanding discussed in my [Exegeting Parables](#) page at Cranfordville.com. This will be included in the discussion of each of the parables in the exegesis below.

For the depiction of a parable see pp. 3-4 of the [previous study](#). Also the previous discussion (pp. 4-5) of **Literary Setting** applies here as well, with but one exception. Luke's parallel to these two parables (13:18-21) is cast in an entirely different setting from that in Mark and Matthew. They are a part of Luke's **Travelogue Narrative** (9:57-19:27) that comes after the time spent in Galilee and before the Passion Week in Jerusalem leading to his death. Although at first glance it seems strange, the reality is that a lot of the Lukan material in this section of his story has its parallel with Mark and Matthew in their Galilean Ministry segment. For his own reasons Luke chose to cast much of this material into his story at a later point in Jesus' public ministry.

II. Message

We will consider each parable separately. Because of the shortness of each parable, no outline division inside each parable will be used as our organizing principle for the exegesis at this basic level. We will instead focus on the three gospel accounts of each parable.

a. Mustard Seed, vv. 31-32

GNT - Mt. 13:31-32

<13:31> Ἀλλήν παραβολὴν παρέθηκεν αὐτοῖς λέγων, Ὁμοία ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν κόκκῳ σινάπεως, ὃν λαβὼν ἄνθρωπος ἐσπείρεν ἐν τῷ ἀγρῷ αὐτοῦ. <13:32> ὁ μικρότερον μὲν ἐστὶν πάντων τῶν σπερμάτων, ὅταν δὲ αὐξηθῇ μεῖζον τῶν λαχάνων ἐστὶν καὶ γίνεται δένδρον, ὥστε ἐλθεῖν τὰ πετεινὰ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ κατασκηνοῦν ἐν τοῖς κλάδοις αὐτοῦ.

NRSV - Mt. 13:31-32

31 He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32 it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

GNT - Mk. 4:30-32

<4:30> Καὶ ἔλεγεν, Πῶς ὁμοιώσωμεν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ ἢ ἐν τίνι αὐτὴν παραβολῇ θῶμεν; <4:31> ὡς κόκκῳ σινάπεως, ὃς ὅταν σπαρῇ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, μικρότερον ὢν πάντων τῶν σπερμάτων τῶν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, <4:32> καὶ ὅταν σπαρῇ, ἀναβαίνει καὶ γίνεται μεῖζον πάντων τῶν λαχάνων καὶ ποιεῖ κλάδους μεγάλους, ὥστε δύνασθαι ὑπὸ τὴν σκιὰν αὐτοῦ τὰ πετεινὰ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ κατασκηνοῦν.

NRSV - Mk. 4:30-32

30 He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? 31 It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 32 yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the

GNT - Lk. 13:18-19

13:18 Ἐλεγεν οὖν, Τίνι ὁμοία ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τίνι ὁμοιώσω αὐτήν; 13:19 ὁμοία ἐστὶν κόκκῳ σινάπεως, ὃν λαβὼν ἄνθρωπος ἔβαλεν εἰς κῆπον ἑαυτοῦ, καὶ ἤρξησεν καὶ ἐγένετο εἰς δένδρον, καὶ τὰ πετεινὰ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ κατεσκήνωσεν ἐν τοῖς κλάδοις αὐτοῦ.

NRSV - Lk. 13:18-19

18 He said therefore, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? 19 It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches."

birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

NLT - Mt. 13:31-32

31 Here is another illustration Jesus used: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed planted in a field. 32 It is the smallest of all seeds, but it becomes the largest of garden plants and grows into a tree where birds can come and find shelter in its branches."

NLT - Mk. 4:30-32

30 Jesus asked, "How can I describe the Kingdom of God? What story should I use to illustrate it? 31 It is like a tiny mustard seed. Though this is one of the smallest of seeds, 32 it grows to become one of the largest of plants, with long branches where birds can come and find shelter."

NLT - Lk. 13:18-19

18 Then Jesus said, "What is the Kingdom of God like? How can I illustrate it? 19 It is like a tiny mustard seed planted in a garden; it grows and becomes a tree, and the birds come and find shelter among its branches."

Notes:

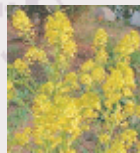
In applying the [principles of parable interpretation](#), let's begin with the "earthly story" aspect. In terms of details classification ([Step 2 in Procedure](#)), this parable falls under the Parabolic Sayings group, since in the Greek it is composed of a single sentence. The metaphorical nature of the saying is evident in the adjective ὁμοία ("like") used to introduce it, but it is more than a simple metaphor (Cf. "faith the size of a mustard seed...", [πίστιν ὡς κόκκον σινάπεως] [Mt. 17:20 // Lk. 17:6](#)). The implication of this is the paucity of story details which can make understanding the point of the story more difficult. The history of interpreting this parable bears this out with a wide diversity of interpretation that has surfaced over the nearly two millennia since Jesus, as a quick check of some of the 37,000 plus hits on a Google search suggest.

Let's explore the story details in order to try to make clearer sense of this parable. **Who** was the planter? Both Luke and Matthew indicate "a man" with the identical expression ὁ λαβὼν ἄνθρωπος, which changes Mark's less direct "which, when sown" (ὅς ὅταν σπαρή). Very likely Robert Gundry (*Matthew: A Commentary on his Literary and Theological Art*, pp. 265-268) is on target, especially with the *Sitz im Leben Jesu* segment ([Step 3](#)), when he says:

As in the parable of the tares of the field (v 24; cf. vv. 3,4,11 in the parable of the sower), 'a man' refers to Jesus the sower (see v. 37). And Matthew's using the indicative mood (ἔσπειρεν instead of Mark's subjunctive σπαρή) makes the verb refer to Jesus' establishing the kingdom in past history.



What was sown? The immediate answer is clear: *a mustard seed*. But this answer is much more complex than might appear. Is the ancient mustard seed/plant comparable to a modern species? The Greek term κόκκῳ σινάπεως (grain of mustard seed) is identical in all three gospels. sometimes pose understandings. Al- not the smallest fully developed



The [modern varieties](#) problems for ancient un- though small, they are seeds of plants found in a modern garden. When they do not resemble either a large bush or tree.



So what is going on here? One of two possibilities exist. (1) The ancient variety of mustard plant is very different from those common in the modern world. (2) The story intentionally exaggerates the size because it has now leaped to the "heavenly meaning" side of the comparison.

Again Robert Gundry (pp. 267-268) has some very helpful and solidly based insights:

The mustard seed was the smallest of Palestinian seeds that could be seen with the naked eye and had become proverbial for smallness (see *m. Tohar* 8:8; *m. Nid.* 5:2; cf. *m. Nazir* 1:5). On the other hand, the mustard plant grows to a height of 8-12 feet. Theophrastus writes of herbs that grow so large they might be compared to trees (*HP* 1.3.1-4), and the rabbi Simeon b. Halafta is reported to have said he had a mustard plant to the top of which he could climb as to the top of a fig tree (*y. Pe'a* 7:3).

On the assumption of the correctness of these ancient Jewish and Roman sources, then possibility (1) is credible. But possibility (2) is also credible in the following sense, as Donald Senior ("Matthew," Abingdon New Testament Commentary, iPreach) suggests:

The assertion that the mustard plant will become a “tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches” adds a note of fantasy true to the usually “strange” twist found in Jesus’ parables. The mustard plant, in fact, does not become a tree where birds can nest in its branches. The image of a great tree was used in the ancient world as a symbol of a strong and flourishing world kingdom (see, e.g., [Judg 9:7-15](#); [Ps 80:8-11](#); [Ezek 17:23](#); [31:5-6](#); [Dan 4:10-12](#)).

The Dan. 4:10-12 passage will be quoted here as representative of the others (NRSV):

10 Upon my bed this is what I saw; there was a tree at the center of the earth, and its height was great. 11 The tree grew great and strong, its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the ends of the whole earth. 12 Its foliage was beautiful, its fruit abundant, and it provided food for all. The animals of the field found shade under it, the birds of the air nested in its branches, and from it all living beings were fed.

Thus careful consideration of ancient texts suggests the plausibility of both understandings. Modern commentators who do not consider these ancient sources easily draw wrong conclusions from the parabolic saying here. The similarity of terminology with the birds making nests in its branches (in all three gospels) to the above Old Testament metaphors of the tree as a symbol of God’s universal rule certainly pushes one toward the second possibility, in spite of Donald Senior’s incorrect statement above that birds couldn’t nest in mustard bushes. Ancient ones they could; modern ones they couldn’t.

Where was the mustard seed planted? Mark (4:31) simply says, “upon the ground” (ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς). Luke (13:19) says, “in the garden” (εἰς κῆπον ἑαυτοῦ). And Matthew (13:31) says, “in his field” (ἐν τῷ ἀγρῷ αὐτοῦ). These differences are significant, and have posed problems for some commentators. But again Robert Gundry (p. 268) has some helpful insights:

Luke makes an adaptation to horticulture outside Palestine by writing “into his own garden” in place of Mark’s general reference to the ground and Matthew’s reference to a field (see Theophrastus *HP* 7:1.1-2). In Palestine, sowing mustard was allowed in fields (so Matthew), but not in gardens (see *m. Kil.* 3:2; *b. Kil.* 2.8).

Thus each gospel writer has appropriately modified the saying of Jesus to suit the needs of his initial target audience.

The nature of the story line in this parabolic saying strongly suggests that it stands as one of the Nature Parables ([Step 4](#)), which typically stress the growth and influence of the Kingdom of God. Thus “growth” seems to be the point of the story (Tertium Comparationis; [Step 1](#)). Both Mark and Matthew --more than Luke -- place great emphasis upon the smallness of the seed in comparison to the bigness of the resulting mustard plant. Then Matthew adds additional emphasis on growth, as Robert Gundry demonstrates (pp. 266-267):

In manifold ways further emphasis fall on the magnitude of the kingdom: **(1)** in Matthew’s substituting “it has grown” for Mark’s second and redundant “it has been sown”; **(2)** in the replacing of καὶ [and] with the typically Matthean combination μέν...δέ [on the one hand...on the other hand] (15,1), which more strongly contrast the smallness of the seed and the largeness of the growth; **(3)** in the omission of Mark’s ἀναβαίνει καὶ [it grows and] the advance of μεῖζον τῶν λαχάνων, “larger than the herbs,” to an emphatic first position; **(4)** in the taking of “all” from “the herbs” in order to transfer the grown mustard plant out of the class of herbs; **(5)** in the replacing of Mark’s “and it forms large branches” with “and it becomes a tree” -- a hyperbolae classification that recall the large tree reaching to the sky, visible to the end of the whole earth and representing a worldwide kingdom in Dan. 4:7-24 (10-27); and **(6)** in the extending of Mark’s allusive quotation of Dan 4:9, 18 (12, 21) to include the previously replaced branches. Consequently, the birds to not settle temporarily in the shade of an herb’s large branches (so Mark); they build their nests in the branches of a huge tree (cf. Ezek. 17:23; 31:6). The hyperbole becomes all the more evident when we consider that by spring, the time of nest building, the annual mustard plant has not yet grown large enough for birds to build their nests in its branches. The realistic reference to the settling of birds under the shade of the grown plant in the hot summertime (so Mark) has turned, unrealistically, into the nesting of birds in the branches of the plant as though the plant had both grown to a tree and had done so by springtime!

One of the intriguing questions is the extent of the possible growth intended here. Is it left in broad, undefined terms and thus how big the Kingdom of God will become is left open-ended? One clue relates to the symbolical significance of the “birds.” Typically in ancient Jewish writings both inside and beyond the Old Testament they symbolized the nations of the world, as Gundry (p. 267) and others point out from both Daniel and Josephus. This can be especially detected in [Ezekiel](#), as well as Daniel. If this is correct, then “both in Jesus’ intent and Matthew’s understanding, the birds probably represent the nations of the world” (Gundry, p. 267).

In probing the levels of life settings (Sitz im Leben; [Step 3](#)) of the pericope in Matthew, Gene Boring ("Matthew," *New Interpreter's Bible*, iPreach) has some helpful insights:

The challenging feature is that the future tree-like glory is in continuity with the present smallness and ordinariness of the mustard plant. The presence of the hoped-for kingdom in Jesus, his works and disciples, is no more obvious than a garden herb—but the kingdom will come in God's power and glory nevertheless. A king who operates in meekness (11:25-30) and rides a donkey instead of a war horse (21:1-9) can be represented by a kingdom symbolized by a garden herb rather than a great tree. For Matthew's readers, the imagery was no longer surprising, for, like the modern reader, they had long since been accustomed to it from Mark's Gospel, their sacred tradition. For them (and us) the parable functions not to upset our imagery of what the kingdom is as such, but as an encouraging/threatening image contrasting the present lowliness of the kingdom with its final greatness.

Jesus here taught that God's rule, although not clearly obvious and seemingly small as represented by the impact of Jesus' earthly ministry in his day upon his own people (cf. [John 1:10-13](#)), would ultimately encompass the nations of the world. In this we find encouragement and hope. God isn't necessarily always in the "big things." He may, instead, be in the "small things" in our world. But where God is at work, good things do happen that will eventually lead to marvelous consummations in eternity. George A. Buttrick, ("The Gospel of St. Matthew," *Interpreters Bible* [Exegesis], iPreach) reminds us well:

Plainly this is a parable of hope: there shall be mighty growth from small beginnings. How small was the seed! A Babe born into a harsh world, a Teacher on a hillside, a condemned Man slain on a shameful Cross, an empty grave, and eleven men believing in him: what a tiny seed in a vast and alien field! How could such a seed ever come to harvest? The story rebukes our cult of bigness. Our pride in huge cities and mighty explosions has little to do with Jesus, or even with any human good. Actually our human life is small — a series of breaths, a sequence of footsteps, a frail chain of words. It is worth noticing that Jesus preferred a cult of smallness, for he stressed "a cup of cold water only" (10:42) and faithfulness "in that which is least" (Luke 16:10). Science is teaching us the infinite in the tiny; but Jesus taught it long ago, both as to the worth of man and as to the significance of the seemingly small kingdom.

There has indeed been great growth. The faint and far beginning in Galilee has become our planet's finest architecture and art and music. Paganism is not yet subdued, but Christ has won a world-wide homage. The soil, seemingly alien and certainly vast, has provided homage for the seed. There has been mysterious adaptation of soil and seed, and a vitalism in the seed, which no merely human theory can explain. Martyrdoms have come, but "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."¹ As for the phrase about the birds nesting, it echoes Dan. 4:12. That may have been the reason why Jesus used it: there is apocalyptic power in the seed. "The tree grew, and was strong, and the height thereof reached unto heaven, and the sight thereof to the end of all the earth" (Dan. 4:11).

The parable is thus reassurance and promise and abounding hope. The disciples needed this cheer; they were seeds cast upon the vast world. What could they do against the seduction and wealth of pagan cults, and against the frowning power of military empires? They could do little, but God through them could do all things. The Christian should live in a great expectancy. In our time also, swept by "world forces" and "economic revolutions," we need this heartenment. God's seeds can cover the earth with harvest.

b. Leaven, v. 33

GNT - Mt. 13:33

<13:33> Ἀλλὴν παραβολὴν ἐλάλησεν αὐτοῖς· Ὁμοία ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ζύμῃ, ἣν λαβοῦσα γυνὴ ἐνέκρυπεν εἰς ἀλεύρου σάτα τρία ἕως οὗ ἐξυμώθη ὅλον.

NRSV - Mt. 13:33

33 He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

NLT - Mt. 13:33

33 Jesus also used this illustration: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast used by a woman making bread. Even though she used a large amount of flour, the yeast permeated every part of the dough."

GNT - Lk. 13:20-21

13:20 Καὶ πάλιν εἶπεν, Τίνι ὁμοιώσω τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ; 13:21 ὁμοία ἐστὶν ζύμῃ, ἣν λαβοῦσα γυνὴ [ἐν] ἐκρύπεν εἰς ἀλεύρου σάτα τρία ἕως οὗ ἐξυμώθη ὅλον.

NRSV - Lk. 13:20-21

20 And again he said, "To what should I compare the kingdom of God? 21 It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

NLT - Lk. 13:20-21

20 He also asked, "What else is the Kingdom of God like? 21 It is like yeast used by a woman making bread. Even though she used a large amount of flour, the yeast permeated every part of the dough."

Notes:

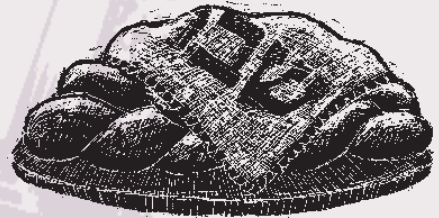
This second parabolic saying comes from the material common to Matthew and Luke but not found in Mark. This material is usually labeled **Q** after the German word *Quelle* meaning 'source.' This material stood as a second major source of mostly written materials after the Gospel of Mark in the writing of both Matthew and Luke. Thus we will examine how Matthew and Luke utilized this material from the Jesus tradition that had been passed down for several decades before the writing of their gospel accounts in the 70s of the first Christian century.

Interestingly, only the introduction of the parable differs between Matthew and Luke. The parabolic saying itself is identical in wording between the two gospel accounts: Ὁμοία ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ζύμη, ἣν λαβοῦσα γυνὴ ἐνέκρυσεν εἰς ἀλεύρου σάτα τρία ἕως οὗ ἐζυμώθη ὅλον. The one minor exception is the use of the term "Kingdom of God" by Luke, rather than Matthew's "Kingdom of Heaven." But this shying away from direct reference to God is typical of Matthew's Jewish oriented writing style.

Luke begins with "And again he said, *To what should I compare the kingdom of God?*" (NRSV), whereas Matthew has simply, "He told them another parable:" (NRSV). As Robert Gundry notes (p. 268), Matthew's terminology ("Ἄλλην παραβολὴν ἐλάλησεν αὐτοῖς") serves to connect this parable to identical statements in 13:3 (ἐλάλησεν αὐτοῖς πολλὰ ἐν παραβολαῖς λέγων), and 13:10 (Διὰ τί ἐν παραβολαῖς λαλεῖς), 13:13 (διὰ τοῦτο ἐν παραβολαῖς αὐτοῖς λαλῶ). This in turn prepares the readers for the concluding statement in v. 34: "Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables..." (Ταῦτα πάντα ἐλάλησεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἐν παραβολαῖς τοῖς ὄχλοις...; NRSV)

This even shorter saying clearly belongs in Parabolic Sayings category ([Step 2](#)) as a metaphorical saying of Jesus. This lies behind the extremely diverse interpretative tradition for this parable. To see a little bit of it, do a Google search of "Parable of the Leaven." Many of the 29,700 hits have some of the strangest views of the meaning of the parable.

The "earthly story" aspect is drawn from daily bread preparation in the home in ancient Israel, rather than from farming as was the mustard seed. The Jewish woman took "[bread starter](#)" (ζύμη, ἣν λαβοῦσα γυνή), not necessarily the exact same thing as modern yeast, and worked it (ἐνέκρυσεν) into "three measures of flour" (εἰς ἀλεύρου σάτα τρία) so that the resulting dough would rise (ἕως οὗ ἐζυμώθη ὅλον) and could then be baked as bread. Thus in everyday life the "yeast" was an important part of food preparation and essential for converting wheat into eatable bread.



These details strongly suggest that the parable should be grouped with the Nature Parables ([Step 4](#)), which emphasize the growth of the Kingdom. In addition its connection to the mustard seed saying, both contextually in both gospels and in the distinctive ways both are introduced in the two gospels, strengthens such an understanding.

The determination of the point of the story (tertium comparationis; [Step 1](#)) should then seem simple. Two things complicate this determination, and have to do with possible symbolical aspects of the saying. Typically in ancient Jewish tradition, leaven is seen as a symbol of things evil, as in Exod. 12:15-20 23:18; 34:25; Lev. 2:11; 6:10, as well as in the New Testament, Mt. 16:5-12; 1 Cor. 5:6-8 Gal. 5:9. If our saying here is taken to mean that leaven is somehow evil then the Kingdom is associated with something evil. All kinds of fanciful interpretations have stemmed from this approach. [One web site](#) I checked made this outlandish claim: "The Parable of the Leaven teaches that corrupt religious leaders will someday spread apostasy throughout the whole church."

But leaven is not uniformly used symbolically as a reference to evil, as Lev. 7:13-14 (13 With your thanksgiving sacrifice of well-being you shall bring your offering with *cakes of leavened bread*. 14 From this you shall offer one cake from each offering, as a gift to the Lord; it shall belong to the priest who dashes the blood of the offering of well-being.) and 23:17 (You shall bring from your settlements two loaves of bread as an elevation offering, each made of two-tenths of an ephah; they shall be of choice flour, *baked with leaven*, as first fruits to the Lord.) clearly demonstrate. Robert Gundry (pp. 268-269) may have a point in his interpretation here:

Here, the unusual use of leaven with a good association not only emphasizes the point of the parable -- the pervasive power of the kingdom of heaven -- but also, and perhaps intentionally, agrees with the inclusion of publicans and sinners in the kingdom.

The other symbolical aspect causing diversity of understanding has to do with the mention of “three measures of flour.” Many see here an allusion to Gen. 18:6 ([And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes."](#)) where Sarah used three measures of flour to prepare the meal for the Lord’s angels who visited Abraham. The quantity of bread produced from such an amount of flour would feed about a hundred people (Gundry, p. 268). Possibly this large end product (note the similarity to the mustard seed end-product) hints at [the messianic banquet](#) at the close of the age in the return of the Son of Man.

Clearly then this parabolic saying stresses the same general point as that of the mustard seed: God’s rule is present in Jesus and will expand to ultimately encompass all nations. The distinctive of the leaven from the mustard seed may be the idea of the pervasive power of that rule to spread itself and impact the lives of all kinds of people.

George A. Buttrick, (“The Gospel of St. Matthew,” *Interpreters Bible* [Exposition], iPreach) has some interesting additional insights that I share in closing:

The kingdom of Christ is silent and imperceptible, like yeast. If the twin parable rebukes our cult of bigness, this story rebukes our cult of noise. Advertising does not help the church, unless it is as reverent as the gospel; and sensationalism can easily be a curse. The big booming forces soon pass: seed and leaven remain. The majestic power of the stars is silent, and the stars themselves are lowly as candles. Perhaps we need a “noise-abatement” movement in the church. Any true sound is born in silence.

But the kingdom, though silent, is yet dynamic. It is a yeasty ferment. It is a quiet revolution. No area of earth is left untouched by the redemptive trouble of its coming. The Epistle to Philemon is gentle enough and makes no noise, but it shows the yeast of the gospel subduing the stubborn dough of ancient slavery. In your heart and mine, and in the customs and institutions of our time, the leaven is at work. We should not fear the gentle agitation or the persistent change. The spirit of Christ is yeast in our world.

Matt. 13:31-33 Diagrammed

1 31 Ἄλλην παραβολὴν παρέθηκεν αὐτοῖς

λέγων,

α

Ὁμοία ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν

κόκκῳ σινάπεως,

λαβὼν

ὃν... ἄνθρωπος ἔσπειρεν

ἐν τῷ ἀγρῷ αὐτοῦ·

32

ὁ μικρότερον μὲν ἐστὶν

πάντων τῶν σπερμάτων,

δὲ

ὅταν αὐξηθῇ

- μεῖζον... ἐστὶν

τῶν λαχάνων

καὶ

- γίνεται δένδρον,

ὥστε ἐλθεῖν τὰ πετεινὰ

τοῦ οὐρανοῦ

καὶ

κατασκηνοῦν

ἐν τοῖς κλάδοις αὐτοῦ.

2 33 Ἄλλην παραβολὴν ἐλάλησεν αὐτοῖς·

β

Ὁμοία ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν

ζύμῃ,

λαβοῦσα

ἥν... γυνὴ ἐνέκρυπεν... σάτα τρία

εἰς ἀλεύρου

ἕως οὗ ἐξυμώθη ὅλον.

Mk. 4:30-32 Diagrammed

³⁰ Καὶ
1 ἔλεγεν,
α Πῶς ὁμοιώσωμεν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ
β ἢ
γ ³¹ ἐν τίνι αὐτὴν παραβολῇ θῶμεν;
(αὐτὴ ἐστίν)
ὡς κόκκῳ σινάπεως,
ὅταν σπαρῇ
ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς,
μικρότερον ὂν
πάντων τῶν σπερμάτων
τῶν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς,

³² καὶ
ὅταν σπαρῇ,
ὅς...ἀναβαίνει
καὶ
-- γίνεται μείζον
πάντων τῶν λαχάνων
καὶ
-- ποιεῖ κλάδους μεγάλους,
ὕπὸ τὴν σκιὰν αὐτοῦ
ὥστε δύνασθαι..τὰ πετεινὰ..κατασκηνοῦν.
τοῦ οὐρανοῦ

Lk. 13:18-21 Diagrammed

18 οὖν,
1 Ἔλεγεν
α Τίνι ὁμοία ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ
β καὶ
β τίνι ὁμοιώσω αὐτήν;
γ 19 ὁμοία ἐστὶν
κόκκῳ σινάπεως,
λαβὼν
ὄν.. ἄνθρωπος ἔβαλεν
εἰς κῆπον ἑαυτοῦ,
καὶ
-- ἤρξησεν
καὶ
-- ἐγένετο
εἰς δένδρον,
καὶ
δ τὰ πετεινὰ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ κατεσκήνωσεν
ἐν τοῖς κλάδοις αὐτοῦ.
20 Καὶ
πάλιν
2 εἶπεν,
ε Τίνι ὁμοιώσω τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ;
ζ 21 ὁμοία ἐστὶν
ζύμῃ,
λαβοῦσα
ἥν.. γυνὴ ἐνέκρυπεν.. σάτα τρία
εἰς ἀλεύρου
ἕως οὗ ἐζυμώθη ὅλον.