

The Teaching of Matthew 13:36-43

One of the numerous illustrations Jesus related in His ministry goes like this in the NKJV: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way. But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. So the servants of the owner came and asked him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? Why then does it have tares?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Do you want us then to go and gather them up?' But he said, 'No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, 'First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn.'" ~ Jesus in Matthew 13:24-30

After telling this story, some of Jesus' disciples asked Him for an explanation; so He replied with the following: "He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world. And the good seed are the sons of the kingdom. But the tares are the sons of the wicked one. The enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age. And the reapers are the angels. Therefore, as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age: the Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend and those who practice lawlessness, and they'll cast them into the furnace of fire; there'll be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father." ~ Jesus in Matthew 13:36-43. So...

Jesus said the following:

The sower	→	the Christ
The enemy	→	the devil
The field	→	the world
The seed	→	the children of the kingdom
The tares	→	the children of the enemy
The reapers	→	the angels
The harvest	→	the end of the/this age

Before getting in-depth in the study of this parable's explanation, let's lay some groundwork.

The speaker is Jesus who Matthew has already put forth in his account of the gospel as the promised Messiah: {1} In chapter 1 he referred to the virgin birth of Jesus and how that an angel told Jesus' earthly father Joseph that his bride's child was of the Spirit of God and thus the promised Savior. {2} In chapter 3 he told the story of how Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, preached of Jesus as being the prophesied Messiah. {3} In chapter 4 Matthew wrote of Jesus' temptation by the arch enemy who referred to Him as the Son of God. {4} In chapter 8 he narrated the story of a demon-possessed man who spoke of Jesus as the Son of God. {5} In chapter 11 he wrote of Jesus as answering in the affirmative when asked if He were the Messiah. And {6} in chapter 12 the inspired writer, Matthew, referred to Jesus as being the One who would raise from the dead after three days as well as strip all power from the arch enemy. With all this in mind, who did Jesus say "The Sower" was? Right—Jesus Christ Himself. Next...

The audience was comprised of Jesus' own Jewish Israelite brethren, for (as He stated in Mat. 10:6) they were the ones to whom He was sent and the ones to whom He came (cf. John 1:11); in fact, in verse 36 of *The Parable of the Tares in the Field*, it specifically states that the Jewish men Jesus chose earlier (those listed in chapter 10) came to Him, asking Him to explain the parable to them. (If one wishes for even more proof of who comprised the audience of the Matthew 13 parables, all he/she has to do is check out the contexts of the two Old Testament prophetic passages quoted in Matthew 13 [viz. vv. 14, 15, & 35]). With all this in mind, what did Jesus say "The Field" was? Right—The World. Oh! Ya don't see the connection? OK. Then let's start our in-depth study of this parable by talking about "The World."

Before talking about the original term for "world" in Matthew 13:38 (and, btw, "world" is an acceptable translation here), let's talk about the English term "world" itself for a moment.

We (and even those of Jesus' time) used the term "world" in numerous ways:

1. the universe
2. planet earth
3. all peoples of planet earth
4. peoples of a division of planet earth, e.g. "The Western World"
5. an ethnic people of planet earth, e.g. "The African World"
6. a government of people of planet earth, e.g. "The Democratic World"
7. a class of people scattered about planet earth, e.g. "The Intellectual World"
8. a religious type of people of planet earth, e.g. "The Muslim World"
9. an individual's sphere of existence, e.g. "My World"

So when Jesus said "the field" of His parable represented "the world," how should we interpret that? Well, it seems logical to me to keep it within the context of "when" Jesus was speaking and to "whom" He was speaking, i.e. what they would've likely understood by His use of this phrase as He was addressing them. So with this in mind...

Since this was a Jew speaking to a group of His Jewish brethren in a time before life as they knew it ended 40 years later, I *extra*-ordinarily tend to think they understood (or at the very least Jesus thought they'd understand) the phrase "the world" to have reference to their world, the world of Israel, God's Old Covenant people (who weren't just a people based on bloodline, but also a people—a "world"—based on government, in this case an administration headed up by God, thus a theocratic government). Intriguingly ...

Not only did Yahweh call Israel His "vineyard" several times, but He also considered Israel His "field"; in fact, in Jeremiah 12:10 we find those two terms actually used interchangeably: The NASB has Yah saying to Jeremiah that "Many shepherds [rulers] have ruined My vineyard, they have trampled down My field; they have made My pleasant field a desolate wilderness [desert]." Here's what's really interesting about this statement:

The Hebrew actually reads more like the RSV: "...shepherds have ... trampled down My *portion* [of land], they've made My pleasant *portion* [of land] a desolate wilderness." So God was saying to Jeremiah that, out of all peoples, the Israelites were His; Israel was His piece of the pie or land or field to cultivate; in fact, the Greek word for "field" is *agros* from which, of course, our word "agriculture" is derived. So what's my point? Well...

Personally, I'm convinced that, in His *Parable of the Tares in the Field*, Jesus, by His use of the words "field" and "world," was referring to national Israel, for the "world" of Israel was God's "field." Let's put this into perspective a little bit here:

In verse 24 Jesus said that "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field [i.e. his portion of land]," and He said that that "man," that "sower," was Jesus Himself (v. 37); thus it's about His task of bringing about the kingdom of heaven on Earth as mentioned in His model prayer in Matthew 6. Then in verse 38 He said that "the field" (i.e. His, Christ's, portion of land/people on Earth, v. 24) is equal to "the world," thus "His world" is equal to a "portion of land/people," NOT all lands &/or all peoples for the purpose of creating the kingdom of redemption. So...

Although we'll have to wait to get to the timing part of this a little later, specifically relative to the point of this parable—and within the parameters of the era involved in this parable (viz. from when Jesus said all this to the end of that age, vv. 39-40), Israel (which, BTW, was strewn throughout the Roman Empire) was the field or the world in which Jesus (via His disciples) would plant His seed of the kingdom. So...

In the previous list of the ways the term "world" is used, instead of "World #3" (viz. "all peoples of planet earth") being what was meant by "the world" in this parable, it's much more reasonable that Jesus was referring mainly to a combination of "World #6" (viz., a people under a government) and "World #8" (viz., a religious group of people)—"The Israelite World." Oh, before we move on past this...

Let's not forget to get back to a few thoughts on the original term for "world," viz. *kosmos*.

As western folk in the 21st century, we tend to think only of the universe when we hear or use the term "cosmos," but such wasn't the case on the other side of the planet in the days of Jesus: it was actually employed as a term of beauty, of something of a very well-ordered arrangement; both the Collins & World English dictionaries (which, btw, agree with Strong's definition of *kosmos*) define *kosmos* as "an ordered system" and the opposite of chaos. And what else is a better ordered system than the theocratic government of God over His religious people, Israel, via the perfect law? Incidentally...

The word "cosmetician" is synonymous with ... that's right ... "beautician." But, as we read in Jeremiah 12:10, God's Old Covenant world or people, God's field, had become ugly and hostile toward Him (the farmer [cf. Heb. 6:7]), so His New Covenant people, the remnant of OC Israel, became His field to cultivate and beautify (1 Cor. 3:9). Now...

Since we know Christ is the sower and that Israel (all twelve tribes of her) throughout the empire was the field, who were "the sons of the kingdom"? That's easy. Right? Christians. Jesus, via the Spirit and His original disciples, was planting seed that sprouted into Christians all over the Israelite world; these folks were spoken of as "the remnant" or "the church"—"the called out ones" from among the so-called "Lost Tribes of Israel" (cf. Rom. 11:5, etc.).

Next we ask, "Who were the sons of the enemy"? Well, just as the children of the kingdom were God's or Christ's people, so the children of the enemy were the enemy's people. So we must move on and ask...

"Who was the enemy?" Well, Jesus said the enemy was "the devil," but we still need more explanation, at least I do. ☺

The original term for "enemy" means exactly that, "an adversary, an enemy, a foe"; and the original term for "devil" is the word from which we get "diabolical," and it refers to "a false accuser, a defamer, a slanderer." So...

The enemy in this story is the one who works against and slanders the name of Christ and His people to the authorities and perhaps even to God Himself; so one can't help but recall the story of Job in which the incident is told of how Satan (which, when translated instead of transliterated as a proper name, means "enemy") approached God and defamed His man Job and family. The thing is (if we think of Satan there as a metaphysical being), he didn't do things to Job on his own, rather he used the Sabaeans, the Chaldeans, so-called friends, and others against Job and his family.

The same applies in the case of Jesus' parable: the enemy/devil (if a supernatural being) used his minions who were strategically placed throughout the Israelite people in attempts to do everything possible to thwart the cause of the Christ. So, more specifically...

Who then were those "sons of the enemy"? The Jews who rejected Jesus as the Messiah.

The same Greek term translated "enemy" in this parable is the same as found in what's called *The Parable of the Minas* in Luke 19:12-27 in which Jesus said of the Jews, "bring here those enemies of mine who didn't want me to reign over them and slay them before me" (v. 27); and, btw, pretty much everyone agrees that this story (like the one in Mat. 22:1ff) is a reference to God's annihilation of Jerusalem and thus Judaism.

The same Greek term for "enemy" is also found in Philippians 3:18 in which Paul, speaking of these same rejecting Jews (cf. v. 2) wrote, "they are the enemies of the cross of Christ."

One specific case of this is found in Acts 13:10 in which Paul said to a Jew by the name of Elymas, "You full of deceit and enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord?" (Cf. 1 The. 2:14-16.)

There are also verses like the following which should be consulted in a study of the true enemy of Christ and His people while the bride-church was being prepared: Galatians 2:4 that speaks of "false brethren" (cf. Acts 15:1 & 24), Second Peter 2:1 that speaks of "false teachers," Jude 4 that speaks of "certain ones" who had "crept in unnoticed," and then Revelation 2:9 & 3:9 that speak of these same infiltrating/pernicious Jews as being of "the synagogue of Satan" (which, again, means "adversary"). However...

Let me add this: I believe both Satan in Job and the devil in this parable represent not some evil spirit-being but the enemy as a singular corporate entity (enemy like seed is singular), reminiscent of the "leaders" of the Jews and their cronies in Jeremiah 12:10. Now...

Before we can summarize the meaning of this parable, the only thing (and probably the most important thing) left to figure out is the harvest of verses 30 & 39. Since we're 2,000 years removed from this story, to get a truly accurate grasp on this parable we must determine what the Lord meant by the phrase "this age" in verse 40 so we can at least narrow down the timing of this harvest-event in hopes, of course, of figuring out what He meant by it. (BTW, out of the seven things Jesus defined, I find it intriguing that the harvest is the only one that He didn't personify. Anyway...)

In verse 39 Jesus identified the *time* for this harvest by the phrase "the end of **the** age"; then in verse 40 He identified *which* age He meant with the phrase "the end of **this** age."

Since there are versions with "the age" in both verses, let me share the following: There are around 5,000 manuscripts of either parts or all of the Greek New Testament, and (due to so many extant manuscripts) there's also a Greek text which was created and has been utilized by translations with the pronoun "this" in verse 40 called *The Majority Text*; it's called that because it's a compilation of what the majority of the manuscripts record in regard to any given statement in the New Testament. So...

This is obviously why I found approx. 40 versions which translate Jesus as saying that the harvest was slated to occur at "the end of **this** age," i.e. that age nearly 2000 years ago now—the age in which He and His audience were then living.

Something else important is this: as an example, on Bible-Researcher.com there are 12 Greek texts of the NT; interestingly, 6 of them include the pronoun "this," while the other 6 don't. So what do I do in such a case? Well, the following scenario makes sense to me:

If I come across two different translations with ancient Greek texts supporting both of them, I need to ask myself the following: Should I devise my own explanation of the statement under consideration? Or should I allow the *more specific* text to make sense of the *less specific* text? Clearly I should do that latter. Right? Surely then...

This means that in the majority of the approximately 5,000 ancient Greek manuscripts of what we call *The New Testament*, the pronoun "this" is found as a modifier of the noun "age" in Matthew 13:40. OK...

Now that we've narrowed down "the age" to "this age" (i.e. the age in which Jesus and His audience of that day were living), we must ask, "Exactly what or who's age was this?" Well, to whom was Jesus speaking? To His religious/Abrahamic/Mosaic brethren—the Jews, from among whom the salvation of the Messiah was to come (John 4:22). OK, consider this:

God's Old Covenant (Abrahamic/Mosaic) people lived in the belief of two ages: the age before Messiah's accomplished work and the age of the Messiah's accomplished work. (Jesus even appealed to this/their belief earlier that day in Mat. 12:32 [cf. Eph. 1:21].) At this point in time, hardly any of God's OC people believed Jesus was the Messiah, much less that He had come and accomplished the work prophesied of Him. Besides...

Twenty years later, Paul reminded the Christians of Galatia that Jesus was "born under the Law" (Gal. 4:4), the Law being, of course, equivalent to the Old Covenant; Jesus, in fact, according to Paul again later in Hebrews 9:26, wasn't only *born* under the Law, but He also *died* near the end of the age of that Law. I'm not sure I know anyone who disputes that Jesus lived/died under the Old Covenant, for His cross-nails were the death-knells of the Old Covenant (Rom. 10:4, "Christ is the end of the Law").

{One quick side-note is the import of the full meaning of the Greek word for "end" here (as well as in every other related passage): it's from *sunteleia* which doesn't just refer to a mere end of something like a rope, but to a consummation or accomplishment of a purposefully worked-toward *goal!*} So...

When Jesus affirmed in *The Parable of the Tares in the Field* that the harvest would transpire at "the end of **this** age," He was referring to the end of the Old Covenant age. And when did their age, their world, and the Old Covenant or the Law of Moses end? Well, we'll get to that momentarily; we must move on to the meaning of the harvest in order to help us with that question in this context. So now...

What did Jesus mean by the harvest?

Whatever was meant by it, Jesus here placed it not only at the end of the Old Covenant age (as is also found in numerous other places in the Bible, especially the NT), but He also implied it was to be an event that included angels and their task at that point to accomplish a once-for-all-time fire-cleansing of the kingdom from offensive things and offensive people, resulting in wailing and gnashing of teeth. (See Eze. 22:17-22 in which the Lord referred His rebellious ones drying in the furnace of Jerusalem when it was taken by the Babylonians; cf. also Mat. 22:7 in which Jesus spoke of burning up the city). Now...

Let's turn over this coin: Since the harvest with its angels, fire, wailing, etc. was to be at the end of the Law of Moses (which, according to Jesus in Mat. 5:17-18, couldn't end until every jot-&-tittle prophecy was fulfilled), then the consummation of the Law was a time of harvest (separation) involving angels, fire, wailing, etc.

Jesus went on in Matthew 13:47-50 to refer even more clearly to this event; we should also note His strong/to-the-point words to Jewish leaders in Luke 3:26ff (which is reminiscent of Mat. 3:7-12).

This story wasn't about the end of the Christian age or the New Covenant age as I was always taught, rather it was about the *purpose* of the age of the Old Covenant, the goal of which was to give birth to or to *produce* the redemptive age of the New Covenant. (Speaking of "produce," the noun "produce" is a synonym for "harvest." Also you may find it interesting to know that there's no Bible prophecy of the end of time, but there are plenty of Bible prophecies about the time of the end [cf. e.g. Dan. 12:4 & 9].) Speaking of Daniel...

Something to help us with our understanding of this harvest is right here in what Jesus said: in Matthew 13:43 He echoed Daniel 12:3. So let's allow the Bible to explain itself:

After Jesus spoke of the harvest (which He called a "gathering" in v. 41, btw), He said, "Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in their Father's kingdom." Likewise, after the angel spoke to Daniel in 12:2 about ... What? ... That's right → the judgmental separation of resurrection (which equals the "gathering out of His kingdom"), he then said that "those who are wise will shine like the heavens, and those ['the sons of the kingdom'] who turn many to righteousness will shine like the stars forever and ever."

And at what point in time did the angel inform Daniel this would all occur? Verse 7, "...when the power of the holy people has been completely shattered, all these things shall be finished." And when was the power of God's Old Covenant people finally "*completely shattered*"? Verse 11 goes on to cite the time when "the daily sacrifices" would be "taken away" at "the abomination of desolation" which Jesus, in His *Olivet Discourse* in Matthew 24:15, declared would occur at the destruction of Jerusalem with its temple, its priesthood, and its sacrifices. So, to summarize...

In *The Parables of the Tares in the Field*, I believe Jesus was simply foretelling the story of the growth and final establishment of His kingdom on Earth over the next forty-year period with all of its persecutions, tribulations, and martyrdom. But, as is also taught in other parables, the Lord/King Himself would come in the events of AD 70 to remove every vestige of the world of Judaism and the Law of bondage, along with its opposition toward the world of Christianity and its Law of Liberty in Christ, thereby proving to Israel once and for all that God's true people are the shining followers/disciples of Jesus of Nazareth.

[Tony Everett Denton, April 2014.]