

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

“God so loved the world . . .” begins perhaps the most quoted of all Bible verses. What may now be accepted as a universal application of the promise in that verse has not always been so understood. The exclusivity of the Jewish race and the covenants that formed their claim to a special relationship with Yahweh convinced them that they were the chosen, the one and only intent of God’s benevolence. Their concept of the Messianic expectation was one of militant deliverance from all Gentile oppressors and a victorious kingdom of dominance for the restored nation of Israel. When Jesus appeared on the scene his idea of a kingdom was quite different and its purpose in his plan included a universal provision for salvation. This study will seek to show that purpose in the kingdom parables of Matthew 13 as they relate to the life and ministry of Christ.

A Light to the Gentiles

The righteous and devout man Simeon waited patiently in the temple, the possessor of a promise that he would see the “consolation of Israel” before his death (Lk. 2:25-26). When holding the small child Jesus that had been brought to the temple for the dedication of circumcision he recognized that he was holding the fulfillment of the promise he had received of the Holy Spirit. Simeon proclaimed:

For my eyes have seen Your salvation Which You
have prepared before the face of all peoples, A light
to bring revelation to the Gentiles, And the glory of
Your people Israel. (Lk. 2:30-32)

The Messianic child was to be the fulfillment of ancient prophecies in the Old Testament. Many of them, including Simeon's reference, are from the prophet Isaiah and point to the universal message of Gentile inclusion, the coming kingdom of God. Jesus, the light of the world, was destined to be "a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles." As Jesus grew in wisdom and understanding there was an increased awareness of his destiny. "I must be about My Father's business," was Jesus' response to those who sought him as a youth in the temple (Lk. 2:49-52). The understanding of his mission and destiny shaped the context of his earthly ministry. This study will show that this dawn of understanding illuminated the horizon of his purpose and focused his sight to a world-wide vision.

Let Him Hear

Evidence suggests Jesus was purposeful about preparing his followers to enlarge their conception of God's Kingdom, to look beyond the nationalistic demarcations to envision a kingdom greater than any earthly empire they had ever known. There are two related features of Jesus' teaching that alone call attention to his intention. First, thirteen verses in Matthew chapters 10-13 contain either the admonition to

hear or the instruction to proclaim what you *hear*.¹ The admonition, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear,” should be understood as a rhetorical means of claiming the full attention of his audience. In Matthew, the emphasis that Jesus places on *hearing* alerts the reader to pay special attention to Jesus’ remarks. Various forms of ἀκούω are used in these chapters and are understood to mean, “to hear, to hearken, listen to, to heed, obey.”²

Second, Jesus quotes Old Testament prophecies concerning the turning tide of events. Following the miraculous healing of the withered hand on the Sabbath day in Matt. 12:14 the Pharisees went out to plot how they might destroy Jesus. Knowing this, Jesus went out from the synagogue and in Matt. 12:18 he quoted from the prophet Isaiah to the people, “He shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles” and further in verse 21, “in his name the Gentiles will hope.”³ Through explicit references from the prophet, Jesus began to prepare those who would hear what he was saying that Gentiles were to be included in the fulfillment of these Old Testament passages.

When the Pharisees requested a spectacular sign from Jesus he responded saying that there would be no sign given but of Jonah the prophet, making a prediction of his own death and resurrection. This is followed by two

¹Cf. Matt. 10:27; 11:4-5,15; 12:19,42; 13:9,13,15-18,43.

²Wesley J. Perschbacher, ed., The New Analytical Greek Lexicon (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 13.

³Cf. Isa. 42:1-4.

references to judgment that also indicate Christ's universal plan. Jonah was the only ancient prophet sent to a Gentile nation. In Matt. 12:41 Jesus said, "The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah *is* here." More than anything the reference to the ancient Assyrian capital reflects God's compassion on the Gentiles and willingness to spare them judgment in response to their repentance.

In the second reference to judgment in Matt. 12:42 Jesus spoke concerning the witness of the Queen of the South who "came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon *is* here." In this instance the Gentile representative came to hear the wisdom of Solomon. In the former passage the Jewish representative went to the Gentiles to deliver God's message. While some may hear of his "good news" and be drawn to seek him, others will be illumined by a response to the commission and the evangelistic mission of believers.

With these indications of intention in the teaching of Jesus, Matthew sets the stage for the parables of Matthew 13. The premise of this study is that the evidence is sufficient to demonstrate that Jesus, through the kingdom parables, sought to reveal his purpose to all those who would hear and believe.

The Need for the Study

Scholarship is divided and explanations vary as to how the teaching of Jesus on the mission to the Jews and the mission to the Gentiles can be reconciled within the gospel

of Matthew. For example, Schuyler Brown suggested that a rationale be found within the composition of Matthew's community:

The difficulty in finding a satisfactory theological explanation for the contradiction between Jesus' restriction of the mission to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Mt 10:6) and his extension of the mission to 'all nations' (28:19) suggests that the gentile mission may have been an object of current controversy within the evangelist's community.⁴

J. Julius Scott, Jr. admitted there are several passages where Matthew records that Jesus either explicitly or implicitly confines his ministry to the Jews, but noted that Matthew also showed Jesus responding favorably to seeking Gentiles and commanding a mission among them.⁵ According to Scott's study, Adolf Harnack argued that Jesus was not concerned for the Gentiles and centered his appeal to the Jewish audience.⁶ Also Scott saw text-critical evidence as

⁴Schuyler Brown, "The Matthean Community and the Gentile Mission," in Novum Testamentum 22.3 (July 1980), 193.

⁵J. Julius Scott, Jr., "Gentiles and the Ministry of Jesus: Further Observations on Matt 10:5-6; 15:21-28," in Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, 33.2 (June 1990), 161.

⁶*Ibid.*, 163.