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https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_grace-theological-journal.php

THE PROBLEM OF THE MUSTARD SEED

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IN this article the author seeks to demonstrate exegetically and botanically that our Lord Jesus Christ was not merely using the language of accommodation or even proverbial language, necessarily, when he referred to the mustard seed as the “least” of all seeds. The author appeals to the language of the text, the context, and to expert testimony in the field of botany to show that the mustard seed was indeed the smallest garden-variety seed known to man in Bible times.

THE PROBLEM

Matt 13:32 (and its parallel in Mark 4:30-32) seems to be a favorite target for opponents of the inerrancy of the autographs of Scripture. In the context of this passage, Jesus, in a parable, describes the phenomenal growth of the Kingdom of Heaven. He compares that growth with the growth of a grain of mustard (σινάπεως) which is sown in a field and grows to be larger than any of the garden herbs (λαχάνων). Jesus refers to the mustard seed as the *least* (μικρότερον) of all seeds (σπερμάτων).

Daniel Fuller of Fuller Theological Seminary, arguing for cultural accommodation, states that Jesus referred to the mustard seed as the smallest of seeds when, in fact, the mustard seed is not the smallest seed known botanically to man.¹ He argues that Jesus was accommodating his language to the knowledge of the people. In short, what Christ said was inaccurate, but it met the need. Harold Lindsell refers to one of Fuller’s public lectures and writes:

Dr. Fuller alleges that botanically we know that there are smaller seeds than the mustard seed. And that is true. Then he argues that Jesus accommodates Himself to the ignorance of the people to whom He was

¹D. P. Fuller, *Evangelism and Biblical Inerrancy* (unpublished monograph, Dallas Theological Seminary, n.d.) 18. This work first came to this writer’s attention in 1968.

speaking, since they believed this. But it constitutes an error, and the presence of one error invalidates the claim to biblical inerrancy.²

Lindsell, in offering suggested solutions to the apparent problem, appeals to a suggestion made nearly a century ago by John A. Broadus. Lindsell writes:

The *American Commentary* says of this passage that it was popular language, and it was the intention of the speaker to communicate the fact that the mustard seed was “the smallest that his hearers were accustomed to sow.” And indeed this may well be the case. In that event there was no error. If the critics of Scripture wish to use the intention of the writer, this is one place it can be used in favor of inerrancy.³

An alternative appeal is made by Lindsell to Matthew Henry’s suggested reading of the passage — the mustard seed “which is one of the least of all seeds.”⁴ Lindsell does not believe that the Greek is sufficiently clear at this point to affirm that Jesus actually was saying that the mustard seed is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth. He writes:

He [Jesus] was saying it is less than all the seeds. What must be determined is what the words “all the seeds” mean here. If Jesus was talking about the seeds commonly known to the people of that day, the effect of His words was different from what they would have been if He was speaking of all the seeds on the earth. When the possibility exists for a translation that fulfills the intention of the speaker and does not constitute error, that passage is to be preferred above one that does the opposite. And when two possibilities exist, why should not the benefit of any doubt be given in favor of the one that fulfills what the Scripture teaches about inerrancy? To choose the other route leaves behind the implication that one is seeking out error and trying to establish it on flimsy grounds.⁵

Lindsell is certainly right in his position that the Bible, with such few apparent errors still unresolved, should be given the benefit of any doubts. However, his two suggested solutions to the problem do not go into sufficient detail as they stand, although they are certainly moving in the right direction. All that seems to be needed is a more detailed extension of both of his suggestions.

²H. Lindsell, *The Battle For The Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 169. Lindsell cites an unpublished paper delivered by D. P. Fuller at Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois. Quite likely this is the same work by Fuller referred to above.

³Ibid. Lindsell cites J. A. Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1886) 296.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

Several years ago (1968-69), this writer investigated the "problem" of the mustard seed.⁶ It is the purpose of this article to suggest a solution which is more satisfactory than most of the suggested solutions and which squares with the Greek text, the context, common sense, and the Bible's teaching concerning its own inerrancy.

THE SUGGESTED SOLUTION

In the NT there is a blurring of distinction between the comparative and superlative forms of the adjective.⁷ The comparative form μικρότερον appears to serve for both the comparative and superlative forms of the adjective μικρός, and only its usage in the immediate context, as Jesus understood and used it, and its use in the parallel passage, Mark 4:30-32, can determine how it is to be translated. Alford argues that the word should not be taken as a superlative and that the phrase should not be pressed too literally since the mustard seed was proverbial of anything small.⁸ Mare, in a scholarly treatment of this text and of the modern translations of the comparative forms in it, also argues for the comparative use here.⁹ He appeals to the anarthrous construction of μικρότερον in arguing his case, but such an appeal is inconclusive. Significant here is Robertson's statement:

The comparative form, therefore, has two ideas, that of contrast or duality (*Gegensatz*) and of the relative comparative (*Steigerung*), though the first use was the original. *Relative comparison is, of course, the dominant idea in most of the NT examples* [italics mine], though as already remarked, the notion of duality always lies in the background.¹⁰

Thus, since relative comparison is dominant with the comparative and in consideration of the immediate context (where it could be taken as comparative but combined with the idea of *totality*, i.e., "less than all seeds," making it *essentially* superlative, it seems best to regard μικρότερον as superlative. Mark's addition of τῶν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς in the parallel passage (Mark 4:31) would further support this. Let it be

⁶J. A. Sproule, *An Exegesis of New Testament Passages Cited As Errant By Evangelicals* (unpublished Master of Theology Thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1969) 7-11.

⁷A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934) 668.

⁸H. Alford, *The Greek Testament*, rev. by E. F. Harrison (4 vols.; Chicago: Moody, 1958), 1. 144.

⁹W. H. Mare, "The Smallest Mustard Seed — Matthew 13:32," *Grace Journal* 9 (1968) 3-11.

¹⁰Robertson, *Grammar*, 663.

granted then that Jesus *did* declare the mustard seed to be the least of all seeds. Is error involved?

The problem of error finds its solution in the kind of seed to which Jesus was referring. The mustard seed referred to was most likely the *Sinapis* (σινάπι) *nigra*, or "black mustard," cultivated to produce a useful product, namely, mustard and colza oil.¹¹ Botanically, the smallest of all seeds is the orchid seed. However, the smallest garden-variety seed (λάχανον) in Palestine, or the entire eastern world, at the time of Christ was the mustard seed. This is true today. Shinnars writes:

The smallest of all seeds are those of orchids. The account under "ORCHIDS" in L. H. Bailey's *Standard Cyclopaedia of Horticulture* has this statement: The seeds of orchids are minute and extremely numerous, the number in a single capsule have been estimated for different species from several thousand to over a million. There are 13 genera with a total of 61 species of this family described in the *Flora of Syria, Palestine and Sinai*, Vol. 2, by George E. Post (2nd ed. by John Edward Dinsmore, 1932). These are not the huge florist's kinds that the ordinary person thinks of first . . . , but they are large enough to be noticeable as wild flowers . . . *the mustard seed would indeed have been the smallest of those likely to have been noticed by the people at the time of Christ. The principal field crops* (such as barley, wheat, lentils, beans) *have much larger seeds*, as do vetches and other plants which might have been present as weeds (the biblical tares) among grain. . . . There are various weeds and wild flowers belonging to the mustard, amaranth, pigweed, and chickweed families with seeds as small or smaller than mustard itself, but they would not have been particularly known or noticed by the inhabitants. Mustard occurs both wild and planted. The seeds of basil (*Ocimum basilicum*, in the mint family) are nearly as small as those of mustard, and the plant was used in ancient times, though not so much as in later periods (medieval and modern). The only modern crop plant of importance with smaller seeds than mustard is tobacco, but this plant is of American origin and was not grown in the Old World until the 16th century and later. . . . In absolute terms, the number of species in Christ's time was almost the same as at present, the chief differences being the disappearance of some (mostly in quite modern times), and the development of hybrids or garden varieties (which aren't true species).¹²

¹¹H. N. and A. L. Moldenke, *Plants of the Bible* (Waltham; Chronica Botanica, 1952) 59.

¹²L. H. Shinnars, private interview held at the Herbarium at Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, June, 1968. Dr. Shinnars received the Ph.D. degree in Botany from the University of Wisconsin in 1943. He has served as Research Associate at the Milwaukee Public Museum and is a founding member of the Southwestern Association of Naturalists. He is the founder, editor, and publisher of the journal,

Shinners, an expert in the field of botany, has been quoted at length to show that the mustard seed in Bible times *was* the smallest *garden-variety* seed and, with the exception of tobacco, remains so today. That Jesus was referring to garden-variety mustard seed is evident from the context. His analogy is between the growth of the Kingdom and the growth of an intentionally planted seed, i.e., *garden-variety* (" . . . which a man took and sowed in his field"). In every NT instance where σπέρμα is used botanically, it is used in an agricultural sense of being sowed (cf. Matt 13:24, 27, 37; Mark 4:31; 2 Cor 9:10). Also, on every such occasion, it is used in connection with the verb σπείρω which means "to sow." The derivation of σπέρμα from σπείρω further augments the argument that Jesus' use of σπέρμα in Matt 13:32 referred to that which was planted by man. This conclusion is fully supported by both classical usage and the papyri evidence.¹³

This argument is further buttressed by the obvious association between σπερμάτων and λαχάνων ("herbs") in the text. Liddell and Scott describe λάχανον as occurring mostly in the plural and referring to garden herbs, potherbs, vegetables, and greens, in opposition to wild plants.¹⁴ Bornkamm defines λάχανον as "edible plants," "vegetables," which are grown in the field or garden.¹⁵

CONCLUSION

Therefore, it may be concluded that when Jesus called the mustard seed the least of all seeds, the reference was to *garden-variety* seeds, and *Sinapis nigra* was the smallest of all such seeds.¹⁶ This is a reasonable conclusion and it squares with both the Greek and the context of the disputed passages.

Postscript

A second defense against the claim of errancy is that Jesus was speaking *proverbially*, since the great contrast between the very small

SIDA Contributions to Botany. Dr. Shinners has been guest lecturer at the Annual Symposium on Systematics at the Missouri Botanical Gardens and at the Smithsonian Institute. He presently serves as Director of the Herbarium at Southern Methodist University, the largest herbarium in the southwest, containing more than 318,000 botanical specimens from all parts of the world.

¹³H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (7th ed.; New York: Harper & Bros., 1889) 1414; for the papyri evidence, see J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930) 583.

¹⁴Liddell and Scott, *Lexicon*, 879.

¹⁵G. Bornkamm, "λάχανον," *TDNT* 4 (1968) 65.

¹⁶Mare, "The Smallest Mustard Seed," 7.

mustard seed and its ultimate herb was proverbial of great growth.¹⁷ Proverbial language is not errant language. Scientific precision need not be expected of proverbial expressions, just as today, when newspapers announce official “sunset” and “sunrise” times without evoking a cry of “error!” Both arguments presented herein adequately show that *no* error is involved in Matt 13:32.

¹⁷H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrash* (4 vols.; München: C. H. Beck, 1961), 1. 669.