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THE SMALLEST MUSTARD SEED— MATTHEW 13:32

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It is to be recognized that the Bible is not intended to be a text book on science but rather is a written revelation of God's redemptive history, involving the fulfillment of that redemptive plan in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

However, presupposing a God of truth who has revealed a rational and inerrant written communication to his rational creature, man, we have the right to expect that this communication, the Bible, when touching on science and secular, historical matters will express such material accurately and meaningfully.

How, then, for example, is the statement of Jesus in Matthew 13:32 to be understood, a verse which sets forth the mustard seed as being "the least of all the seeds"? Is this statement scientifically accurate, the phrase seeming to express in the language and understanding of that day the fact that the mustard seed was the smallest seed, a statement which might well be disputed by a modern day botanist?¹

The Greek text of Matthew 13:32 which is to be examined in the light of the linguistic and historical sitz im leben is as follows:

ho² mikroteron men estin pantōn tōn spermatōn, hotan de auxēthēi, meizon tōn lachanōn estin kai ginetai dendron, hōste elthein ta peteina tou ouranou kai kataskēnoun en tois kladois autou.

This paper was presented at the Thirteenth General Meeting of the Midwestern Section of the E. T. S., April 19, 1968, in response to a paper by Dr. Daniel Fuller entitled, "Benjamin Warfield's View of Faith and History" (Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society, Vol. 11, No. 2 [Spring 1968], pp. 75-83). Dr. Fuller rejects Warfield's views of Biblical inerrancy and believes that Jesus "deliberately accommodated his language in non-revelational matters to the way the original readers viewed the world about them, so as to enhance the communication of revelational truth." For example, he insists that "although the mustard seed is not really the smallest of all seeds, yet Jesus referred to it as such because to the Jewish mind of Jesus' day, as is indicated by several passages from the Talmud, the mustard seed denoted the smallest thing the eye could detect" (p. 81).

It is well to observe how Matthew 13:32 is translated by some of the more modern versions. They fall into three basic categories as follows:

1. THOSE TAKING THE COMPARISON WORDS AS SUPERLATIVE

"Which indeed is the least of all seeds. . . it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree. . ." (KJV).

"It is the smallest of all seeds. . . it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree. . ." (RSV).

"It is the smallest of all seeds. . . it is the largest of plants and grows into a tree. . ." (Goodspeed).

"welches das kleinste ist unter allen Samen. . . so ist es das grösseste unter dem Kohl, und wird ein Baum. . ." (Luther).

2. THOSE TAKING THE FIRST COMPARISON WORD AS SUPERLATIVE
BUT THE SECOND ONE AS COMPARATIVE

"It is the smallest of all seeds. . . it is bigger than any plant and becomes a tree. . ." (Berkeley).

"This indeed is the smallest of all the seeds; . . . , it is larger than any herb and becomes a tree. . ." (Roman Catholic Confraternity Edition).

3. THOSE TAKING THE FIRST COMPARISON WORD AS COMPARATIVE,
BUT COMBINING IT WITH THE IDEA OF TOTALITY,
AND THE SECOND WORD AS COMPARATIVE

"Which indeed is less³ than all seeds; . . . it is greater than the herbs and becometh a tree. . ." (ASV).

"It is less than any seed on earth. . . it is larger than any plant, it becomes a tree. . ." (Moffatt).

It is evident from the variation in these translations sampled that there is a struggle to find adequate words with which to express the meaning of the Greek words.

THE GREEK COMPARATIVE AND SUPERLATIVE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In contrast to the rather distinct and separate categories occupied by the comparative and superlative in classical Greek,⁴ these two forms of comparison in the New Testament are less distinctive and tend to overlap. Actually the superlative form is on the decline in the New Testament.⁵

As to meaning and function Robertson, in noting a blurring of distinction between the comparative and superlative in the New Testament, observes that the comparative can be used when three things are compared (I Cor. 13:13) as well as be found in its usual sense of comparing two things (I Cor. 12:23, Luke 7:42f).⁶

It is to be observed further that as the New Testament superlative, besides having the normal superlative sense, like biggest, fastest, etc., can have the elative force of "very," so the comparative also may be used in the elative sense (Acts 24:22; 25:10; II Tim. 1:18; John 13:27).⁷

Robertson observes that the comparative has both the ideas of contrast or duality (Gegensatz) and of the relative comparative (Steigerung), the latter idea being the dominant thought in most of the New Testament examples, the notion of duality, however, always being in the background (cf. Matt. 10:15; II Pet. 1:19; I Cor. 11:17; I Cor. 1:25).⁸

THE MEANING OF IMPORTANT WORDS IN MATTHEW 13:32

In the discussion of the meaning of the words important to the understanding of Matthew 13:32, mikroteron is the first to be considered, being a comparative form used five times in the New Testament, two of which occurrences are used similarly in parallel passages, Matthew 13:32 and Mark 4:31. Two other uses are likewise in parallel passages, Matthew 11:11 and Luke 7:28, in which Christians are compared in greatness to John the Baptist, with the thought that, although none humanly born is greater (meizōn) than John, yet he who is "smaller" (mikroteros), or "smallest" is greater (meizōn) than he.⁹ The comparative sense of mikroteros here is to be preferred, for the comparison involves a duality between John the Baptist and another individual who, on the one hand, is considered smaller and, on the other, greater than John. Cullmann presents an interesting thought that mikroteros in Matt. 11:11 (and Luke 7:28) should be translated "younger," this being a reference to Christ as John's greater successor,¹⁰ an idea which fits the concept of John 3:30.¹¹

The last New Testament use of mikroteros is found in Luke 9:48 where "the smallest" one (ho mikroteros) among all the disciples is declared to be great (megas). The article used here may make the superlative translation preferable by specifying the one among all, but if this were the idea exclusively, it would seem that the comparative or superlative¹² form would more likely have been used than megas in the conclusion of the thought.

The comparative, meizōn, is common in the New Testament, occurring some fifty times,¹³ often used in comparing two things (as Matt. 23:17, 19; Luke 12:18; John 4:12), sometimes comparing more than two things (as John 10:29, etc.)¹⁴ and sometimes having a superlative meaning when comparing a number of things or persons (as Matthew 18:1, 4; Mark 9:34; Luke 9:46). Thus, it is evident that the testimony is mixed as to the specific usage of meizōn, the context alone having to determine its meaning whether comparative, "greater," or superlative, "greatest." In the context of Matthew 13:32 the seed, when grown (auxēthēi, effective, punctiliar aorist passive) is declared to be meizōn with respect to the lachana, not necessarily in respect to every lachanon, nor "greater" in every way, but greater by becoming dendron, tree-size,¹⁵ the duality concept¹⁶ being emphasized between the mustard seed which grows larger and the other garden herbs which at maturity are not so large.

Regarding sinapi, it is difficult to determine specifically the exact species of mustard seed called in the text kokkos sinapeōs,¹⁷ it being identified by most as being brassica (or, sinapis nigra (black mustard), but also claimed as being sinapis alba (white mustard, a view held by Dalman), sinapis orientalis (Pratt), sinapis arvensis (Dalman), salvadora persica (Royle), phytolacca decandra (pokeberry)(Frost), and phytolacca dodecandra (an Abyssinian species of pokeweed).¹⁸ At any rate, Jesus identifies it with sperma, a seed from which anything springs, but in the botany area, a seed from which a plant germinates,¹⁹ in the context being further compared not only with all spermata generally, but in particular with the lachana, a vegetable species of plants, the garden herbs, in contrast to the wild plants.²⁰

The dendron here need not be considered the timber tree, but can include tall plants (Hdt. 1.193) and such small trees as the olive tree (Ar. Av. 617). The mustard seed here would be that plant which would grow to small tree size, up to ten feet in height.²¹

Thus, this verse conveys the thought that a small seed, some species of the mustard seed, of the biological phylum, the spermatophyta,²² of which there are more than 126,000 species,²³ of that subdivision of seeds called the garden, or cultivated, herbs, has the unusual characteristic of developing from a very small size to that of tree size, not the largest tree category, but to a height considerably larger²⁴ than that to which herb seeds usually grew. Such a comparison from smallness to largeness was a fitting illustration to express an aspect of the kingdom of heaven, that is, although seen to be extremely small in its beginning, it develops into an organism of considerable size.

A RESULTANT INTERPRETATION AS TO THE SIZE OF THE MUSTARD SEED IN RELATION TO THE SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE

Some, as Daniel P. Fuller, have understood that such passages as Matthew 13:32 involve scientific error. Fuller says that Jesus found it necessary to illustrate the small beginnings of the kingdom of God,

. . .by referring to what His hearers considered to be the smallest seed (Matt. 13:32; 17:20). Although the mustard seed is not really the smallest of all seeds, yet Jesus referred to it as such. . . .

Surely God and Jesus subserved the interests of truth more by accommodating themselves to the people's understanding of botany than they would have by being as careful to be inerrant in this non-revelational matter as they were in revelational ones.²⁵

Jesus' statement in Matthew 13:32 about the size of the mustard seed need not, and has no reason to, be interpreted as contradictory to scientific evidence for the following reasons.

In the first place, although, as noted above, the orchid seed may be the smallest, or one of the smallest plant seeds, and thus smaller than the mustard seed, it is not necessary to consider Jesus' statement in Matthew 13:32 as containing scientific error since the class of seeds with which the mustard seed is associated is the garden herb group (lachana) which may possibly be interpreted as being the "all the seeds" category to which reference is made in the earlier part of the statement, "all" there being limited to the specific group (lachana) under consideration in the total context of the verse.²⁶ Since the mustard seed probably was cultivated in Palestine in ancient times, for its oil,²⁷ it may be argued that Jesus, when speaking of this type of seed, was talking about it in a comparison with all those seeds which were planted by farmers for food. Since pantōn is used with the lachana group in the parallel passage in Mark 4:31, it may be further argued that the pantōn ton spermatōn group in both Matthew 13:32 and Mark 4:31 is intended to mean only the lachana species, the "all the garden herb" group. In this limited context of garden herbs then, Jesus speaks of the mustard seed as extremely small.

With "all the seeds" being understood as limited in this way by the context, the minute orchid seed²⁸ need not be considered as being included by Jesus in His statement. It is to be observed that if Jesus had said, "The mustard seed is smaller than the orchid seed," He would have seemed to have spoken erroneously; but this He did not say.

Secondly, that the expression comparing smallness with the size of mustard seed was a common Jewish saying²⁹ argues for the fact that scientific literalness and preciseness need not be pressed upon it, it being able to be understood then, as men certainly understand it now, as a general and popular expression of smallness. Compare such sayings as, "the four corners of the earth" (Isa. 11:12; Ezek. 7:2), and "the sun rises" (Matt. 5:45) which also must not be pressed as being expressions of a technical scientific nature, being understood by all today as describing in general what men from their localized and limited positions in a material world see and experience.

However, it is to be realized that Jesus, in using the common Jewish proverbial expression of the mustard seed as a figure of smallness, did so only because the proverbial expression so used was a true and accurate statement, including those implications involving scientific data regarding the mustard seed, both as to its very smallness as a seed and to its moderate largeness when grown.

In positing the doctrine of total Biblical inerrancy, two basic principles are always to be found together (as is seen to be true in Matthew 13:32) in Biblical statements and propositions:

1. The words and concepts used are understandable to the hearers and readers. (Compare Paul's use of anēr in Acts 17:31, a term understandable to the Athenians, instead of the term huios tou anthrōpou which would rather be meaningful to those who were exposed to the Old Testament Scripture and its background.)

2. Those words and concepts used are likewise true and accurate, containing no error of fact, doctrine or judgment.

It is not that one or the other of these principles applies, but that both of them are true at the same time in all Scriptural statements, as is the case in Matthew 13:32.

Furthermore, the phrase in which mikroteron is found in Matthew 13:32 may be translated as follows, "a grain of mustard seed. . . which is a smaller of all the seeds," or, better expressed, "a smaller group (or, example) from, or, out of, the total group of all the seeds," this translation and/or paraphrase being possible because the phrase can be taken as a partitive or ablative genitive after the comparative,³⁰ and because the form mikroteron is anarthous³¹ even as kokkos sinapeōs is anarthous and translated "a grain of mustard seed,"³² and, being comparative in form, it can be taken as a true comparative in meaning, such as certain other New Testament comparative forms elsewhere are to be taken, as has been seen above.³³

If the assumption be made that the comparison expressed in Matthew 13:32 involves more species of seeds than just the garden herb group, and, if the mikroteron phrase is translated, "a smaller group (or, example) out of all the seeds," then, in such a context, the mustard seed species would compare favorably with the orchid seed species, as being another example, along with the orchid, of "a smaller seed group."

It is to be observed that the relative sense, "very," is a possible interpretation of comparatives in some contexts, but not in this case, since the comparative here is used with a following genitive rather than as an adverbial modifier of the verb, as is seen in the relative comparatives in Acts 24:22; 25:10; II Tim. 1:18; John 13:27 (also MS D, Acts 4:16³⁴ and 10:28), where the idea of "very" fits.

An additional argument for taking mikroteron as comparative in meaning is that it is thus parallel in meaning, as well as form, with the succeeding comparative, meizōn, which a number of the versions take also as comparative in meaning, translating it, "bigger," "larger," "greater,"³⁵ the complete comparative picture in the verse thus agreeing with Robertson's thought that "the notion of duality always lies in the background" of the comparative.³⁶

Even if mikroteron be taken as superlative in meaning, the verse still need not be interpreted as teaching that the mustard seed is exhaustively the smallest of the seeds, inasmuch as being anarthous, it may be translated, "a smallest group out of all the seeds."

At any rate, mikroteron taken either comparatively or superlatively in the manner suggested above may, together with the whole ho relative clause, be properly interpreted as teaching that the seed mentioned (sinapi), whatever its specific nature,³⁷ is to be thought of as

a seed group which develops into a plant larger than the garden herbs (lachana) with which class it seems to be a part, and also which begins in its growth as a very small seed (as presumably other lachana begin) being "a smaller" or "a smallest" seed of all the seed groups (pantōn tōn spermatōn).³⁸

Therefore, on the basis of the above discussion, it is not necessary to consider that Matthew 13:32 in its sitz im leben includes a botanical scientific error, since the text can be culturally, historically and linguistically interpreted as describing scientific phenomena in general, but accurate, terms which agree with current Greek syntax and are readily understandable in this terminology as presenting that which men ordinarily see and experience in the material world, this text being an accurate and adequate expression of truth coming from a God of absolute truth who has revealed Himself through the propositional truth of the Bible.

DOCUMENTATION

1. Compare Moldenke's remarks about the orchid seeds "now usually regarded as the smallest in the world, being actually as fine as powder." H. N. Moldenke and A. L. Moldenke, Plants of the Bible (Waltham, Mass.: Chronica Botanica Company, 1952), p. 61.
2. Mark 4:31 in the parallel passage has the masculine relative pronoun, hon, which strictly agrees grammatically with the masculine, kokkos, whereas Matthew is evidently thinking more of to sperma and so uses the neuter, ho. See W. C. Allen, Gospel According to S. Matthew, in the International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907) p. 151. The text of Mark 4:31 is much the same in Greek, but it is to be noted that pantōn there is also used with tōn lachanōn.
3. Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 5th edition says under "less," "syn. less, smaller, fewer. Less (opposed to greater, more) refer esp. to degree, value, or amount; smaller (opposed to larger) esp. to size, dimensions, or amount. . . ."
4. H. W. Smyth, Greek Grammar, rev. by G. M. Messing (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 278-283.
5. F. Blass and A. Debrunner, A Greek Grammar of the New Testament, translated and revised by R. W. Funk (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 33. A. T. Robertson, A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research, 3rd ed. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1919), p. 28.
6. Robertson, op. cit., p. 668; and J. H. Moulton, A Grammar of New Testament Greek, 3rd ed., Vol. I (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908), p. 236.
7. Compare the superlative, elachistos, in Luke. Moulton, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 236.
8. Robertson, op. cit., p. 663.
9. These two passages are identically word for word in the Greek text except that Matt. 11:11 has tōn ouranōn instead of tou theou found in Luke 7:28.
10. Blass-Debrunner, op. cit., Par. 61, p. 33, notes this idea of O. Cullmann, Con. Neot. 11 (1947) 30, which they say was also the concept of Franz Dibelius.

11. Compare Luke 22:26 where D it vg^{c1} sy sa have mikroteros instead of neōteros, providing the interesting suggestion that the former word in the comparative might be considered equivalent to the meaning in neōteros.
12. Regarding comparison forms of meγas, Moulton (op. cit., Vol. I, p. 78) observes that megistos "is practically obsolete in Hellenistic: its appearance in II Peter is as significant as its absence from the rest of the New Testament."
13. Robertson, op. cit., p. 277.
14. However, this usage could be interpreted as expressing duality, two classes again being compared, the Father on the one hand, all other beings and forces on the other. Compare also in this connection John 14:12; Hebrews 11:26; III John 4.
15. Compare J. A. Broadus, Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1886), p. 296.
16. Robertson, op. cit., p. 663.
17. W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, 4th revised edition. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), "sinapi"; A. Plummer, An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew (London: Robert Scott Roxburghe House, 1915), p. 194.
18. Moldenke, op. cit., pp. 59-61.
19. J. H. Thayer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, rev. (New York: American Book Company, 1889), "sperma."
20. Lachanon is from lachainō, to dig; thus developed the idea of herbs grown on cultivated (dug-up) land. Thayer, op. cit., "lachanon."
21. Thayer, op. cit., "sinapi"; Moldenke, op. cit., p. 60.
22. Webster's New International Dictionary, 2nd ed., unabridged (Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1956), "plant."
23. Webster, op. cit., "spermatophyta."
24. It is not necessary to assume that the sinapi when grown was large enough and strong enough to be a nesting place for birds. All the verb kataskēnoō ("settle") need imply is that small birds temporarily perched on its branches. See Moldenke, op. cit., p. 61.
25. Daniel P. Fuller, "Benjamin B. Warfield's View of Faith and History," pp. 10, 11, a paper presented at the Nineteenth Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Dec. 27-29, 1967, Toronto Bible College, Toronto, Canada, and published in the Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Spring, 1968), pp. 75-83 (see pp. 81 and 82).
26. Compare, for example, "all" limited by the context in John 6:37 and John 12:32.
27. Moldenke, op. cit., pp. 59, 61.
28. A number of kinds of orchids were known to be native to Palestine. Moldenke, op. cit., p. 61.
29. Plummer (op. cit., p. 194) says, "'small as a mustard seed' was a Jewish proverb to indicate a very minute particle." See also H. Alford, The Greek Testament, Vol. I (New York: Harper and Bros., 1859), p. 132; H. A. W. Meyer, The Gospel of Matthew (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1884), p. 259; H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, Kommentar Zum Neuen Testament, 4th unchanged ed., Vol. I (München: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1965), p. 669.
30. Actually the partitive and ablative genitives frequently blend into one another. See Robertson, op. cit., p. 519. Examples of the partitive genitive are tous ptōchous tōn

hagiōn (Rom. 15:26) and hoi loipoi tōn anthrōpōn (Luke 18:11); and, of the ablatival genitive used after the comparative form, which construction is common in the New Testament are, ischuroteros mou (Matt. 3:11) and mikroteron hon pantōn tōn spermatōn (Mark 4:31), this latter example suggested by Robertson being in the parallel passage on the mustard seed. Robertson, op. cit., p. 516.

31. The other three uses of mikroteros (aside from Matt. 13:32 and its parallel, Mark 4:31) to which reference has been made above, Matt. 11:11, Luke 7:28; 9:48, all have the article and are to be translated, "the smaller" (possibly, "younger," Matt. 11:11), or "the smallest."
32. It is to be noted that the anarthrous form, kokkos, in Matt. 13:31 is generally translated "a grain. . .," as is evidenced by the KJV, RSV, Luther, R.C. Confraternity Edition, and the ASV.
33. Compare meizōn used in the true comparative sense in Heb. 11:26; and John 14:12.
34. Moulton, op. cit., p. 236.
35. See the following English versions: Berkeley, Roman Catholic Confraternity Edition, ASV, and Moffatt's translation.
36. Robertson, op. cit., p. 663.
37. H. Alford, The Greek Testament, Vol. I (New York: Harper and Bros. 1859), p. 132.
38. Blanchan has said, ". . . the comparison between the size of a seed and the plant's great height was already proverbial in the East when Jesus used it. . . ." Through Moldenke, op. cit., p. 60.