

GOD AS THE AGENT OF KINGDOM GROWTH: AN ARGUMENT FOR DIVINE PASSIVES IN MATTHEW 13:32, 33

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Abstract: *Matthew frequently utilizes a literary and rhetorical device known as the *passivum divinum* (divine or theological passive) to indicate with subtlety the activity and work of God. Two possible cases found in Matthew 13:32, 33, however, are often overlooked. Based on Matthew's historical-biblical convictions of God's sovereignty even over everyday events and a thorough study of Matthew's use of divine passives, this article will demonstrate that ἀύξήθη in the parable of the mustard seed and ἐξυμώθη in the parable of the leaven should also be interpreted as divine passives. This conclusion carries implications for understanding Jesus's teaching on the kingdom of heaven. God grows the kingdom of heaven from something miniscule into something unexpectedly great and powerful. God also causes the kingdom of heaven to transform everything it touches. These truths carry both theological and practical implications.*

Key words: *Gospel of Matthew, Parable of the Mustard Seed, Parable of the Leaven, divine passive, kingdom parables, kingdom of heaven, kingdom growth, sovereignty of God*

Matthew frequently utilizes a literary and rhetorical device known as the *passivum divinum* (divine or theological passive) to indicate with subtlety the activity and work of God.¹ By using both divine active and divine passive verbs Matthew “announce[s] God’s past, present, and future dealings with human beings.”² This Gospel is a divinely directed story. Even where God is not explicitly mentioned, he is there, bringing about his will and ushering in his kingdom to earth.³ While the exact

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¹ The divine passive is not a way for authors or speakers to avoid using the name of God (i.e. not a reverential circumlocution). Instead, Matthew uses it as a rhetorical or stylistic technique. The term divine passive or *passivum divinum* is used simply to indicate that God is the unstated agent of the action that occurs. Wallace is probably correct when he states that the divine passive is most likely a subcategory of the larger category of agentless passives. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 438. See also Stanley E. Porter, “Commentaries on the Book of Romans,” in *On the Writing of New Testament Commentaries: Festschrift for Grant R. Osborne on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday* (ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel and Stanley E. Porter; TENTS 8; Leiden: Brill, 2012), 386; Wesley G. Olmstead, *Matthew 1–14: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Baylor Handbook on the Greek NT; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 77.

² Robert L. Mowery, “What Does God Do? Divine Actives and Divine Passives in the Gospel of Matthew” (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the SBL, Toronto, ON, 2002).

³ For a thorough summary of the history of the study of the divine passive and its status in current debate, see Peter-Ben Smit and Toon Renssen, “The *passivum divinum*: The Rise and Future Fall of an Imaginary Linguistic Phenomenon,” *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 27 (2014): 3–24.

number of divine passives in the Gospel of Matthew is debated, many scholars recognize over fifty such occurrences.⁴

Two possible cases found in Matt 13:32, 33, however, are often overlooked.⁵ Based on Matthew's historical-biblical convictions of God's sovereignty even over everyday events and a thorough study of Matthew's use of divine passives, this article will demonstrate that *αὐξηθῆναι* in the parable of the mustard seed and *ἐξυμῶσθαι* in the parable of the leaven should also be interpreted as divine passives. This conclusion carries implications for understanding Jesus's teaching on the kingdom of heaven. It is God who grows the kingdom of heaven from something miniscule into something unexpectedly great and powerful. It is also God who causes the kingdom of heaven to transform everything it touches.⁶

I. THE DIVINE PASSIVE IN MATTHEW

Divine passive verbs in Matthew can be grouped broadly into several major categories: those found in (1) Sermon on the Mount, (2) fulfillment formulae, (3) eschatological imagery, (4) miraculous events, (5) divine impartations, and (6) other examples.

1. *Sermon on the Mount.* The Sermon on the Mount receives its own category because the concentration of divine passives in Matthew 5–7 is unparalleled in the

⁴ See Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 10–11; Julius Boehmer, *Die neutestamentliche Gottsschen und die ersten drei Bitten des Vaterunsers* (Halle, Germany: Richard Mühlmann, 1917), 20–34; Donald S. Deer, "Les constructions à sens passif dans le grec des évangiles synoptiques: Problèmes d'interprétation et de traduction" (Ph.D. diss.; Université des Sciences Humaines [Strasbourg], 1973), 50–273; and more recently Charles L. Quarles, *Matthew* (EGGNT; Nashville: B&H Academic, 2017), 13–352.

⁵ Major Matthean commentaries that do not label *αὐξηθῆναι* and *ἐξυμῶσθαι* as divine passives include W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew* (AB 26; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 169; Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew* (NAC 22; Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 219–21; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew 8–18* (ICC; London: T&T Clark, 2004), 417–24; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 526–28; Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 265–69; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13* (WBC 33A; Dallas: Word, 1993), 384–91; Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 387–89; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20* (trans. James E. Crouch; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 261–65; Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 351–53; John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 550–54; Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 525–27; David L. Turner, *Matthew* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 344–46.

⁶ All Scripture citations are taken from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

rest of the Gospel.⁷ The Beatitudes alone contain four widely recognized divine passives in the span of six verses (5:4–9).⁸ In each case the implication is that God is the agent who comforts those who mourn, who satisfies those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who gives mercy to the merciful, and who calls peacemakers sons of God.⁹

2. *Fulfillment formulae.* Ten times throughout his Gospel, Matthew uses his standard fulfillment formula (*πληρωθῆ τὸ ῥηθὲν ὑπὸ κυρίου διὰ τοῦ προφήτου λέγοντος*) with slight variations, indicating that the events and circumstances he describes fulfill what was spoken in the OT prophets (1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 27:9).¹⁰ This construction contains two different divine passives: *πληρωθῆ* and *ῥηθὲν*. *πληρωθῆ*, “it was fulfilled,” expresses God’s sovereignty over history, whereas *ῥηθὲν*, “it was spoken,” conveys divine inspiration of Scripture. Charles Quarles rightly notes, “The [construction] emphasizes that God was sovereignly orchestrating these events to fulfill his promises given through the proph-

⁷ In order to compare the frequency of divine passives throughout Matthew’s Gospel, the total word count (18,365), total number of passives (597), and total number of divine passives (67) must first be established. While the number of divine passives in Matthew is debated, for the sake of simplicity, the number of divine passives used in this article is taken from Quarles, *Matthew*. Quarles lists sixty-seven divine passives. These numbers provide the baseline frequency of divine passives in Matthew. This allows for a comparison of Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount to his other discourses. The resulting data can be displayed as follows:

Table 1

	Chs. 1–28	Chs. 5–7	Ch. 10	Ch. 13	Ch. 18	Chs. 24–25
Total Word Count	18365	1992	726	1076	669	1577
Total Passives	597	59	17	35	22	49
Passives/ 1,000 Words	32.51	29.62	23.42	32.53	32.88	31.07
Divine Passives	67	12	3	5	1	9
Divine Passives/ 1,000 Words	3.65	6.02	4.13	4.65	1.49	5.71

As can be seen from Table 1, Jesus’s five major discourses all contain a higher frequency of divine passives than the rest of the Gospel, except the fourth discourse in Matthew 18. The Sermon on the Mount contains a higher percentage of divine passives per 1,000 words than any of the other discourses. The only passage in Matthew that contains a higher frequency of divine passives is Matthew 2. Of the 458 words in Matthew 2, 4 of those are divine passives, resulting in 8.73 divine passives per 1,000 words. The reason for the higher percentage in Matthew’s infant narrative is Matthew’s desire to demonstrate that Christ’s birth fulfilled Scripture. Three of the four divine passives in Matthew 2 occur in Matthew’s fulfillment formulae and introduce OT citations (2:15, 17, 23). Divine passives found in Matthew’s fulfillment formulae receive their own category, and therefore need not be considered here.

⁸ Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 92; Quarles, *Matthew*, 50–51; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew 1–7* (ICC; London: T&T Clark, 2004), 429; Morris, *Gospel according to Matthew*, 97 n 17.

⁹ France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 168; Olmstead, *Matthew 1–14*, 77.

¹⁰ Quarles, *Matthew*, 22, 29; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7* (trans. James E. Crouch; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 120; Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1–7*, 211–12; Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 20; Morris, *Gospel according to Matthew*, 30.

ets.”¹¹ God himself spoke the words through the prophets, and God himself brought about their fulfillment through his sovereign activity among humanity.

3. *Eschatological imagery.* Divine passives also appear in passages containing eschatological or judgment imagery. Examples of this include 3:10 and 7:19, “Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire”;¹² 18:8, “It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet be thrown into the eternal fire”;¹³ 21:43, “The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits”;¹⁴ and 24:29, “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”¹⁵ The use of the divine passive in these eschatological passages confirms God’s authority and ability to judge humanity.

4. *Miraculous events.* Matthew commonly uses the divine passive to describe miraculous events. In his genealogy, Matthew intentionally shifts from the aorist active *ἐγέννησεν* (“fathered” or “begat”) to the aorist passive *ἐγεννήθη* (“was conceived”) when addressing Jesus’s birth. The grammar here “implies that God miraculously conceived Jesus by Mary, as the birth narrative will explicitly demonstrate.”¹⁶ God speaks to both Joseph and the wise men through dreams (1:24; 2:12).¹⁷ All references and predictions of the resurrection attribute the miracle to God (17:23; 27:63, 64).¹⁸ At the time of Jesus’s death Matthew uses the divine passive to narrate the miraculous events that accompany the crucifixion. The curtain is torn, the earth was shaken, the rocks were split, tombs were opened, and bodies were raised (27:51–52).¹⁹ Only God is able to carry out these miracles and Matthew rightly points to God’s ever-present activity through the use of the divine passive.²⁰

5. *Divine impartation.* Throughout his Gospel, Matthew uses the divine passive to describe instances where God, as the agent of the divine passive, gives, provides,

¹¹ Quarles, *Matthew*, 31.

¹² Joshua E. Leim, *Matthew’s Theological Grammar: The Father and the Son* (WUNT 2/402; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 92; Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 184; Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1–7*, 309–11; Quarles, *Matthew*, 35; Morris, *Gospel according to Matthew*, 544.

¹³ Osborne, *Matthew*, 676 n. 9; Quarles, *Matthew*, 208.

¹⁴ Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19–28* (ICC; London: T&T Clark, 2004), 186; France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 816–17; Quarles, *Matthew*, 255; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28* (WBC 33B; Dallas: Word, 1995), 623; Graham Stanton, *Studies in Matthew and Early Christianity* (ed. Markus Bockmuehl and David Lincicum; WUNT 309; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 111.

¹⁵ Quarles, *Matthew*, 288; Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 21:1–28:20* (ConcC; St. Louis: Concordia, 2018), 1284; Morris, *Gospel according to Matthew*, 609; Albright and Mann, *Matthew*, 298.

¹⁶ Quarles, *Matthew*, 16.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 22, 27; Leim, *Matthew’s Theological Grammar*, 53; Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 31; Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1–7*, 251; Morris, *Gospel according to Matthew*, 41; France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 76.

¹⁸ Quarles, *Matthew*, 202, 345; Morris, *Gospel according to Matthew*, 451.

¹⁹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Getsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels*, vol. 2 (Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1994), 1137–40; Quarles, *Matthew*, 342; Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19–28*, 628–29; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28* (trans. James E. Crouch; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 566–67; Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 848–52.

²⁰ Timothy Wardle, “Resurrection and the Holy City: Matthew’s Use of Isaiah in 27:51–53,” *CBQ* 78 (2016): 673, 678.

and reveals in several different contexts. He gives his divine authority to Jesus the Son (11:27; 28:18).²¹ Through the Holy Spirit, God provides what the disciples are to say when they are called before courts to give an account of themselves (10:19).²² He is also the one who reveals his truth (13:35; 19:11).²³ God is actively involved in history, demonstrated through his divine giving and revelation.

These examples do not exhaust Matthew's use of the divine passive.²⁴ The purpose of this section has been to demonstrate that Matthew consistently uses divine passives throughout his Gospel to attribute many actions to God without explicitly naming him as the agent. God's activity underlies the entire Gospel of Matthew, both explicitly and implicitly.

II. AGRICULTURAL IMAGERY

A brief survey of ancient writings on agriculture and plant growth provides needed context for interpreting the parables of the mustard seed and leaven. If the biblical authors did not believe God was the agent of plant growth, then the present argument need be taken no further. Joachim Jeremias wrote, "The modern man, passing through the ploughed field, thinks of what is going on beneath the soil, and sees a biological development. The people of the Bible, passing through the same ploughed field, look up and see one of God's miracles after another, nothing less than resurrection from the dead."²⁵ Unfortunately, Jeremias communicates an inadequate perspective of the Jewish understanding of agriculture.²⁶ From the witness of Scripture, it becomes clear that the inhabitants of ancient Israel understood the nature of organic growth.²⁷ Simultaneously, however, the biblical authors viewed the fruit, crops, and plants of the earth as a blessing from God.²⁸ There is no need to dichotomize the natural from the supernatural. According to Nils Dahl, "The Biblical authors do not feel a contrast: the processes of nature are due to the wonderful work of the Creator."²⁹

1. *Old Testament.* Genesis 1:11–12 confirms a natural and supernatural understanding of agriculture. God commands the earth to sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees. The earth obeyed and brought forth all that God desired.

²¹ Leim, *Matthew's Theological Grammar*, 83–88; Quarles, *Matthew*, 120, 351; France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 445–47; Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19–28*, 682; Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 886.

²² Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 277; Quarles, *Matthew*, 103–4; Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1–11:1* (ConcC; St. Louis: Concordia, 2006), 520.

²³ Quarles, *Matthew*, 152, 223; Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 550; France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 723.

²⁴ For a detailed list of divine passives see Deer, "Les constructions à sens passif dans le grec des évangiles synoptiques."

²⁵ Joachim Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables* (New York: Scribner, 1966), 118.

²⁶ Speaking specifically about the parables of the mustard seed and leaven, Jeremias comments, "It is not the purpose of either parable merely to describe a process; that would be the way of the western mind. The Oriental thinks in a different way; he looks at the first stage and the last, seizing the paradoxical element in both cases, the two successive, yet fundamentally different situations" (*ibid.*, 117).

²⁷ Gen 2:5; Lev 25:1–7; Deut 22:9; Job 8:11, 16–19; Isa 5:1–2; 28:23–26; 61:11; Ezek 31:3–9; Hos 14:5; Mark 4:26–29; Luke 12:27.

²⁸ Gen 1:11–12, 29–30; 2:6–9; 9:3; Deut 11:13–17; Ps 65:9–11; 104:14; Isa 30:23; Jer 32:41; Ezek 36:29–30; Zech 10:1; Matt 15:13; 1 Cor 3:6–7; 2 Cor 9:10.

²⁹ Nils Alstrup Dahl, "Parables of Growth," *ST* 5 (1952): 142.

God is the source of both the plants and their growth. Genesis 2:6–9 also demonstrates this understanding of God’s creative process. God caused it to rain on the ground (v. 6), planted the garden in Eden (v. 8), and made plants grow up from the ground (v. 9).³⁰ God is the source of the growth and also the one who orders its process. Deuteronomy 11:13–17, speaking of God’s promise to give Israel a land, also shows God’s ordered care for it. He promises to maintain the seasons and to provide grass for their livestock. If the people turn away from him and serve false gods, however, he has the power and authority to seal up the heavens and prevent the land from producing life-giving fruit.³¹

Many psalms praise God for his agricultural provision.³² Psalm 65:9–11 reads, “You visit the earth and water it; you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide their grain, for so you have prepared it. You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers and blessing its growth. You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with abundance.” Reflecting on this psalm, Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner state, “It is not that the farmers had not toiled over the preparation and harvest of the crop, but they did so profoundly aware of the fact that their labors would be in vain if the Lord did not ‘bless its growth.’”³³ Psalm 104:14 declares, “You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth” (Ps 104:14). According to Charles Briggs and Emilie Briggs, this verse “combines with the narrative of the creation, Gn. 1:11–12, the thought of Gn. 3:17–19, the necessity of human labour in the ground, in order to win the products necessary for subsistence.”³⁴ While humankind must tend the earth, they cannot bring forth fruit without God’s help.³⁵

Prophetic passages that concern the new creation and the restoration of God’s people present a similar picture. In Ezekiel 36, God, speaking through the prophet, promises to restore his people from exile. He will cleanse them, remove their heart of stone, give them a heart of flesh, place his Spirit within them, and cause them to walk in his statutes and obey his rules (36:25–27). The prophet continues in 36:29b–30, highlighting God’s involvement in agricultural prosperity, “And I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you. I will make the fruit of the tree and the increase of the field abundant, that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations.”³⁶ God will redeem

³⁰ John D. Anderson and R. Sean Milliken, “A Biblical Perspective on Stewardship in the Context of Modern Livestock Production Practices,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 42 (2018): 213.

³¹ Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1–21:9* (rev. ed.; WBC 6A; Waco, TX: Word, 2001), 215.

³² See also Ps 67:1–7; 85:12; 104:14; 126:1–6; 147:1–20.

³³ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 147.

³⁴ Charles A. Briggs and Emilie G. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1907), 334.

³⁵ Regarding Ps 104:14, Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger comment, “The chain of production is retained: YHWH gives the plants, which people must cultivate so as to produce food, with God’s help.” Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101–150* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 52.

³⁶ Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 358.

his people, rebuild the ruined places, and replant that which was desolate so that the nations will know that he alone is Yahweh (36:36).³⁷ Isaiah echoes Ezekiel's images of new creation: "And he will give rain for the seed with which you sow the ground, and bread, the produce of the ground, which will be rich and plenteous" (Isa 30:23).³⁸ Jeremiah explains that not only will God bless his restored people with agricultural abundance, but after gathering them and making an everlasting covenant with them, he will also plant the people themselves in the land (Jer 32:41).³⁹

2. *Second Temple literature.* The use of a plant or a holy seed as a metaphor for the people of God appears frequently throughout the writings of the Second Temple period, especially in the books of 1 Enoch and Jubilees. First Enoch, which was compiled over several centuries, provides valuable insight into Jewish thought during the late Persian and early Greek periods.⁴⁰ One of the major themes of 1 Enoch concerns the final judgment and the separation of the righteous from the wicked. After all sin on earth is removed, the eternal plant of righteousness will appear. This arrival will precipitate God's planting trees and vines, which he will bless.⁴¹ A passage of particular interest for the present article is 1 Enoch 5:1b–2. When considering trees and their growth, the author reflects, "Examine all these works (of creation) and reflect that God who lives forever and ever has created all these works. And all his works which he has made for ever attend on him year by year; and all his works serve him and do not change, but all perform his commands."⁴² God is the source of all creation, of all trees and their fruit. His creation obeys his commands, grows, and produces fruit.

The book of Jubilees recounts the biblical account from creation to Sinai (Genesis 1–Exodus 12). Similar to the book of 1 Enoch, Jubilees provides contextual insight to the social crisis experienced by the Jews surrounding the Maccabean revolt.⁴³ Since the book of Jubilees is dependent upon 1 Enoch, it is not surprising that an eschatological theme illustrated with planting imagery is also found throughout. Those who are chosen by God and follow his ways will be "transplanted into a garden oasis, a new Eden."⁴⁴ In chapter 21, the author recounts Abraham's instructions to his son Isaac. If Isaac remains rejects evil and faithful to God, "He will bless you in all your deeds, and he will raise up from you a righteous plant

³⁷ Ibid., 363–64.

³⁸ See also Isa 45:8 and 61:11.

³⁹ Peter Y. Lee notes, "Jeremiah 30–33 is the blessed word of hope of the new covenant that will 'build' and 'plant' the people back in their homeland; the Lord will accomplish this through his messianic King, the 'Branch' of David." Peter Y. Lee, "Jeremiah," in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised* (ed. Miles V. Van Pelt; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 282. In Jeremiah 30–33, the prophet also speaks of God multiplying his people and rejoicing in doing them good. For parallels in Second Temple literature, see also 1 Enoch 62:8; 84:6; 93:10.

⁴⁰ Jennifer Metten Pantoja, *The Metaphor of the Divine as Planter of the People: Stinking Grapes or Pleasant Planting?* (BIS 155; Leiden: Brill, 2017), 183.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Matthew Black, *The Book of Enoch, or, 1 Enoch: A New English Edition with Commentary and Textual Notes* (SVTP 7; Leiden: Brill, 1985), 27.

⁴³ Pantoja, *Metaphor of the Divine as Planter of the People*, 186.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

in all the earth throughout all the generations of the earth” (Jub. 21:24).⁴⁵ Those who turn away from God “will be uprooted and exterminated without descendants, but Isaac will be the root of a true or righteous plant that will remain on the earth forever—the father of an eternal line.”⁴⁶ God himself raises up and grows the plant, causing it to spread throughout the earth.

Shozo Fujita believes that for both 1 Enoch and Jubilees, God’s raising of the righteous plant is “one of the most important component events in God’s plan of world history.”⁴⁷ He goes on to argue that the image of the righteous plant “intends to underscore God’s sovereignty over people, i.e. his initiative of planting, his ownership, his protection and also his right of disposal. The metaphor calls for absolute dependence on God.”⁴⁸

3. *Gospel of Matthew*. In the Gospel of Matthew, the author typically uses plant and bread imagery in three ways: (1) to demonstrate God’s sovereignty over nature and his gracious provision;⁴⁹ (2) to illustrate the fruit of the kingdom work God is accomplishing;⁵⁰ and (3) in connection with judgment, eschatology, and Christ’s second coming.⁵¹ God is aware of what his people need. God causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on both the evil and the good alike (5:45), both of which were necessities for crop growth and for human life. Matthew recognizes the absolute dependence people have on God for their survival.⁵² After writing about God’s provision of food in 6:25–27, he uses a plant metaphor to describe how God provides clothing for his people: “And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?” (6:28–30). In the same way that God clothes the grass with the lilies of the field, he will also clothe his people.⁵³ Matthew presents God as the one who causes both the grass and the lilies to grow.⁵⁴

A full harvest represents the salvation of people and the growth of the kingdom of heaven.⁵⁵ Matthew 9:37–38 reads, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers

⁴⁵ Trans. O. S. Wintermute, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2 (ed. James H. Charlesworth; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 96–97. See Table 13 in Pantoja, *Metaphor as Divine Planter of the People*, 187–88, where she lists further passages in Jubilees that refer to the people of God with plant and planting imagery: *Jub.* 1:15b–16; 7:34; 12:4; 15:28; 15:34; 16:17b–18, 26; 21:22, 24; 36:6–7

⁴⁶ James C. VanderKam, *Jubilees: A Commentary on the Book of Jubilees 1–21* (ed. Sidnie White Crawford; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), 645.

⁴⁷ Shozo Fujita, “The Metaphor of Plant in Jewish Literature of the Intertestamental Period,” *JSJ* 7 (1976): 34.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴⁹ Matt 6:28–30; 12:1–8; 14:13–21; 15:26–28, 32–39.

⁵⁰ Matt 9:37–38; 13:3–23, 31–35; 21:43.

⁵¹ Matt 3:10, 12; 7:15–20; 9:37–38; 12:33; 13:24–30, 36–43; 15:13–20; 20:1–16; 21:33–41; 23:23; 24:32–35, 40–42; 25:26.

⁵² Nolland, *Gospel of Matthew*, 268–69.

⁵³ Turner, *Matthew*, 199–200.

⁵⁴ Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 164–65.

⁵⁵ France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 373–74.

are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” The harvest belongs to God. He is the source of its growth, and he has the authority to send workers to harvest it.⁵⁶ The parable of the sower (13:3–23) also uses plant imagery to illustrate that although not all receive and accept the truths of the gospel, God’s work results in the exponential growth of his kingdom.⁵⁷ These parables begin to overlap with Matthew’s third use of plant imagery involving the end of the age. In 3:10, John the Baptist engages the imagery of an axe already laid to the root of the trees as he announces the arrival of God’s judgment on those who are not producing spiritual fruit.⁵⁸ Other passages that fit under this category include the parable of the wheat and the tares (13:24–30, 36–43), the parable of the mustard seed (13:32–33), and Matt 15:13, which reads, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up.” In all these passages God’s work can be clearly seen either implicitly or explicitly. He is the power, source, and cause of kingdom growth.

4. *New Testament.* Matthew is not the only NT writer to use agricultural metaphors that express divine agency. The Gospel of John contains one of Jesus’s best-known illustrations containing agricultural imagery. In John 15:1–6, Jesus compares himself to the true vine in his seventh “I am” saying. Here Jesus demonstrates that anyone wishing to produce fruit must abide in him.⁵⁹ “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:4–5). Jesus speaks of spiritual fruit, but the principle remains the same. Unless a person or a branch is connected to the source of life, it cannot bear fruit. God is the source of all fruit.⁶⁰ Branches that do not bear fruit, in both a natural and spiritual sense, are cut off and thrown into the fire (15:6).⁶¹

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul makes even more explicit creation’s absolute dependence upon God: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gives the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth” (1 Cor 3:6–7).⁶² Ciampa and Rosner put it this way: “Our impersonal view of the laws of nature prevents us from feeling the force of Paul’s analogy. We tend to think of the growth of plants as automatic: if the soil, seed, and nutrients are right, and there is enough rain and sun, the crops grow; it is as simple as that. However, Paul’s notion that God causes the flora on earth to grow is firmly

⁵⁶ Morris, *Gospel according to Matthew*, 239–40.

⁵⁷ Osborne, *Matthew*, 515–17.

⁵⁸ France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 112.

⁵⁹ Edward W. Klink, *John* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 650–54.

⁶⁰ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 517.

⁶¹ J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 806–8.

⁶² Anthony Thiselton notes that Paul first uses the aorist tense form in 1 Cor 3:6a: ἐγὼ ἐφύττευσά, Ἀπολλῶς ἐπότισεν. He then switches to the imperfect tense when speaking of God’s work: ἀλλ’ ὁ θεὸς ἡρῶσεν. Thiselton believes this shift is significant: “Ministers come and go, but God’s own work continues. . . . [A]ll come and go as ministers, but God continues to give life and growth.” Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 302, italics removed. See also Ciampa and Rosner, *First Letter to the Corinthians*, 146 n. 11.

based on a Jewish theology of creation.”⁶³ This is the previously stressed belief that God is both the creator and sustainer of his creation. He creates the plant, the seeds, and also causes them to grow, as seen in the natural processes which he himself has established.⁶⁴ Paul’s words in 1 Cor 3:6–7 express “the view of the whole Bible, in regard to natural as well as to spiritual growth.”⁶⁵

5. *Church Fathers.* The Church Fathers, like Paul, were steeped in a biblical theology of creation. In his first epistle addressed to the Corinthians, Clement of Alexandria uses plant imagery that is very similar to Jesus’s use in the Gospels. He writes, “The sower goes out and casts each of the seeds onto the soil. Because they are dry and barren they decay when they fall onto the soil. But then the magnificent forethought of the Master raises them up out of their decay, and from the one seed grow more, and so bring forth the crop” (1 Clem. 24:5).⁶⁶ God, the Master, causes the seeds to grow and bring forth a great harvest. In another of his writings, Clement addresses the parable of the mustard seed. Speaking of Christ, he comments, “Wherefore He Himself, declaring Himself very beautifully, likened Himself to a grain of mustard-seed; and pointed out the spirituality of the word that is sown, and the productiveness of its nature, and the magnificence and conspicuousness of the power of the word. . . . By the little grain, as it is figuratively called, He bestows salvation on all humanity abundantly.”⁶⁷ It is through the power and gospel of Jesus that Jesus himself grows and transforms the plant, thereby providing salvation for all who would follow him.

John Chrysostom addresses both the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the leaven. Commenting on the mustard seed, he writes about the disciples and their dependence upon God: “Yea, for His Disciples were weakest of all, and least of all; but nevertheless, because of the great power that was in them, It hath been unfolded in every part of the world.”⁶⁸ The disciples did not grow the plant. According to Chrysostom, God used their weakness to demonstrate God’s divine power in growing his kingdom. Christ, working in and through them, used their actions and grew the plant in spite of their weaknesses. Chrysostom’s comments regarding the parable of the leaven carry a similar message: “Let them learn Christ’s power, seeing the verity of His deeds, and on either ground let them adore Him, that He both foretold so great a thing, and fulfilled it. Yea, for it is He that put the power into the leaven.”⁶⁹ It is the power of Christ that causes his kingdom to grow. In the same way that the flour cannot leaven itself, neither can the disciples transform the world around them on their own. It is Christ in them and his work through them that causes his kingdom of heaven to spread and transform the world.

⁶³ Ciampa and Rosner, *First Letter to the Corinthians*, 146.

⁶⁴ Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 302.

⁶⁵ Ciampa and Rosner, *First Letter to the Corinthians*, 146.

⁶⁶ 1 Clem. 24:5 (Ehrman, LCI).

⁶⁷ Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 1.11 (ANF 2:234).

⁶⁸ Chrysostom, *Hom. Matt.* 45 (NPNF³ 10:289).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

6. *Summary of agricultural imagery.* The purpose of this brief survey is to demonstrate that a biblical view of plant growth finds God both as the source and sustainer of growth. God creates the plant and causes it to grow. He has also established the natural order of plant growth. This view can be observed from the first chapter of the OT through the teachings of the Church Fathers. The image of God as the power and cause of growth lends itself as a perfect image of the spiritual spread and growth of the kingdom of heaven.

III. PARABLES OF THE MUSTARD SEED AND LEAVEN

The crux of this article comes down to whether or not *ἀύξηθῆ* (3rd sg. aor. pass. ind.; “it was grown”) and *ἐξυμώθη* (3rd sg. aor. pass. ind.; “it was leavened”) can be interpreted as divine passives. The central images of the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the leaven are both presented as a contrast of two stages. Matthew uses a *μὲν ... δέ* construction in addition to two comparative adjectives (*μικρότερον* and *μεῖζον*) used as superlatives to stress the contrast between the microscopic mustard seed and the large mustard tree.⁷⁰ The *μὲν* clause anticipates the *δέ* clause, which contains the more significant development and emphasis of the parable.⁷¹ A mature mustard plant could grow up to a height of eight to twelve feet.⁷² The tiny mustard seed was therefore the perfect image for depicting the insignificant manner of the beginnings of the kingdom of heaven, and the glorious form it will assume at Christ’s second coming.⁷³ Similarly, the unique emphasis and contrast within the parable of the leaven, according to R. T. France, “is the expansion which [the leaven] causes in the new dough. So the kingdom of heaven ... has a dramatic effect on society.”⁷⁴ While the transformations in these parables do not go beyond the realm of possibility, their heightened contrasts certainly border on the extravagant.⁷⁵ The kingdom of heaven will grow far beyond expectations, especially when compared to its inauspicious beginnings.

When writing about parables of growth in the Gospel of Matthew, Dahl rightly asserts, “That only one single point is emphasized in a parable does not exclude the possibility that there may be several points of deliberate correspondence between the image and the reality which is compared to it.”⁷⁶ Since Matthew compares the kingdom of heaven to the transformation of the mustard seed and the transformative power of the leaven, he clearly envisions the growth of the kingdom with the growth of these illustrative substances. Concerning *ἀύξηθῆ* and *ἐξυμώθη* in 13:32 and 33, Matthew uses these passive forms either to indicate that no agency should be implied or to imply that God is the agent.

⁷⁰ Mark L. Bailey, “The Parable of the Mustard Seed,” *BSac* 155.620 (1998): 452.

⁷¹ Olmstead, *Matthew 1–14*, 48.

⁷² Morris, *Gospel according to Matthew*, 352.

⁷³ Jack Dean Kingsbury, *The Parables of Jesus in Matthew 13: A Study in Redaction-Criticism* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1969), 79.

⁷⁴ France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 528.

⁷⁵ Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (2nd ed.; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 393.

⁷⁶ Dahl, “Parables of Growth,” 137.

It was demonstrated earlier that Matthew uses the divine passive throughout his Gospel but especially when referring to eschatological events. Both the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the leaven conclude with an eschatological illustration of the kingdom of heaven. The authors of the OT, Second Temple literature, the NT, and even the early Church Fathers attribute the growth of plants and other natural processes to God. In light of both the internal and external evidence, it seems best to interpret Matthew's use of both ἀύξηθῆναι and ἐξυμώθη as twofold: to avoid interrupting the flow and imagery of the parable and to hint at God's unexpressed agency. While the focus of these parables rests on the mustard seed and the leaven, God's presence and involvement as the unstated agent remains significant. Matthew uses the passive verb form both for stylistic effect and to indicate God's invisible divine activity in the growth of the mustard seed and leavening process of the flour.

Warren Carter and John Paul Heil summarize God's divine activity in these two parables. Concerning the grain of mustard they write, "When it has grown (ἀύξηθῆναι) by the creative activity of God, [it] becomes a kingdom (tree) great enough to embrace the people of the world."⁷⁷ Speaking of the leaven, they conclude, "From the leaven (ζύμη) that a woman hides in three measures of flour, an enormous quantity, the 'whole' (ὅλον) is leavened (ἐξυμώθη) by God."⁷⁸ Neither the field nor the flour is able to transform itself. God is the one who causes the seed to take root and grow into a tree. It is also God who causes the leaven to transform the entire amount of flour. God is actively at work in growing, governing, and bringing about his transformational heavenly kingdom.

IV. IMPLICATIONS

If ἀύξηθῆναι and ἐξυμώθη are both divine passives, what sort of theological and practical conclusions can be made and what further implications may warrant additional study?

1. *Theological implications.* The primary and most obvious conclusion that can be drawn from these divine passives concerns the sovereignty of God. God alone is sovereign over the heavenly kingdom, and only he can break into human history and usher in his kingdom on earth.⁷⁹ In the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven, Jesus presents a great contrast between the insignificant and minute beginnings of the kingdom and its glorious transformation at the end of the age.⁸⁰ It will be far greater and far grander than anyone could imagine. Jesus's parables also demonstrate the certainty of this glorious transformation. This guarantee is not founded upon the ingenuity, creativity, or faithfulness of the work of Christians. Rather, this guarantee is founded upon the sovereignty of God to bring about his will. J. D. Kingsbury observes, "Just as leaven initiates a process that is independent

⁷⁷ Warren Carter and John Paul Heil, *Matthew's Parables: Audience-Oriented Perspectives* (CBQMS 30; Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association, 1998), 81.

⁷⁸ Carter and Heil, *Matthew's Parables*, 81.

⁷⁹ Jeannine K. Brown and Kyle Roberts, *Matthew* (THNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 285.

⁸⁰ Kingsbury, *Parables of Jesus in Matthew 13*, 79.

of man's control, so God alone determines the course of events that will culminate in the manifestation of his splendid Kingdom."⁸¹ In his sovereignty, God has predetermined the series of eschatological events that will culminate in the inbreaking of his heavenly kingdom and the total transformation of his creation.⁸²

This assurance that kingdom growth lies in God's hands is closely related to the means he uses to achieve his divine will. Matthew concludes his Gospel with the Great Commission in 28:18–20: "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'" Jesus calls his followers to participate in his kingdom work, yet he does not leave them on their own. He promises to be with them to the end of the age.⁸³ By sending the Holy Spirit, Jesus indwells his followers in order to work in and through them for the glory of his kingdom. Mark Bailey recognizes the Holy Spirit as the power and source of kingdom growth: "The growth of the kingdom in its interadvent phase does not result from external religious activity. Instead the growth comes by means of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. He is the invisible yet effective Agent of transforming growth."⁸⁴ This assurance still encourages Christians today, who live in between the planting of the seed and the full maturity of the mustard tree, and between the initial mixing and the complete leavening of the dough. God guarantees and oversees the outcome of his divine will through the work of the Holy Spirit.

2. *Practical implications.* These theological truths carry significant implications for Christians as they seek to discern and fulfill the will of God in their lives. While God is the one who accomplishes the work of the kingdom, he has, in his wisdom, chosen to use weak and broken vessels. First, Christians have the great privilege to serve and participate in the work of God on earth. They should prayerfully seek where God is at work around us and where he desires to use us. Second, while God uses the unique gifting and talents of his children, Christians must recognize their absolute dependence upon the Holy Spirit. William Owen Carver recognized this tension when he said, "Our Lord intends that we shall use our minds, under the direction of the ever-present Spirit of Truth, in the interpretation of revealed precept and inspired example in our missionary endeavor."⁸⁵ Christians should not put their faith in their own creativity, eloquence, or excellence as they seek to fulfill God's will in their lives. Instead, they need to humble themselves and submit to the authority and direction of the Holy Spirit. Third, the divinely guaranteed outcome should fill Christians with great hope. No matter how insignificant and unfruitful a person's work may appear, God will fulfill his ultimate plans, and redeem for himself a people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. With this hope, Chris-

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁸² Dahl, "Parables of Growth," 149.

⁸³ Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19–28*, 687.

⁸⁴ Mark L. Bailey, "The Doctrine of the Kingdom in Matthew 13," *BSac* 156.624 (1999): 446.

⁸⁵ William Owen Carver, *Missions and the Kingdom of Heaven* (Louisville: J. P. Morton & Co., 1898), 5.

tians ought to be filled with compassion for the lost and encouraged to boldly proclaim the gospel in the name and power of Jesus Christ.

3. *Further implications.* Matthew's conviction of God's sovereign activity underlying his Gospel may be a larger theme than previously recognized. If indeed 13:32–33 includes two divine passives that have been overlooked, might there be other passages in Matthew's gospel that need closer inspection?⁸⁶ Matthew's use of the *passivum divinum* may be an intentional stylistic choice in order to demonstrate God's sovereign activity throughout his Gospel.

One example of this implication may be seen in 27:51–53. Several scholars have considered this passage to be a scribal interpolation.⁸⁷ Quarles has demonstrated that the passive verbs in this passage should be interpreted as divine passives. God is the one who split the temple veil, shook the earth, split the rocks, opened the tombs, and raised the dead.⁸⁸ In two verses, the author uses the *passivum divinum* five times, implying that these supernatural events are enacted by God. As in 13:32–33, naming God as the stated subject of these five verbs may have distracted from the flow of the narrative. Here it is possible—and even likely—that the author uses divine passives in order to emphasize the supernatural events accompanying Christ's crucifixion, while subtly and explicitly conveying that God is the agent of these events.⁸⁹ If Matthew consistently uses divine passives throughout his Gospel to highlight a theological theme of God's sovereignty, this could provide further evidence to support the claim that 27:51–52 is original to the Gospel rather than a later scribal addition.

V. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to survey the concept of agricultural growth in the Bible and in ancient literature, document Matthew's regular use of the divine passive, and comment on both the immediate context of the parable of the mustard seed and leaven, as well as on the greater themes within the Gospel of Matthew. Taken together, the cumulative evidence supports the interpretation of ἀβέβηθη (“it was grown”) and ἐζυμώθη (“it was leavened”) in 13:32–33 as divine passives. While Christ followers have the privilege of participating in the work of the kingdom, the growth of the kingdom and its transformative nature belong to God alone. Jesus

⁸⁶ Some examples not explicitly mentioned by Quarles in *Matthew* that might prove fruitful are found in 5:23, 29; 6:7; 8:12; 9:15, 25; 10:22; 12:31–32, 37, 39, 42; 13:12, 30, 35; 16:19, 21; 17:2, 9; 18:9, 18; 19:25; 20:18, 19; 21:19, 20; 23:12; 24:7, 30, 40, 41; 25:29, 32, 34, 41; 26:2, 24, 28, 32, 42, 54, 75; 28:6. Interestingly, many of these passives are in a judgment/eschatological context and in the passion narrative. They may point to God's sovereign authority as judge and his sovereignty over the events of the passion.

⁸⁷ See Charles L. Quarles, “Matthew 27:52–53 as a Scribal Interpolation: Testing a Recent Proposal,” *BBR* 27 (2017): 207–9, esp. 207 n. 1 and 208 n. 2.

⁸⁸ Charles L. Quarles, “Matthew 27:51–53: Meaning, Genre, Intertextuality, Theology, and Reception History,” *JETS* 59.2 (2016): 272.

⁸⁹ Wesley G. Olmstead, *Matthew 15–28: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Baylor Handbook on the Greek NT; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 389. While Olmstead believes that the divine passive is a “questionable grammatical category,” he nonetheless agrees that God is the unstated agent of the five aorist passive verbs in 27:51–52. See footnote 1.

chose to use the twin parables of the mustard seed and leaven to communicate this great and mysterious truth. God is actively ushering in his heavenly kingdom to earth and will one day bring about its glorious fulfillment at the second coming of Christ.