not stand in one of the two great blocks of teaching material (chs. 4 and 13). My approach will be to study the six major parables as “texts” and then to ask how they fit into the major theological themes of the Gospel of Mark.

PARABLES AND THE MYSSTERY OF THE KINGDOM:
MARK 4

A cursory glance at Mark 4 discloses a composition of different elements.4

4:1–2 An elaborate, scenic introduction
4:3–9 The parable of the Sower
4:10–12 Private instruction on the reason for speaking in parables to “those who were about him with the twelve”
4:13–20 The allegory of the seeds
4:21–25 Four sayings that have parallels in the Q tradition (i.e., material common to Mark and Luke, but not in Matthew);5

4:26–29 The parable of the Seed Growing Secretly
4:30–32 The parable of the Mustard Seed
4:33–34 Concluding sayings on the reason for speaking in parables.


5. Throughout this work I follow the generally admitted “two source theory”—that Matthew and Luke in composing their Gospels used as a source Mark and a collection, mainly of sayings of Jesus (roughly 235 verses), not found in Mark, which has been called Q. The classic exposition of this theory in English is Streeter, The Four Gospels. See also Kümmel, Introduction. This theory has been attacked in recent years, especially by Farmer (The Synoptic Problem and “Modern Developments”). The attacks exact more from the two source theory than the data allow. Also, adherents of the two source theory generally admit that traditions often existed in both written and oral forms, so that, for example, Matthew and Luke, even when following Mark, could have access to an earlier oral version of a given saying. For a strong defense of the two source theory, see Fitzmyer, “The Priority of Mark and the Q Source in Luke.” Excellent commentaries on the Q material are Edwards, A Theology of Q; and Manson, Sayings. See also Kingsbury, Jesus Christ in Matthew, Mark and Luke, 1–27. For a survey of recent theories of composition within Q, see Kloppenborg, The Formation of Q, esp. 41–101; and “Tradition and Redaction in the Synoptic Sayings Source”; also Neirynck, “Recent Developments in the Study of Q.”
Aspects of Mark 4 suggest composition from elements of different traditions: the elaborate introduction of 4:1–2 with the threefold emphasis on the teaching of Jesus (4:1, he began to teach; 4:2a, he taught them in parables; and 4:2b, in his teaching he said to them); in 4:1–2 Jesus is teaching publicly, while in 4:10–12 he teaches his disciples privately; the audience shifts—in 4:33 he seems to be addressing the crowds again, while in 4:35 he speaks to the disciples. There are different introductory formulas, such as “he said to them” (4:2, 11, 13, 21, 24, 33) and simply “he said” (4:26, 30). While only one parable is given in 4:3–9, in 4:10 the disciples ask Jesus “concerning the parables.” At first glance the statement in 4:11–12 that the parables were given to outsiders to prevent their hearing conflicts with the statement in 4:33 that Jesus adapted his parabolic teaching to the hearing of the crowds. The material of the chapter is also diverse: three seed parables united by catchwords (sowing, 4:3, 4, 31, 32; seed, 4:26, 31); a saying based on Isa. 6:9–10 which itself is used in different contexts in the NT (Acts 28:26; John 12:40); an allegory of the seeds (4:13–20) which may have followed 4:3–9 in the pre-Markan tradition; and four gnomic sayings which are well attested both in the Q tradition and (for three of them) in the Gospel of Thomas. 6

Structure of Mark 4

Mark 4 has a clear structure where the important material in the center of the chapter is bracketed or framed by similar material—a technique extensively used in other parts of Mark. For example, in 3:20–21 (22–30) 31–35, the Beelzebul controversy and the saying about sin against the Spirit are framed by narratives of the relationship of Jesus to family and disciples; and in 5:21–24 (25–34) 35–43, the story of a woman who touched Jesus’ garment is framed by the cure of the daughter of Jairus. 7 Both Joanna Dewey and Jan Lambrecht have also found instances in Mark 4 of a concentric structure. 8 I will first indicate my proposed structure and then give the supporting reasons.

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The chapter is carefully composed in concentric parallelism so that the central motifs are highlighted. 9 The introduction and the Sower (4:1–9, A, B) occupy 9 verses (151 words and 17½ lines of Greek text in the Nestle-Aland 26th edition). The conclusion (4:33–34) and the two preceding parables (4:26–32, B’, A’) likewise occupy 9 verses (143 words and 17½ lines of text). This quantitative parallelism has a correspondence in content with an introduction (A) followed by a seed parable (B), while the chapter concludes with seed parables (B’) and a conclusion by the narrator (A’). The middle section also has a relation of structure and content. Both section C and C’ occupy the same space (8 and 8½ lines, 52 and 74 words, respectively), and the longest pericope in the chapter is D’ (4:13–20, 146 words and 18½ lines). At the center of this middle section and therefore of chapter 4 as a whole stands the allegory of the seeds (4:13–20).

The first striking element of this structure is that the introduction, conclusion, and seed parables (A, B/A’, B’) frame the material that is most clearly addressed to the disciples (C/D/C’). The question of the audience in the chapter is obscure. Clearly 4:1–9 is addressed to the crowds with an explicit change of audience in 4:10 (“when he was alone, those who were about him with the twelve”). Commentators generally claim that the rest of the chapter (4:11–32) is then

6. On the relation of the Gospel parables to the Gospel of Thomas, see below, chap. 3, n. 52. Parallel texts from the Gospel of Thomas are listed in Funk, New Gospel Parallels, 195–96; and Crossan, Sayings Parallels, nos. 47, 115, 144.

7. For a complete list, see Donahue, Are You the Christ? 58–59. For their literary function, see Rhoads and Michie, Mark as Story, 51.

8. Dewey, Markan Public Debate, 147–52; and Lambrecht, Once More Astonished, 86–89. My structure, though similar, differs from their proposals.

9. Even though verse counting is anachronism, since division by verses represents a late addition to the text of the NT, the number of verses gives a rough estimate of the amount of time taken to proclaim a certain text (as in oral performance) or of the space it occupies on a papyrus. My counting of lines is based on the Greek text of Nestle-Aland, 26th edition.
addressed to the disciples. The text, however, does not clearly support this. The conclusion of the chapter (4:33–34), “With many such parables he spoke the word to them,” recalls the address to the crowds in 4:2 (“He taught them many things in parables”), and the distinction between teaching “to them” (the crowds) and the disciples (v. 34) recalls a division that runs through the chapter. At 4:26 (the introduction to the Seed Growing Secretly) a change of audience is indicated by the shift from “he said to them” to simply “he said.” The formula “to them” (autoi) does not designate a specific group (disciples versus crowds) but the nearest referent of previous sayings. In 4:11, 13, 21, and 24 it refers to the disciples, while in 4:33 it refers to the “crowds” who have apparently heard the three previous parables (4:26–32). More important, the parables from 4:26–32 are explicitly kingdom parables. In Mark, Jesus proclaims the kingdom publicly and openly (1:15; 3:24; 10:14; 12:34), while its deeper nature is explained to disciples (4:11; 9:1; 47; 10:23–25). The three kingdom parables of chapter 4 are addressed to the crowds.

The material in 4:10–25 is therefore addressed to disciples, and there is also an inner connection between the framing sections 4:10–12 and 4:21–25. While 4:11 presents a favorable view of the disciples—“to you has been given the mystery of the kingdom”—in 4:12 the disciples are warned that they can become outsiders for whom everything happens in riddles. Similarly, 4:21–22 is a positive exhortation to the disciples; 4:23–25 is a warning. The challenge of discipleship is clearly a major concern of the chapter.

While the structure of chapter 4 reflects Mark’s composition and interpretation of tradition, its component parts had earlier settings and meanings. In Gospel studies it is customary to distinguish three settings or stages: (a) the setting of the life of Jesus, (b) the setting of the life of the early church, and (c) the setting of the evangelist (or author in the case of literature outside the Gospels). While our primary concern for the third stage, we will now turn to the elements of Mark 4 to study them as independent texts and to suggest some meanings in their settings prior to incorporation into the Gospel.  

11. For a discussion of these three stages in the growth of tradition, see Marxsen, Mark the Evangelist, 15–29; and Perrin, What Is Redaction Criticism?


The seed parables of Mark 4 form a relatively independent group, united by both theme and structure (B and B'). The first of these, the Sower, paints a deceptively simple and idyllic picture, narrated in the manner of a folk tale with a minimum of detail and with repetition for effect. In what seems a haphazard manner, a sower scatters seed. The parable describes the failure of three of the sowings: that on the path is devoured by birds (v. 4); that on rocky ground is scorched by the sun because it has no roots (vv. 5–6); and that among the thorns is choked (v. 7). Yet one-fourth of the seed yields a harvest that is not simply bountiful but truly extraordinary, since a tenfold yield was a good harvest, while a yield of 7½ constituted an average one.  

As a text, the parable is polyvalent; there are different options for interpretation. The common designation of it as the parable of “the Sower” is least apt, for the sower is simply mentioned and does not appear as a dramatic character; he neither rejoices in the bountiful yield nor orders it to be harvested. Nor is it a parable of the four seeds as the allegory of 4:13–20 suggests.

Concentration on different aspects of the parable has yielded fruitful interpretations. Dodd stresses that since a good harvest emerged, Jesus proclaims that now is the time to reap the fruit of the harvest.  

13. Jeremias calls attention to the difference between the time of sowing and that of harvest as well as to the discrepancy between the three failures and the great harvest. In the parable, then, Jesus assures his disciples that what God has begun in his ministry, despite apparent failure, will have ultimate success. J. Dominic Crossan treats the Sower in conjunction with the Mustard Seed, and while admitting the contrast between the failure and the harvest, he emphasizes the miracle of the harvest rather than its size. This calls attention to the giftlike nature, the graciousness, and the surprise of the advent of the bountiful harvest—all suggestive of the advent of the kingdom. It is like that, surprise and gift.

Closer examination of the movement and images of the parable
suggestions another interpretation. The first three sowings convey a rhythmic temporality. Each begins with the mention of a seed, proceeds to the situation that the seed encounters—path, rocky soil, thorns—and concludes with the failure of the seed to mature. The parable does not hurry to its conclusion, and the description of the three sowings takes seventy-three words in the Greek text. The parable achieves a dramatic effect, not by simply listing the three failures in contrast to the one great harvest but by depicting a progression in the growth of the seed. The first seed has virtually no chance of survival and is devoured before any roots are put out. The second seed seems to be growing—“immediately it sprang up” (v. 5)—but withers under the heat of the sun. The third grows higher, to a stage when the buds are almost ready, but is choked off at the last minute. This rhythmic and ascending progression involves the hearer in the unfolding mystery of growth. A natural conclusion to the parable would be that the fourth seed “brought forth grain” and the harvest was good.

The expectation of the hearer is shattered, and the rhythmic progress of nature, which lulls the hearer into acceptance, is broken in v. 8 which, though condensed into twenty-four words, explodes with verbs of motion. The seeds fell (epesei) and brought forth (edidous) grain, growing up (anabainonta), increasing (auxanomena), and they yielded (sperken) thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and a hundredfold. The contrast between a 75 percent failure and an extraordinary harvest suggests that there is no comparison between the expectation of the kingdom and its effect. But the manner in which the final verse explodes, after the lull of the previous three verses, conveys the advent of the kingdom in Jesus’ teaching and activity (cf. Mark 1:14–15) as something that shatters the way in which we feel that life normally operates and the patterns it follows.

The Seed Growing Secretly
(Mark 4:26–29)

This parable along with the Mustard Seed provides the framework of images for the middle section of chapter 4. It is found only in Mark; its omission by Matthew and Luke has long been a problem in exegesis. It is also the first parable that Mark explicitly calls a kingdom parable. Like the Sower, it admits of multiple foci for interpretation. There is an initial contrast between the inactivity of the farmer who simply scatters the seed and then returns to his rhythm of daily activity and the dynamic activity of the seed. The description of the seed as sprouting and growing, without the farmer knowing how, suggests that the central thrust is the mystery of growth. On the other hand, the earth produces “of itself” (v. 28, automen), which underscores the power of the earth and the seed. The final verse announces that the ripening of the grain is the signal for the harvest to begin so that no time should be lost: “at once he puts in the sickle” (v. 29).

Such a range of possibilities intrinsic to the text itself has produced an equally high range of interpretations. Nineteenth-century liberalism embraced this parable as the image of the hidden growth of the kingdom within human hearts and society. C. H. Dodd places the emphasis on the harvest, which suggests that the end time is realized in the advent of Jesus. Joachim Jeremias calls it the parable of “the Patient Husbandman” and stresses the contrast between the inactivity of the farmer and the certainty of the harvest. It is a parable of assurance that the final eschatological harvest already begun in the ministry of Jesus is coming and one can do nothing to hasten its arrival. Also suggested is that it countered a zealot-like desire to hasten the arrival of the kingdom through violence; patient waiting, not activity, brings the harvest.

Here I want to focus on certain aspects of the movement and images of the parable. As in the Sower, a lulling effect is conveyed by the portrait of the farmer who follows the natural rhythms of life—sleep and rise, day and night (4:27)—juxtaposed with the rhythms of growth (first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear, 4:28). Such rhythmic balancing suggests the rhythm of the times in Eccles. 3:1–9 (esp. 3:2, “a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted”), two times in alternation—God’s time and human time. In Mark 4:29, these times intersect when the grain is ripe and the harvest has come, with overtones of the eschatological judgment (cf. Joel 3:13). Now is the time for the rhythm of nature to cease and the farmer to resume activity. In this manner Jesus

16. Dodd, Parables, 141–44.
18. Ibid., 152.
proclaims the kingdom. His hearers “interlock” as they see their daily lives mirrored in the parable (see above, p. 18). God’s power and activity have their times and rhythms, and human activity does not hasten their full manifestation. Yet the hearers are summoned to think of a new time when God’s reign and time may intersect their lives and shatter the tranquil rhythms of life. Only then is the time for immediate response.

The Mustard Seed
(Mark 4:30–32 = Matt. 13:31–32;

Examining the tradition history of this parable is an aid to its interpretation. 19 The parable appears in the triple tradition (i.e., a passage in Mark that is taken over by Matthew and Luke), but the differences in the respective versions suggest that there may also have been a Q version of the parable. 20 Mark, followed by Matthew, says that the mustard seed was the “smallest” of all seeds (Mark 4:31 = Matt. 13:32). Luke (13:19) simply says the kingdom is like “a grain of mustard seed.” Mark, followed again by Matthew, says that the seed became the greatest of all shrubs (Mark 4:32 = Matt. 13:32), while Luke says that it became a tree (13:19). Mark alone states that the shrub “puts forth large branches” (4:32). Mark says that the birds of the air nest in the shade of the tree (4:37), while Matthew and Luke say the birds nest in the branches, which is more natural. While some of these differences may be explicable in terms of differences in the oral tradition, according to the normal criteria of the two source theory, when Matthew and Luke agree in disagreeing with Mark, they depend on the sayings source, Q. 21 Since Matthew and Mark agree in designating the final growth as a tree and placing the birds’ nests in the branches, many scholars posit a Q version of the parable which would be much like the present text of Luke. Matthew seems to have used both Mark and Q, which explains the agreements of Matthew with Mark (the designation of the seed as the smallest and the phrase “greatest of all shrubs”).

This complicated tradition history suggests that the three evangelists freely adapted an original parable to their own purpose. In the original version, probably close to that of Luke and the Gospel of Thomas 20, the thrust is on the contrast between the small seed and the final tree. There is a certain extravagance in this version, since the mustard seed does not really grow into a tree. This extravagance and contrast suggest that the kingdom of God is like this—small, with barely visible beginnings and hidden growth, with disproportionate and surprising results.

The allusions to different texts of the OT also enrich the possible meanings of the parable. The specific point of contact is that the birds nest (kataškenoun, v. 32) either in the branches of the tree or under its shadow. The pertinent texts are the hymn to God as creator (Ps. 104:12), the allegory of the sprig (Ezek. 17:22–24), the allegory of the cedar (Ezekiel 31), and Daniel’s vision of Nebuchadnezzar and his empire as a mighty tree (Dan. 4:10–12, 20–27). In Psalm 104 one of the beauties of God’s creation is a verdant tree where “the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches” (v. 12). The imagery here evokes other places in the OT where a verdant tree is a symbol of God’s favor (see Ps. 1:3; 92:13–15; Jer. 17:7–8). In the other texts the tree is an allegory of kingdoms or empires (cf. Judg. 9:7–15), and nesting birds stand for the subjects of imperial rule. Mark’s final verse has most direct contact with the allegorical usages.

It is impossible to know definitely whether there was a nonallegorical version. If there was, then the original version may be an allusion to Ps. 104:12 and the tree would evoke images of God’s provident care. The allegorical usage may stem from the early church’s understanding that the kingdom that Jesus came to proclaim supplanted the mighty kingdoms of history. The term “dwell” (kataškenoun) evokes images of the ingathering at the end time. The Markan version, along with its allegorical overtones, contains, however, a comic twist. 22 The place where the birds (i.e., nations) will gather is not a mighty tree but “the greatest of all shrubs,” a subtle hint that God’s kingdom is not to be like the mighty trees (i.e., empires) of old which are established through power and violence.

19. A helpful exposition is McArthur, “The Parable of the Mustard Seed.”
20. It appears also in the Gospel of Thomas 20 in a form that may be close to the original. See Crossan, In Parables, 45–49.
21. See above, n. 5.
The Seed Parables and the Kingdom Proclamation of Jesus

It is hazardous to make statements about the kingdom proclamation of Jesus on the basis of only three parables, so what we offer are elements of such a proclamation that contribute to a synthetic presentation of the kingdom. Also, as Norman Perrin has stressed, there is no one-to-one correspondence between kingdom of God and any concept or expression of it. It is a "tensive symbol," which "can have a set of meanings that can neither be exhausted nor adequately expressed by any one referent," in contrast to a "steno symbol" which has a single referent (e.g., mathematical symbols).

The "seed parables" in which this symbol comes to expression use images taken from and oriented to the mystery of growth and human engagement in it. As poetic images they are able to evoke a whole network of meanings: the mystery of growth, its hidden quality, the rhythmic and unhurried pace of nature, the need to respect the times and seasons, the urgency of the harvest as well as eschatological sitting and judgment. These images point to the ways in which God's power and presence intersect with human history. Yet the ordinary process of growth is surpassed and new meanings emerge. The harvest is extraordinary, beyond all expectation and experience (4:8): the farmer seems unconcerned about the growth of the seed, and the smallest of all seeds becomes a haven for the birds of the air.

The processes of nature tell us what the kingdom of God is "like," and alteration of these same processes shatters the mold into which we try to fit the kingdom. The familiarity of the images tells us that the kingdom is near; the improbability of the images tells us that it also transcends our attempts to define it. Jesus calls his hearers to see in his ministry the inbreaking of God's presence. The ordinary world where they dwell is to be the arena of this presence, but the kingdom has its own time and its own rhythm of growth. Jesus' hearers are to find God in his word and work, but they are to look beyond what they see to what they hope for. Failure, hiddenness, and insignificance are not the final word. The kingdom parables of Jesus are not simply Jesus' teaching about the kingdom but they are...
disciples, who are inexplicably alone with Jesus, ask him about parables when only one has been given (4:3–9). “Those outside” are not identified. Are they the crowds of vv. 1 and 33–34? The word “secret” (mystērion) occurs only here in the Synoptic Gospels.24 The quotation from Isaiah corresponds neither to the Hebrew text nor to the Greek translation (Septuagint). The deterministic theology that implies that Jesus’ teaching “hardened” the outsiders does not jibe with other aspects of Mark, such as the favorable reaction of the crowds (2:13; 5:24; 6:34; 12:17), the following of those not explicitly called to be disciples (2:15; 10:52), the praise of the unknown exorcist who is an outsider (9:38–41), and the confession of the gentile centurion (15:39). The portrayal of the disciples as a privileged group of insiders in 4:11 clashes with the repeated indications that the disciples fail to understand (6:52; 7:18; 8:31–32; and esp. 8:17–21, where the disciples, like the outsiders of 4:11, have eyes that do not see and ears that do not understand). They also fail in the face of the passion of Jesus (14:50, 71).

These verses are a constant reminder that the mystery given to the disciples remains for subsequent generations. Frank Kermode may be correct in suggesting that Mark simply leaves us with an unresolved riddle and enigma.25 At the risk of joining the ranks of the outsiders, however, I will chance some response to the questions raised by this text in terms of Mark’s theology in parable.

Excursus: The Enigma of Mark 4:10–12

The most disturbing thing about Mark 4:10–12 for many scholars has been the harsh deterministic theology put on the lips of Jesus. Our purpose is not to defend the historical authenticity of the saying but to ask whether the scandal it causes may not be due to the last residue of the Enlightenment, liberal Jesus in contemporary thought. A “reasonable” Jesus who reached out to and loved all would hardly speak in this way! If, however, the historical Jesus is seen more as a prophet grappling with the presence and power of God, such a saying is not as scandalous. Isaiah was commanded to “make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy, and [o] shut their eyes” (Isa. 6:10), and Jeremiah is called “to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow” (Jer. 1:10).

The first way in which the historical Jesus has been absolved of blame for this harsh saying is to ascribe its present deterministic thrust to a mistranslation, either of the Aramaic into Greek or of the Greek into modern languages. In favor of some Aramaic substratum is the fact that the Greek text of Mark 4:12 is closest to the Aramaic Targum (= translation) of Isaiah. Since synagogue readings were in Aramaic, Jesus would have heard and presumably cited the text in Aramaic. Jeremias proposes the following translation of the reconstructed, original text: “To you has God given the secret of the kingdom of God; but to those who are without everything is obscure, in order that they (as it is written) may see and yet not see, may hear and yet not understand, unless they turn and God will forgive them.”26 The key points in this reconstruction are the understanding of the Markan “so that” (hina) as a code word for the fulfillment of Scripture rather than direct divine purpose, and the Markan “lest they should turn” as a mistranslation of the Aramaic dišma, which can also mean “unless.” Jeremias also claims that the saying was originally meant to describe the reaction to Jesus’ ministry and teaching as a whole and not to the parables, which for Jeremias are clear ways of proclaiming the kingdom. The problem with such a reconstruction is that while absolving the historical Jesus of a deterministic purpose, it leaves us with a picture of the Markan Jesus (also the “canonical” one) who articulates such a theology.

A reconstruction on the basis of the Aramaic Targum of Isaiah is problematic, however, since its extant text dates from the fourth or fifth century A.D. An alternate mistranslation theory is to recognize that the Greek hina during this period can mean either purpose or result, so that the blinding is the result of Jesus’ parabolic teaching rather than its purpose.27 The problem of “lest” (mēpotè), however, remains unresolved by this suggestion.

The second major solution has been to accept the deterministic or predestinarian thrust of the passage but to interpret it as a saying of the early church which betrays its perspective on salvation history. This perspective is fueled by the “hardening” of the heart theology of the OT (Exod. 4:21; 8:15, 32; 9:34), which, in effect, holds that God can be rejected by human beings only because God wills such rejection. Such a perspective also fits in with the deterministic bent of apocalyptic thought where the “secrets” of history are known to God and revealed to human beings, even though the course of history is predetermined. Early Christian thinkers explained Israel’s nonacceptance of Jesus as having been willed in advance (cf. Rom. 9:16–29; 10:16–21; 11:7–10; John 12:37–41; Acts 28:25–28). Mark is thus seen to be adopting this perspective and applying it to the parables of Jesus. Though Jesus spoke in parables to win over his hearers, it was in effect willed that they would not perceive or understand. The problem with such a perspective is that in Mark 12:12 the Jewish opponents

25. See the original treatment of Mark 4 in Kermode, The Genesis of Secrecy, 23–47.
27. See Moule, An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek, 142–46. Matthew (13:13) changes Mark’s hina (“in order that”) to hoî (“because”), thus making the blindness a cause of parabolic teaching rather than its consequence.
of Jesus perceive very clearly the meaning of the parable and this intensifies their opposition to Jesus.

The third major direction for a solution to this difficult saying is through redaction criticism which explains the saying as Mark's conscious purpose rather than simply as his recording of church tradition. One approach is to interpret the saying in terms of the Messianic Secret in Mark. Here the "nondisclosure" in parable is likened to those places where Jesus forbids demons to reveal his identity (1:30; 3:34; 3:11-12), where he prohibits publicity after miracles (1:43-45; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26), where he forbids Peter's confession to be made public (8:30; cf. 9:9), and where Jesus remains hidden (7:24; 9:30) or gives private teaching to his disciples (esp. 4:10-12, 34; 7:27-28; 13:3-37). By noting this, however, one intensifies the problem, since the meaning and function of the Messanic Secret in Mark are themselves widely debated. 28

The Reason for Speaking in Parables in Mark's Context

The solution that I will propose has points of contact with the question of the messiahship of Jesus but embraces other aspects of Mark's theology. The first set of issues concerns the identity of the "you" to whom the mystery of the kingdom of God is given (4:11) as well as that of "those outside" for whom everything happens in parables. The second issue concerns the meaning of the terms "mystery of the kingdom of God" and "in parables." These observations will prompt some suggestions about the theological ramifications of 4:10-12.

The question in Mark 4:10 is posed by "those who were about him with the twelve," and in 4:11-12 the response is directed to them. These questioners are often identified in the light of 4:33-34, where Jesus explains the parables to his disciples in private but speaks to the crowd in parables. The "you" is therefore thought to be the disciples, while "those outside" refers to the crowd. Jesus thus speaks to the crowd in riddles, which he explains to the disciples in private. Problems, however, attend this interpretation, and a key

28. Since the foundational study of Wrede (The Messianic Secret), there has been a wide-ranging debate on the origin of these texts (i.e., do they represent authentic sayings of Jesus? an apologetic theology of early church? or a creation of Mark?) and on which texts should be subsumed under the aegis of the secret as well as on their theological purpose in Mark. See the essays in Tuckett, The Messianic Secret. See also Kingsbury, Christology of Mark's Gospel, 1-23; and Kilgallen, "The Messianic Secret and Mark's Purpose." S. Brown argues against interpretation of Mark 4:11 from the perspective of the secret ("The Secret of the Kingdom," 60-74).


30. The identity of hoi par' autou (RSV, "his friends") in Mark 3:21 is also disputed. In Koine Greek it frequently means family or relatives (see BAGD, 610) and is so interpreted by a number of scholars: e.g., Crossan, "Mark and the Relatives of Jesus"; and Kelber, Kingdom in Mark, 59.

to the proper meaning of the terms is found in the section immediately preceding chapter 4, which is Jesus' first discourse in parables (3:23). The latter part of chapter 3 contains an instance of the Markan framing technique. In 3:19-20 Jesus is pressed in by crowds (as in 4:1). When his family (hoi par' autou) hear of this, they try to seize him, for they think he is out of his mind (3:21). There follows the accusation by the scribes from Jerusalem that Jesus casts out demons by the power of Beelzebul, and Jesus responds with the parables of the divided kingdom and the strong man's house. This section then concludes with a solemn warning about sins against the Holy Spirit (3:21-30).

In 3:31 relatives of Jesus again appear. While the mother and brothers of Jesus are standing "outside" (exo; cf. 4:11), the crowd is sitting around him (peri auton; cf. 4:10). In both 4:10 and 3:31 we have the same juxtaposition of people around Jesus contrasted with outsiders. In 3:32 the crowd announces to Jesus that his mother and brothers (and sisters in some manuscripts) are outside "seeking" him—which often in Mark has pejorative connotations (3:17; 7:18; 12:12; 14:1). In response, Jesus turns to those around him (tous peri auton) and says, "Behold my mother, brothers and sisters! Whose does the will of God is my brother and sister, and mother" (3:34, 35, au. trans.). Given the Markan technique of framing, one can assume that the family of 3:21 seek again to restrain him. In contrast, Jesus pronounces those around him (the crowd) to be potential family members if they do the will of God. Here the terms "those outside" and "those around him" connotes the direct opposite of the common interpretation of 4:10-12. The crowds are the "insiders" who are around Jesus and receive private teaching. The intimates of Jesus are outsiders who misunderstand him. I would claim, then, that the distinction between those around Jesus and the outsiders is not between called disciples and the crowd, nor is it between Jews and Christians, but it is a distinction between those who will understand the true meaning of discipleship and those who will not. "Insiders" and "outside" are existentially, religious categories, determined
by the kind of response one makes to the demands of Jesus. One of the great paradoxes in Mark is that Peter, the one first called (1:16–17) who stands at the head of the Twelve (3:16), in his final appearance in the Gospel, goes “outside,” where he denies that he ever knew Jesus (14:68–71).

The second major issue concerns the meaning of the terms “mystery” and “in parables.” “In parables,” used frequently in Mark, is generally admitted to mean, in 4:12, “in riddles” or “enigmatic sayings” which need explanation. Also the ginētai (“is” or “happens”) suggests that the deeds as well as the sayings of Jesus are enigmatic to outsiders. The “mystery” (RSV: “secret”) of the kingdom of God does not denote, as in later Christian usage, something incomprehensible to human reason, but the once hidden, now revealed salvific plan of God now manifest in the proclamation of a rejected and crucified Messiah (1 Cor. 2:1–2, 7; Rom. 11:25; 16:25; Eph. 1:9; 3:3, 4, 9). Christian preachers, among whom we should count the evangelist Mark, are to be “stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor. 4:1).

I contend that the content of the “mystery of the kingdom” in Mark is that the reign or power of God is now manifest in the brokenness of Jesus on the cross, his hiddenness which is to be revealed. Faith in such a Jesus places one “around him.” My main arguments are the following:

1. While the citation of Isa. 6:9–10 in Mark 4:12 gives the impression that the outsiders fail to understand the teaching of Jesus, citations elsewhere of this same text deal with the rejection of the person of Jesus and his death on the cross. Acts 28:23–31 recounts the final appearance of the historical Paul. From his Roman house arrest he testifies to the kingdom of God, which is described as teaching “about Jesus” (Acts 28:23). When this teaching is rejected, Paul then cites Isa. 6:9–10. In John 12:40, after Jesus says that he must be lifted up (i.e., crucified, 12:27–36), the crowd refuses to believe in him and the narrator cites Isa. 6:10. Therefore, in Mark 4:11–12 that which causes unbelief and is a riddle to the outsider is the cross of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 1:23 where Paul describes the cross

31. For the understanding of mystery adopted here, see Boucher, Mysterious Parable, 56–63; R. Brown, The Semitic Background of the Term “Mystery”; and S. Brown, “The Secret of the Kingdom,” above, n. 28.

similarly as a scandal). For the one who will be around Jesus, this is a mystery given by God.

2. Other aspects of Mark’s theology support a relation between 4:10–12 and the cross of Christ. As noted, the mystery of the kingdom is given to those around Jesus, who earlier in 3:34 become the new family of Jesus because they are summoned to do the will of God. The will of God is not simply a general term in Mark for all that is commanded in the Torah and teaching of Jesus. In Gal. 1:3–4 Paul describes the will of God:

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father. (Italics mine)

In Mark 8:31 when Jesus first predicts his passion and death he announces that “it is necessary” (dei. RSV: “must”) that the Son of man suffer. This phrase suggests divine necessity or God’s will. When Peter rejects the necessity of suffering, Jesus rebukes him by saying, “You do not think the thoughts of God, but human thoughts” (8:33, au. trans.). Peter’s “failure” is not lack of dedication or courage but an inability to see that the passion is willed by God.32 In the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus confronts most deeply the mystery of suffering he prays, “Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup from me: yet not what I will, but what thou wilt” (14:36). The will of God in the Gospel of Mark is that Jesus suffer and die. Jesus accepts this will. Those who are to be “around him” and who will become members of the family of Jesus are to do the will of God. Peter, who ends up as an “outsider,” does not see suffering and death as willed by God. Such is the mystery which, when given and accepted, makes one a true disciple; when rejected, it makes one an outsider.

A few summary remarks here may prevent my exposition from becoming yet another riddle in an ever-puzzling chapter. The enigmatic saying of 4:10–12 occupies a central place in Mark 4 and in Mark’s theology. It may well originate in the prophetic consciousness of Jesus, who, like the prophets of the OT (e.g., Isa. 1:2–20; 6:9–13; Jer. 1:9–10), was commissioned to proclaim conversion and judgment. The result would be that some would see but not perceive;

32. On the will of God in Mark, see Donahue, “A Neglected Factor.”
hear but not understand. The early church probably adopted this prophetic proclamation to explain the rejection of Jesus by his own people (cf. Mark 6:1–6). Mark then incorporates the saying both in the literary structure of chapter 4 and in the theological structure of his whole Gospel. Mark offers to his community on the lips of Jesus the gospel of God (1:14) which is specified as the proclamation of the kingdom and the demand for belief and conversion (1:15). “Kingdom” is thus a code word for both the proclamation of Jesus and that about him. The mystery of the kingdom which God gave to the community in the gospel of Jesus is for Mark the scandal of the cross. Proclamation, Christology, and discipleship are thus intertwined in 4:10–12, perspectives that are fleshed out in the rest of the chapter.

The Allegory of the Seeds
(Mark 4:13–20)

Scholars often suggest that in the pre-Markan tradition this text followed immediately the parable of the Sower.33 In its present location it is the centerpiece of chapter 4. The introductory verse (v. 13) looks in two directions.34 “Do you not understand this parable [riddle]?” looks back to 4:10–12; “How then will you understand all the parables [riddles]?” looks forward to both chapter 4 and the rest of the Gospel. Realization that the mystery of the kingdom involves discipleship on the way of the cross is a key to all the parables of Mark’s Gospel.

The explanation of the Sower in 4:13–20 has become a parade example of the use of allegory to interpret the sayings of Jesus.35 The evidence that it springs from the early church is multiple.

“The word” used absolutely in 4:14 mirrors early Christian usage (e.g., Acts 4:4; 8:4; 1 Thess. 1:6; Gal. 6:6). Terms occur here which are not found elsewhere in the Synoptics but are frequent in other NT writings, especially Paul (e.g., “sow”[Später] in the sense of “preach,” 1 Cor. 9:11; “root” for inward stability, Col. 2:7; Eph. 3:17; “lure” of riches, Col. 2:8; 2 Pet. 2:13). The situation of both persecution and the danger of wealth does not reflect the ministry of Jesus but represents a more developed church setting. The tendency to turn eschatological sayings of Jesus into ethical ones also mirrors church development. Finally the parable of 4:1–9 is allegorized, with each detail achieving independent significance which is to be understood by insiders. Like allegory in general, 4:13–20 suggests a situation of tension or persecution (esp. 4:17).

In Mark’s context and because of its points of contact with other parts of this Gospel, the allegory receives added significance as a key to Mark’s understanding of discipleship. The different fates of the seed become images for different negative responses to Jesus and his teaching throughout the Gospel. In 4:15 the seed along the way symbolizes situations where Satan immediately snatchers the word. This situation is hauntingly similar to what happens after Jesus proclaims the word (τὸ λόγον, used absolutely, as in 4:14) that he must suffer and die (8:31–32). In the very next phrase Peter rebukes Jesus for this saying and Jesus immediately calls Peter “Satan.” In 4:17 the fate of the seed is that it has no root and when tribulation or persecution comes, they fall away (lit., “are scandalized”). In Mark, being scandalized is clearly the fate of those who were close to Jesus but who failed after a short time: the family and relatives of Jesus are initially amazed at his teaching and wisdom (6:2) only to be scandalized; the disciples, who Jesus prophesies will be scandalized when the shepherd is struck (14:27–28), flee when Jesus is arrested (14:50). In 4:19 the word is choked by the lure of riches and desire for other things. In the only “negative call narrative” in Mark, a young man refuses to follow Jesus because he had many possessions (10:22) and Jesus speaks about the difficulty the rich have entering the kingdom of God (10:23–25). The seed (word) which will bear fruit is that which is heard and accepted (4:20). This last verse functions as an example of true discipleship for the Markan community. The summons to discipleship is in the form of a call (1:16–20; 2:14–15) and its reward will be “a hundredfold” (10:30), just as the good seed bears fruit a hundredfold (4:20). The allegory of the seeds then echoes throughout the Gospel. By placing it after the revelation of the mystery of the kingdom, Mark suggests that “those who were about him with the twelve,” disciples, may become themselves outsiders.

The Parabolic Sayings (Mark 4:21–25)

In this section Jesus continues his explanation to the disciples of the riddle of the kingdom (4:11–12). Since these sayings appear in
the triple tradition (Mark, followed by Matthew and Luke) as well as in the double tradition (the sayings source or Q which Matthew and Luke share in common) and since three of them are in the Gospel of Thomas, they have a high claim to authenticity. Since they also are adapted to different contexts (cf. Matt. 5:15; 10:26; 7:2; 25:29), it is almost impossible to know their original meaning and context. Mark here links four independent sayings together (4:21–22, 24–25), punctuated by his warning about hearing (4:23; cf. 4:9).

The first saying begins with the unusual phrase “Does a lamp come in to be put under a bushel?” (au. trans.) in place of some expected word for “lighting a lamp” (cf. Luke 8:16; Matt. 5:15; Luke 11:33). The use of “come” may have a christological nuance, since the verb “to come” (erchēsthai) is used so often of Jesus in Mark (esp. 1:14, 39; 6:1; 8:38; 10:45; 14:62). The second saying (4:22), which promises that what is hidden and secret will be made manifest, picks up other motifs of chapter 4: hidden growth which will yield a rich harvest and the secret of the kingdom of God which will be manifest.

These first two sayings encourage the disciples in their mission of hearing and proclaiming the word. The second pair of sayings which also begin with a warning to hear (4:24) serve more as warnings about the dangers of discipleship. The measure the disciples give will be the measure they get. This may be an enigmatic reference to the allegory of the seeds (4:13–20), that is, that the care and zeal with which they receive the word (the measure you give) will be an index of the fruit of the harvest. The final saying, “To the one who has will more be given; and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away” (au. trans.), may refer to the eschatological judgment when the time for action is past (cf. the Talents, Matt. 25:14–30, which has the same motif in story form). In its present Markan context it continues the warning of 4:13 against improper hearing. It also repeats the motif of the Sower where the first, unfruitful budding will be “taken away,” while the fruitful harvest will be extravagant. For those who do not accept the word, even what they have will be lost; for those who accept, even more will be given them. These four sayings, then, recapitulate motifs of 4:10–12, 13–20 and with 4:10–12 provide the frame for the allegory on the demands of discipleship.

Theology and Proclamation of the Parable Discourse

By taking over various traditions, by arranging them in a definite structure, and by locating this material in chapter 4, Mark presents major theological motifs of his Gospel. A Christology emerges that not only continues the portrait of Jesus as one who teaches with authority (1:27; cf. 4:1–2) but that also proclaims that the death and resurrection of Jesus is the mystery of the kingdom. This is present in the material that precedes and follows chapter 4. In 3:23–30 Jesus is “the stronger one” (cf. 1:7) who comes to despoil the kingdom of Satan (cf. 1:24). The kind of disbelief that attributes Jesus’ power to Satan is blasphemy (3:28), the same charge that will be leveled at Jesus (14:64). In the pericope that immediately follows the parable discourse Jesus is addressed as “teacher” (4:38; cf. 4:1–2, 33–34), but his teaching is manifest in control over the chaotic power of nature (4:35–41; cf. Pss. 65:7; 104:7; 107:23–31: God has power over the raging sea and rescues those threatened by it).

In Mark 4 Jesus is the powerful one whose power will ultimately be made manifest even if it is now as hidden as the process of growth. The seed parables acquire a christological overtone and function as parables of hope for the community. Just as the seed has its own power and dynamism which is revealed at the harvest, so too does the mystery of the kingdom. The contrast between the power of Jesus which is hidden and absent on the cross and his glory when he returns (13:26–27; 14:62) is no greater than the contrast between the smallest of all the seeds and the greatest of all the shrubs. The parables of Mark 4:1–34 are metaphors of the Christology of the Gospel.

Equally important in both content and context is the theme of discipleship, which in Mark is the correlate to Christology. Discipleship permeates chapter 4 and is highlighted by the repeated demands for “hearing” (4:3, 9, 23, 24, 33). In biblical thought, hearing

36. Gospel of Thomas 33 (= Mark 4:21–22); 5 (= Mark 4:22); 6 (= Mark 4:22).
37. The RSV’s “Is a lamp brought in?” misses Mark’s wordplay with its christological overtones in the frequent use of “coming” for Jesus (e.g., 1:7, 9, 14) and here for the lamp (4:21).
38. Discipleship has become a major concern in the study of Mark. See esp. Best,
(akoué) is intimately related to obedience (hypakoué), and the demands of God are expressed in the daily prayer which begins, “Hear, O Israel” (Deut. 6:4–9; 11:13–21; Num. 15:37–41; cf. Mark 12:29). In the allegory of the seeds, each unsuccessful sowing begins with a “hearing” (4:15, 16, 18), and the outsiders of 4:12 “hear but do not understand.” Throughout Mark, discipleship failure is equated with improper hearing. In 7:14–17 the disciples hear the “parable” about the clean and the unclean but are without understanding (7:18; cf. 4:12). The disciples who do not understand Jesus’ teaching about the bread are described as “having ears” but not hearing (8:18). Even the opponents hear the teaching of Jesus but do not let his teaching take root.

Contrariwise, in 4:20 there is a threefold progression in responding to the word—hearing, accepting, and bearing fruit—which becomes a paradigm for true discipleship. This structure corresponds to the progress of the good seed in 4:8: budding, increasing (growing), bearing fruit to a hundredfold. The calls of the disciples in Mark convey a threefold structure (1:16–20; 3:13b–19; 6:7–13). They begin with a call or summons which is heard, which then issues in following or “being with” (3:14), followed by preaching, teaching, and healing (3:14–15; 6:8–13). True discipleship is then engagement with a life and following the way of Jesus which will yield a bountiful harvest. Both the parables and the middle section of Mark 4 function as warning against false discipleship—superficial hearing, manifest in an initial and rootless enthusiasm, seduction by wealth or failure in persecution. They also function to encourage the community in the face of failure and persecution (cf. 13:9–13). Growth is taking place; initial failure is not the whole picture; Jesus is powerful in word and work; he comes to rescue his community even when they are lacking in faith (4:35–41).

Eschatology or the temporality of the kingdom is a final motif of this chapter. Mark’s eschatology is very much like that of Jesus, “eschatology in the process of realization” or proleptic eschatology.


39. On the “three step progressions” and their importance for understanding both the structure of Mark and his theology, see Robbins, Jesus the Teacher, 19–48.

40. This understanding of eschatology is largely dependent on Jeremias, Parables, esp. 48–49, 114–24, 160–80. For a summary of Jeremias’s position, along with other interpretations of the eschatology of Jesus, see Perrin, The Kingdom of God, esp. 79–89.

41. On miracles in Mark, see esp. Achtemeier, “Toward the Isolation of Pre-Markan Miracle Catena”; idem, “The Origin and Function of the Pre-Marcan Miracle Catena”; and Weeden, Mark, esp. 53–69.

42. Cf. the description of “cheap grace” offered by Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, 45–49.
followed by the bearing of much fruit becomes a symbol of the death and resurrection of Jesus as well as the gift of self in a life of discipleship which bears fruit and issues in life eternal. Paul adopts images of planting and growing for ministry in the community (1 Cor. 3:5–10), confident that “only God gives the growth” (1 Cor. 3:7). The seed that dies, only to prepare for the plant, becomes an image of the transformation hoped for in the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:35–36, 42–43). The seeds that Mark planted in 4:1–34 continue to bear fruit.

THE DRAMA OF SALVATION HISTORY
IN MARK 12

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants

This is the longest narrative parable in Mark and the only one in which human, dramatic actions are significant. It presents a host of exegetical problems—most basically, whether it was ever a parable of Jesus. A number of factors underscore its problematic character. It is the only parable that includes a lengthy, almost verbatim allusion to the OT (Mark 12:1 = Isa. 5:2). The treatment of the servants (vv. 2–5) is a clear recollection of the violent rejection of the OT prophets (1 Kings 18:13, 22–27; 2 Chron. 24:21; 36:15–16; Neh. 9:26; cf. Matt. 25:29–31; Luke 19:12). The image of the vineyard and the vine, so prevalent in the OT for Israel (Isa. 5:1–2; Ps. 80:8–18; Jer. 2:21; Hos. 10:1), and the giving of the vineyard “to others” after unfaithful administration, reflect an early Christian explanation for the unbelief of Israel (cf. Rom. 11:17–24). The details of the parable are not particularly credible and may function, like allegory, to illustrate a truth already known. Would, for example, the owner send his son after the previous killings, especially if he has the power indicated in v. 9? Are the tenants realistic in thinking that they will gain respect by killing the son? Also the reference to the “beloved” son of v. 6 recalls its use as a christological title in Mark 1:11 and 9:7. Many scholars hold, then, that the parable is really an allegory of the early church about the rejection of God’s beloved Son by the previous administrators of the vineyard—the Jewish leaders of 11:27 and 12:12.43

43. See Crossan, “Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen,” 461–65; he holds that One of the more interesting defenses of the authenticity of the parable is that of Crossan.44 By examining the Lukan version and that of the Gospel of Thomas 65, Crossan proposes an earlier version which omits the allusion to Isa. 5:1, the reference to “the only” son in v. 6, the giving of the vineyard to others (v. 9b), and the appended citation of Ps. 118:22–23 in 12:10–11. In such a form we have a narrative where a vineyard owner sends different messengers to gather the fruit of his leased vineyard. At the time of payment the tenants make the momentous decision to resist and ultimately kill the son; their action is not totally irrational, since possession was determined by occupancy and the tenants may hope that the owner will give up after the death of the son. Crossan locates this parable within a group that deals with the need for decisive action in the face of a critical situation (e.g., Mark 13:33–37; Matt. 25:14–30). The point of comparison and thrust of the parable as spoken by Jesus is that the advent of the kingdom should cause us to take that kind of resolute and decisive action which the tenants showed in their mayhem and murder. By telling a story of a shocking murder, Jesus shocks his hearers out of their complacency about the advent of God’s reign.

Jeremias also holds that the parable is authentic, with the exception of vv. 10–11, but finds the point of comparison in the phrase about the vineyard being given “to others.”45 The gift of the kingdom will now be given to tax collectors and sinners rather than to the previous tenants, the Jewish leaders who criticize Jesus’ fellowship with outsiders. By this parable Jesus vindicates his offer of grace and mercy to the marginal and the outcast.

While I follow Crossan and Jeremias in discovering an earlier version of the parable (ending at v. 9 and omitting “beloved son”), I claim that literary analysis discloses yet another meaning to the parable which reflects an aspect of the ministry of Jesus.

The Parable as Text

In assessing a dramatic parable, one must always ask who is the major character in the parable. Though the traditional title suggests in its pre-Markan form it was not an allegory). See also Lambrecht, Once More Astonished, 127–32.
that it is the tenants, it is not really their actions which give either unity or suspense to the narrative. A close reading of the text reveals that the story is permeated with verbs that describe the activity of the owner: he planted, cared for, and let out the vineyard (v. 1); he sent (v. 2); he sent another and another (vv. 4–5); finally he sends the son (v. 6). He disappears in vv. 7–8, where the action shifts to the tenants, but reappears in v. 9, where his actions are in the future tense. The action of the owner determines the narrative development of the parable. Had he not sent further message or had he punished the tenants after the first rejection, the parable would be different. The rhetorical question of v. 9, “What will the owner of the vineyard do?” is the dramatic focus of the parable.

It is also the owner who acts in a surprising manner which arrests the hearer by its strangeness. Once the tenants beat the first servant, the reader gets an intimation that they are a bad lot. The one character who remains veiled throughout the parable is the owner; so that after his apparent folly in the continual sendings and in finally sending his son, the question of v. 9 really asks the reader not only what the owner will do but what kind of person he is. The surprise in the parable comes not from the killing of the son, since the tenants have shown themselves capable of brutal activity, but from the sending of the son and the almost naïve musings of his father, perhaps “They will respect my son” (v. 6). Locating the main thrust of the parable here is supported by Mary Ann Tolbert’s observation that the meaning of a parable should be sought where the narrative shifts to dialogue. Here the shift is really to a dual dialogue where the owner and the tenants are contrasted, enhanced by the rather strange order of words in v. 6 where the father sends the son and then muses about the reason for sending. The reader is made privy to the almost simultaneous thoughts of the owner and the tenants much in the same manner as an audience hears the musings of the “Fool” in Shakespeare or of the chorus in Greek tragedy. The juxtaposition of these two soliloquies with their differing hopes and radically differing fulfillments—“they will respect” and “the inheritance will be ours”—as well as the role of the owner in determining the development of the narrative provides the key to our interpretation of the parable.

The parable should be viewed from the horizon of OT prophecy, as described by Abraham J. Heschel. He describes prophecy as “the inspired communication of divine attitudes to the prophetic consciousness” and notes that “the divine pathos is the ground tone of all these attitudes.” This pathos is an instance of what for Heschel is “the mysterious paradox” of biblical faith: God is pursuing humanity which Heschel describes as “God in search of man.” The prophetic books refer to the long-suffering of God, who reaches out for a human response (Hos. 2:2, 14–20; Jer. 3:11–14; Ezek. 16:59–63). The historical Jesus was perceived as a prophet (Mark 6:4, 15; 8:26; cf. Luke 24:19), and in this parable Jesus brings to expression the searching God who is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exod. 34:6; Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:16; Ps. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8).

The parable expresses Jesus’ own experience of the divine pathos. It can better be titled “the Patient Vineyard Owner,” with the focus on the surprising conduct of the owner who continues to send envoys and seek a response after continued rejection. In this fashion the question of v. 9 engages the hearers in the larger question of how they think of God. Rather than an attack on unbelieving Israel for rejecting him, Jesus presents God who is longing for a response. As in the OT, rejecting God’s offer is, in effect, self-judgment which evokes punishment from God. The dialogue of the tenants shows that they are people who have eyes but do not see and are hard of heart. Jesus thus summons his hearers to a conversion (cf. Mark 1:15) and warns them of the consequences of rejecting God’s continual summons. It summons contemporary hearers to think of themselves as the vineyard workers, confronted by a God who continually seeks them but one they can reject.

The Parable in Context

In its Markan context, by the addition of the allegorizing allusion to the vineyard of Isa. 5:1, by the explicit designation of the son as Jesus, or the beloved son, and by the addition of the saying on the rejected stone (12:10–11), the parable is a clear allegory of the rejection of Jesus by Jewish leaders, a rejection that will ironically result in Jesus being the cornerstone of a new temple not made with

46. Tolbert, Perspectives, 74–82.
47. Heschel, The Prophets, 223.
hands (cf. Mark 14:62). The parable occurs in the Jerusalem section of Mark (11:1—16:8) where the opposition to Jesus first intimated in 3:6 will culminate in his death.

By parabolic action Jesus curses the fig tree so that it will never again yield fruit (11:14), as will the destroyed vineyard never yield fruit. The story of the fig tree (11:12—14, 20—21) brackets the cleansing of the temple where Jesus says the temple will become a house of prayer for all nations (11:17). After both this incident and the parable of the vineyard workers, Mark notes plans of the officials to do violence to Jesus (11:18; 12:12). Rather ironically, while the leaders are rejecting Jesus, he pronounces God’s judgment over their stewardship of the temple and the “vineyard” or the people whom God has planted.

Immediately following the allegory of the vineyard workers Mark has three important pericopes which are not so much christological controversies (see 11:1—12:12) as instruction by Jesus on three cardinal points of Jewish and later Christian faith. These points are (1) the summons to render to God the things of God while recognizing the claims of Caesar (12:13—17); (2) the affirmation that God is a “god of the living” (12:18—27) from whose presence not even death can separate a person; and (3) the command to love God and neighbor (12:28—34). When the vineyard is given “to others” in 12:9, Mark had in mind the early Christian community. The instruction of 12:13—34 presents the foundation of belief for these others as they begin to spread the word about God’s beloved Son who was rejected by the Jewish leadership.49

The Markan redaction in the case of the Wicked Tenants is similar to that in chapter 4. There we saw that Mark took an original parable, where Jesus articulated his faith in God’s power to bring about a harvest beyond all reckoning, and put it in a context of teaching about Christology, the crucified Jesus as the “mystery of the kingdom,” and about discipleship. In 12:1—11, which stands at the center of the Jerusalem ministry, Mark takes an original parable in which Jesus expresses his experience of God reaching out to people and turns it into a christological allegory. Here, as in chapter 4, he connects the teaching of Jesus with the church’s proclamation of him as the crucified one and appends to this teaching on discipleship.

COMMUNITY LIFE “BETWEEN THE TIMES”:
THE PARABLES OF MARK 13

The final parables of Mark come at the conclusion of the eschatological discourse (13:1—37), which itself is Jesus’ final testament before his passion and death.50 The discourse begins with a prediction by Jesus that the temple will be destroyed (13:2), which precipitates a double question by the disciples: “When will this be, and what will be the sign when these things are all to be accomplished?” (13:4). In the first major section of the discourse, traditional apocalyptic motifs—wars, earthquakes, plagues, famine (13:7—8)—are taken up, ones that herald the imminent end of history. This period is to be characterized by persecution and the profanation or destruction of the temple (13:9—23), after which there will be cosmic disturbances preceding the return of the Son of man in order to gather the elect from the ends of the earth (13:24—27).

Though Mark uses traditional material here, the discourse as a whole is directed to problems alive in his community. Mark does not want his community to view the wars, civil disturbances, and persecutions that preceded the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70 as the sign of the return of Jesus, as some claimed (13:6, 21—22). As Jesus said, these things are but antecedents to the end (13:7—8), and the end will come only “after that tribulation” (13:24). Mark counters those in his community, or known by his community, who interpreted the destruction of the temple as the final days and claimed that in some way Jesus had returned—"If any one says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ . . . do not believe it” (13:21)—and that they possessed the power (13:22) and authority of Jesus (13:6).

Mark uses the final parables to counter these claims with a proper eschatology and a perspective on life in community prior to the return of Jesus.

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49. For a detailed study of the theology of Mark 12:13—34, see Donahue, “A Neglected Factor,” 570—81.

50. It is generally admitted that, more than any other section, Mark 13 reflects the actual experiences of the Markan community. The literature on it is immense. I am influenced esp. by Cousar, “Eschatology and Mark’s Theologia Crucis”; Grayston, “The Study of Mark XIII”; Kelber, Kingdom in Mark, 109—28; Hooker, “Trial and Tribulation in Mark XIII”; and Pesch, Naherwartungen.
The Fig Tree

The two parables that conclude the discourse provide a nuanced eschatological perspective. Translated literally from the Greek, the initial verse of the first of these reads, “From the fig tree learn the parable” (RSV: “learn its lesson”) (13:28). Here, “parable” is used in a sense different from Mark 3:23 and 4:11 (enigmatic saying or riddle) and with the meaning “lesson” or meaning of the illustration. The illustration is the budding fig tree. In Palestine the fig tree was distinguished from the other trees in completely shedding its leaves in winter, so that its first budding is a sign of the return of summer which followed quickly upon a short spring.\(^\text{51}\) From this the community is to learn that the events described in 13:5–27 are not themselves the end time, but the end time will follow soon. In fact, he, the Son of man (13:26), is near “at the very gates” (13:29). Mark therefore, in rejecting the false eschatological timetable of some in the community, still retains the sense of urgency and imminence of the return of Jesus. The community is to be observant and watchful.

The Doorkeeper (Mark 13:33–37)

Verses 30–32, while maintaining that the return of Jesus is imminent, reject the use of Jesus’ words to identify any specific event with this return, since not even Jesus himself knew the day or the hour (13:31). The final “parable” of the Gospel (13:33–36) describes in some detail the posture of the community prior to the return of Jesus. I will argue that this is a Markan allegory about the community life between the resurrection and the parousia.

The “parable” itself through having points of contact with other “parousia” parables (e.g., the Q parable of the Talents, Matt. 25:14–30 = Luke 19:11–27) shows wide variation, and neither Matthew nor Luke recounts it in the corresponding place at the end of his eschatological discourse. Most likely the core parable was a simple exhortation to watchfulness in the face of some imminent crisis such as the advent of the kingdom of God or the return of Jesus soon after the resurrection (cf. Mark 1:14–15; Luke 12:35–56).

By the phrasing of the introductory verse (13:33) and by the addition of important details, Mark gives a distinctive meaning to the parable. Mark begins by saying, “Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come” (13:33). The first word, “take heed” (blepēte), links this parable with the three other places in the discourse (13:5, 9, 23) where Mark warns his community to be observant. The term for “being watchful” (agrynypneite) occurs only here in Mark in contrast to the more normal grêgeite (13:34, 35, 37; 14:34, 37, 38). Literally it means “be awake” and figuratively suggests watchful care. Paul uses it to describe his apostolic care for the churches (cf. 2 Cor. 6:5; 11:27–28), and in Heb. 13:17 it describes that care which church leaders are to show the community. The Greek word for “time” in the phrase “The time will come” is kairos, which is used in Mark 1:15 for time as an event or occasion when one should “be converted and believe in the gospel” and in 12:2 for the time to render fruit to the absent landowner. By this introductory verse Mark thus exhorts the leaders in his community to proper conduct in the light of the imminent parousia. The following parable, which can be called “the Waiting Servants,” extends this theme.

The community’s life is compared to a situation where a man, later identified as the “lord of the house” (13:35), goes on a journey, a familiar metaphor for the absence of Jesus before the parousia (cf. Matt. 25:14; Luke 19:12). Only in Mark, however, does the man leave “his house” (cf. Matt. 25:14). While gone, he entrusts his authority (exousian, 13:34) to his servants (doulos). Both terms are important in Mark. Jesus’ first appearance in the Gospel is as one who possesses a new teaching with authority (1:22, 27) and as Son of man who has power (exousia) to forgive sin (2:10).\(^\text{52}\) When Jesus calls his disciples, he bestows power (exousia) on them (3:15; 6:7). The description of those waiting as servants (doulos) not only reflects a widely attested early Christian usage (e.g., Gal. 1:10; Phil. 1:1) but

\(^{51}\) Jeremias, *Parables*, 120.

\(^{52}\) Perrin has called attention to the parallelism that Mark creates between the community and Jesus through the use of exousia as well as that between the fate of John, Jesus, and the disciples (see esp. Mark 1:14–16; 6:14–29—John is handed over and killed; Mark 8:31–32; 9:31; 10:33–34—Jesus will be handed over and killed; Mark 13:9–13—Jesus’ followers will be handed over and killed). See Perrin, *A Modern Pilgrimage*, esp. 78–93.
recalls Jesus’ command to the disciples to be a servant of all (pantōn doulos, 10:44; cf. 9:35) in imitation of the Son of man who came not to be served but to serve (10:45). Power, in Mark’s community, is to be expressed in service.

The short indication that the master leaves the servants with power (RSV: “in charge”), “each with his work” (hekaston to ergon), like many details in an allegory, has wider significance. The phrase initially suggests that there are different tasks to be performed in the community even though they all share the same power, a perspective similar to Paul’s description of different gifts and different ministries all inspired “by one and the same Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:4–11; cf. Rom. 12:6–8). In the parable itself, “work” is that mission given by the absent “lord of the house”—therefore, work of or from the Lord. In Paul “the work of the Lord” is equivalent to faithful Christian existence before the return of the Lord (1 Cor. 15:58) and to missionary activity (1 Cor. 16:10). In the context of Mark 13, all these nuances are possible. The larger context is one of an exhortation to fidelity amid eschatological trials (cf. 13:13), yet this period is also to be one when the gospel will be preached to all nations (13:10). The “work” of the Markan community includes both service within the community and missionary activity.

In the allegory, household language has links with other parts of Mark. Mark manifests a number of places where significant events take place in a house: healings (1:29; 2:1–12; 5:39–43), private instruction to the disciples (7:17; 9:28; 10:10), and house is a designation for the community itself (11:17). Mark also uses household and family imagery to describe doing the will of God (in 3:31–35 those who do the will of God are Jesus’ new family) and the disciples who left all to follow Jesus receive a new family along with houses (10:28–31). Since we know from other passages that the first Christian meeting places were “house churches” (1 Cor. 16:19: Col. 4:15), it is safe to assume that Mark’s community was such and that 13:33–37 is an allegory of life in Mark’s house churches prior to the return of Jesus.53

The Eschatological Parables in Context
In the parable of the budding fig tree and the allegory of the waiting servants, we find points of contact with both the immediate and the larger context of Mark’s theology. In the context of the eschatological discourse, these passages give a balanced eschatology. In contrast to passivity or hopelessness in the face of suffering, Mark tells his community that the end time when they will see the Son of man is as near as the summer after the budding of the fig tree. In contrast to an enthusiasm that would claim that the end time has arrived and that the Christ has returned with “signs and wonders” (13:22), Mark says that the words of Jesus cannot be invoked to determine the day or the hour of his return (13:32), and the community is to wait in faithful vigilance.

There are points of contact between chapters 4 and 13, the other major discourse of Jesus in Mark. In both chapters we have the structure of a nature parable (4:1–9; 13:28–29), followed by words of Jesus expressing a promise to the community (4:10–12; 13:30–32) and a concluding allegory on discipleship (4:13–20; 13:33–37). In both chapters also the blessings and the dangers of discipleship are underscored. The disciples who hear the word and accept it will bear great fruit (4:20), and even more will be given (4:22). Those who persevere to the end will be saved (13:13) and will be gathered to the Son of man (13:27). Yet many of those who hear the word will be unfruitful, just as there will be betrayals within the community (13:12). In the allegory of the waiting servants, even though the servants are commanded to watch, in Gethsemane they are unable to watch even one hour (14:37). Radically, however, the message of both Mark 4 and Mark 13 is one of hope. Just as there is no comparison between the three failures and the bountiful harvest, so there is no comparison between the sufferings of the end time and the return of the Son of man. Just as the farmer waits in patience while the seed grows secretly (4:26–29), patient fidelity is to characterize the community (13:13, 33–36).

The community has been summoned to believe in the good news (1:15). From a previous generation Jesus speaks to the trials of the generation that hears Mark’s good news. This is a story of one who, though mighty in word and work, chose the way of powerless self-

53. Developed in more detail in Donahue, *Theology and Setting of Discipleship*, 31–51. For a discussion of the significance of “house” in Mark, as well as for the other architectural, topographical, and geopolitical references, see Malbon, *Narrative Space and Mythic Meaning in Mark*, esp. 106–40.
giving that others might be free (10:45). His death was not the end of the story, for he has been raised up (16:6). The community lives between the resurrection and the return of Jesus, between promise and presence. Jesus is "lord of the house" which awaits his return. The community lives therefore by hope as well as by faith. When it recounts the parables and allegories of Jesus, it shares the memories of Jesus that have been handed down. A community that can share such memories can become a community of shared hopes.

3

THE PARABLES OF MATTHEW

INTRODUCTION

In contrast to Mark, Matthew has a great number of parables: four from Mark (Matthew omits the Seed Growing Secretly); nine from Q (the sayings source which he shares in common with Luke); and ten that are called M or Matthean special material. Matthew's parables manifest certain common traits. Many are dramatic parables where human actions and human decisions engage the hearers. Matthew loves the grand scale. Mark's shrub (Mark 4:32) becomes a tree (Matt. 13:32); the treasure and the pearl exceed all value (Matt. 13:44–46); the debt of the servant exceeds the taxes from Syria, Phoenicia, Judea, and Samaria (Matt. 18:24); ten bridesmaids are the retinue for a rich man's daughter (Matt. 25:1–13); and the talents given to the servants equal wages for thirty, sixty, or 150 years (Matt. 25:15). Matthew also loves stark contrasts and reversals. His parables contain more allegorical elements than those of Mark or Luke, and he exhibits a fondness for apocalyptic imagery to underscore the crisis occasioned by the teaching of Jesus. The stakes are heaven or hell, outer darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth. This combination of dramatic interaction, imaginative language, and religious awe provides an entree into the theological world of Matthew.

1. Numbers are based on the list of parables in Jeremias, Parables, 247–48. For a more complete list which includes parabolic sayings, see Drury, Parables, 70–72.
Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels

THE GOSPEL
IN
PARABLE

JOHN R. DONAHUE, S.J.

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