

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER,
A PATH THROUGH AN INTERPRETIVE MAZE
MARK 4:1–20

By

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ABSTRACT

In his teaching, Jesus is well-known for his many parables and parabolic sayings. The parables of Jesus stand out as his prominent teaching method (Mark 4:33–34). They contain examples of his use of figurative language to communicate his mission and the kingdom of God in meaningful ways. Developments throughout the three main historical phases of parable interpretation have been a mix of helpful insight and troubling trends. The purpose of this thesis is to identify some of the beneficial methods from the three competing views in the history of parable interpretation and utilize them in the textual analysis of the Parable of the Sower in Mark 4:1–20 in order that Jesus' approach to his parables and the appropriate application of the parable may more clearly be understood and communicated today. The three significant phases of the history of parable interpretation covered are: Patristic and Medieval allegorizing (2nd -14th century), Tradition Criticism (Jülicher, Dodd, Jeremias 1888-1960), and Reader-Response (1970 to present). The concluding chapter is the application for the modern reader.

To my Father - My dearest Hero of the Faith.

To my Husband - You are my Champion and Dream Maker. I love you!

To my Children (Kara, Anastasia, Josephine and Evan) - Being your Mother is my greatest joy.

To my Savior and my Friend, Jesus Christ - I will praise your name with all that I am.
~ Psalm 103 ~

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
Chapter 1. Competing Views	10
Chapter 2. The Setting and the Parable of the Sower (4:1–9)	32
Chapter 3. The Disciples' Questions and Jesus' Answer (4:10–12)	45
Chapter 4. Jesus Explains the Parable (4:13–20)	54
Chapter 5. Application	69
BIBLIOGRAPHY	

INTRODUCTION

In his teaching, Jesus is well known for his many parables and parabolic sayings. The parables of Jesus stand out as his prominent teaching method (Mark 4:33–34). They contain examples of his use of figurative language to communicate his mission and the kingdom of God in meaningful ways. The Parable of the Sower has a paradigmatic message. In Mark 4:13 Jesus challenges the disciples, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?”¹ Two questions are the focus here: What can one learn about Jesus’ overall approach to his parables from the Parable of the Sower? And, what is the appropriate application of the Parable of the Sower?

The method used to arrive at answers to these questions will be textual analysis and a walk through an interpretive maze consisting of three well-known interpretive methods of Jesus’ parables: Patristic and Medieval allegorizing (2nd–14th century), Tradition Criticism (Jülicher, Dodd, Jeremias 1888–1960), and Reader-Response (1970 to present). If these methods are not analyzed, aspects of them could hinder the goal of accurate textual analysis. The purpose of this thesis is to identify the beneficial methods from the three competing views in the history of parable interpretation and utilize them in the textual analysis of the Parable of the Sower in Mark 4:1–20 in order that Jesus’ approach to his parables and the appropriate application of the parable may more clearly be understood and communicated today.

¹ The English Standard Version (ESV) will be used unless otherwise noted.

First, it is important to get a bearing on the passage, Mark 4:1–20, and its context. In all three Synoptic Gospels, the Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:1-20, Matthew 13:1-23, Luke 8:5-15)² takes place during Jesus’ Galilean ministry and before the beheading of John the Baptist. Jesus’ Galilean ministry began fully after John was put in prison (Mark 1:14, Matthew 4:12). A noncanonical version of the Parable of the Sower without the attached interpretation is found in the *Gospel of Thomas*. This gnostic apocryphal gospel will not be referenced because of its late dating and the fact that it does not mention the parable's historical or geographical context.

The first half of Mark is Jesus' Galilean ministry (1:14–8:26), which describes several noteworthy developments. First, Jesus stated his mission as, “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15) Then Jesus calls his inner circle (plus Andrew) (1:16–37). To them he says, “Let us go somewhere else – to the nearby villages – so I can preach there also. That is why I have come” (Mark 1:38). Next comes the commissioning of the twelve by Jesus as apostles (3:13–19), followed by the sending out of the apostles two by two (6:7–30).

The major example of Jesus' parabolic teaching in the first half of Mark is chapter 4. The Parable of the Sower is the longest of the three parables in this chapter, the other two being the Mustard Seed and the Seed Growing Secretly. Additionally, the chapter contains the figurative sayings of the Lampstand and the Measure. The turning point in the book of Mark is Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah of Israel (8:27-30). The second half of Mark recounts the journey of Jesus and the apostles to Jerusalem and then in Jerusalem itself, which is marked by the Passion.

² The Gospel of John does not have Jesus’ Galilean ministry as a focal point.

Here is an outline of how the Parable of the Sower fits into Mark chapter four:

- A. Setting and introduction to the chapter (4:1-2)
- B. The Parables (4:3-34)
 - 1. The Parable of the Sower (4:3-20)
 - a. The parable itself (4:3-9)
 - b. Why Jesus teaches in parables (4:10-12)
 - c. Explanation of the parable (4:13-20)
 - 2. A Lamp on a Stand (4:21-23)
 - 3. The Measure (4:24-25)
 - 4. The Parable of the Growing Seed (4:26-29)
 - 5. The Parable of the Mustard Seed (4:30-32)
- C. Miracle of God's power: Jesus Calms the Storm (4:35-41)

Before leaving the broad context of Mark, here are a few background points. The textual analysis is based on *The Greek New Testament*, UBS Fourth Revised Edition.³ This textual analysis is intended to take apart all the pieces of the passage under consideration and analyze the parts. The focus will be on understanding not only the vocabulary of the time but also how the words fit together in each sentence. The focal contexts under consideration are (1) the immediate context in Mark, (2) the context of the book of Mark as a whole and (3) the context of the synoptic Gospels. In the synoptic Gospels, the accounts are very similar, but the differences do tell us about the evangelist's point of view, style and theological concerns. Mark will be compared with Matthew and Luke. I assume the author to be Mark, the interpreter of Peter. I further assume a significant amount of Mark's sources are from Peter's

³ Kurt Aland, Barbara Aland, Florian Voss, Barclay Moon Newman, United Bible Societies and Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, *The UBS Greek New Testament: Reader's Edition With Textual Notes* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).

preaching and testimony.⁴ According to source criticism, Mark's Gospel likely came first based on the significant dependence of Matthew and Luke on Mark.

The Parable of the Sower would have been a relatable farming illustration to the near eastern agrarian culture at that time. Jesus tells a story about a farmer sowing seed in four different types of soil: the hard path, the rocky ground, among thorns and in good soil. Only the seeds in good soil produce a harvest (Mark 4:1–9). The disciples, knowing that Jesus, as a rabbi, was not simply talking about farming, wanted to know what this and other parables meant, so they asked him (4:10).

Jesus answered by first stating that the secret of the kingdom of God had been given to them, but not to those outside. He further quotes part of Isaiah 6:9ff, which epitomizes a hardhearted response by people to a prophet's message. In Mark 4:10–12, the severity of Jesus' words, if taken in the literal sense, would mean that the purpose of Jesus' parables is for some people not to hear and that God will not forgive. This has posed a hard question that has been a part of ongoing debate. Some respond to this passage by skipping over it entirely, immediately softening the literal meaning, or assume that Mark had a mistaken understanding when he wrote it down. This debated question will be modestly touched on in the textual analysis. The structure and significance of the entire passage, Mark 4:1–20, will be taken into account.

Subsequently, Jesus challenges the disciples' thinking with his questions in Mark 4:13 and follows this with an explanation of the Parable of the Sower which clearly contains

⁴ Eusebius quotes from Papias' work, "Mark, indeed, having been the interpreter of Peter, wrote accurately, howbeit not in order, all that he recalled of what was either said or done by the Lord. For he neither heard the Lord, nor was he a follower of His, but, at a later date (as I said), of Peter; who used to adapt his instructions to the needs [of the moment]..." Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Kirsopp Lake (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1926), 3.39.15.

several allegorical elements. The seed, which the sower sows, is the word. The four soils are four kinds of people and their responses to the word. The message of the parable is straightforward with the explanation. The clear allegorical elements have significantly contributed to the understanding of Jesus' approach to all his parables.

With regard to allegory, Patristic and Medieval exegetes saw, though not exclusively, Jesus' parables as detailed allegories. Tradition Criticism (Jülicher, Dodd and Jeremias) saw Jesus' parables as containing no allegory, only one non-allegorical point of comparison per parable based on an extended simile. The Reader-Response approach embraces the full metaphorical language of the parables, but these critics disregard the historical setting altogether and make the meaning of each parable open-ended based on the modern day paradigm of the reader's choice. Therefore, one sees Jesus' parables as all allegory, no allegory or accepts allegory as filtered by one's own context and not the original. These competing views can affect how one understands Jesus' approach to his parables as well as the meaning of any given parable. This is one main contributing factor to the windy interpretive maze. As an introductory matter, the definitions of *mashal*, *parabolē* and allegory will be covered. This is done so that one can better understand the categories of allegory and parable to which the Parable of the Sower belongs.

Definition of *mashal* and *parabolē*

The word παραβολή (*parabolē*) is found 45 times in the Greek Old Testament (LXX).⁵ In all of its occurrences it is a translation of the Hebrew word *mashal*.

⁵ Craig Evans, "Parables in Early Judaism," in *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 52.

Understanding the meaning of *mashal* is the major background for understanding the frequent use of the word παραβολή among the Synoptic evangelists. The range of meaning for *mashal* centers around the meanings: “proverb” (ex. 1 Kings 4:32), “parables” (ex. 2 Samuel 12:1–14) and “riddles” (ex. Psalms 49:4). Ten parables in the Old Testament approximate the form of Jesus' parables. These parable-like passages include:

Judges 9:8–15 Fable of the Trees
2 Samuel 12:1–15 Parable of the Ewe Lamb
2 Samuel 14:4–7, vv. 1–3, 12–20 Parable of the Two Brothers
1 Kings 20:38–43 Parable of the Escaped Prisoner
2 Kings 14:8–10 Fable of the Thistle
Isaiah 5:1–7 Song of the Vineyard
Ezekiel 17:2–10 The Eagle and the Vine
Ezekiel 19:1–9 Funeral lament
Ezekiel 19:10–14 Parable of the Vine
Ezekiel 21:1–5 Parable of the Forest Fire (metaphor, lacks plot)
Ezekiel 24:2–5 Parable of the Seething Pot⁶

As a literary device, the definition of allegory closest to the time of Jesus comes from Quintilian, a first-century rhetorician. He defines allegory as presenting one thing in words and another in meaning.⁷ This figurative use of language is found early in the Bible. For example, there is allegory in Pharaoh's dream where he saw seven healthy heads of grain on a single stalk followed by seven heads of grain that were thin and scorched by the sun. The seven healthy heads ate the seven thin heads. The meaning of this dream was unknown until Joseph understood from God that this represented seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine (Genesis 41:1–40).

Possibly the most well-known Old Testament parable is the Parable of the Ewe Lamb (2 Samuel 12:1–15). In this parable Nathan tells David a story about the theft of a treasured

⁶ Evans, “Parables in Early Judaism,” 52–74.

⁷ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 8.6.44.

ewe lamb by a rich man from his poor neighbor. Nathan then applies its moral forcefully to David, famously declaring, “You are the man!”

According to Evans, The Fable of the Trees (Judges 9:8–15; 16–21) has a form and explanation closest to the Parable of the Sower because of the level of detail.⁸ There is a structural similarity using the rule of 3: three parallels and the fourth a contrast, followed by an explanation.⁹ Jotham, Jerub’ Baal’s only living son, responds to the actions of others with this fable. Some Trees got together to appoint themselves a king. They asked an olive tree, a fig tree, a vine, and a thornbush. All said “No” for various reasons, except the thornbush who vociferously made them an offer, “Either make me king or I will consume the cedars of Lebanon with fire”(Judges 9:15 paraphrase). What at first was a reasonable discussion about who was best suited to be king, turned into a deadly ultimatum by the thornbush.

The Greek word παραβολή (*parabolē*) has a wide variety of functions, the broad category being a form of figurative language or use. The word “parable” ranges between a pithy 3-word proverb (Luke 4:23) to a long story such as the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32). The basic component is a comparison of two unlike things.¹⁰ Jesus’ parables are discursive illustrations to communicate divine truth. They are of a twofold nature. The illustrated component communicates information and the illustration is the picture component.

A simile is an explicit comparison by way of an image. A metaphor is an implied comparison by way of an image. When a simile or metaphor has been expanded from a

⁸ Evans, “Parables in Early Judaism,” 54.

⁹ John W. Sider, *Interpreting the Parables: A Hermeneutical Guide to Their Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 193.

¹⁰ Robert H. Stein, “The Genre of the Parables” in *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables* ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000) 47.

simple image to a picture it is a similitude. Further, a similitude can be extended to a story. When this is done we have either a story-parable, example-parable or “allegory.” Story and example parables are single extended metaphors. “Allegory” uses a string of metaphors.¹¹ It is not necessary to have an exact definition of παραβολή because of its broad use, but it is safe to say that including all similes and metaphors would be too inclusive. “Simply for convenience we shall define a parable as a figure of speech in which there is a brief or extended comparison.”¹²

In the synoptic gospels the noun παραβολή (*parabolē*) occurs 46 times. The word occurs 16 times in Matthew, 12 times in Mark and 18 times in Luke.¹³ In Mark, the first use is 3:23, with Jesus responding to his growing opposition. Then, in Mark 4 the word occurs 7 times. The discursive sequence in Mark is about the nature of the kingdom (4:11, 26, 30). Then, the last uses are in 7:17 (Clean and Unclean), 12:1 and 12:12 (The Tenants), and 13:28 (The Fig Tree).

Here is an index of the 17 parables or parabolic sayings found in Mark based on John Sider’s Index found in Mark. I have placed the Patched Garment and Wineskins next to each other because they are considered to be a doublet, repetition of the same basic idea.¹⁴ Additionally, I have also placed Divided Kingdom and House and Strong Man Bound next to

¹¹ Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012) 19-21.

¹² Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 22.

¹³ The word also occurs in Hebrews 9:9 and 11:19 with a different function. The word is not present in the Johannine tradition but the word παροιμία (John 10:6, 16:25, 16:29) is present.

¹⁴ Sider, *Interpreting the Parables*, 76.

each other because they are a part of the same narrative. The parables and short metaphors in Mark 4 are a discursive sequence.¹⁵

Index of Parables and Parabolic Sayings in Mark

Physician for the Sick (2:16-17)
Wedding Guests (2:18-20)
Patched Garment (2:21) and Wineskins (2:22)
David and the Consecrated Bread (2:23-28)
Divided Kingdom and House (3:22-26) and Strong Man Bound (3:26-27)
Sower (4:3-9, 14-20)
Lamp on a Stand (4:21-23)
Measure (4:24-25)
The Patient Husbandman/Growing Seed (4:26-29)
The Mustard-seed (4:30-32)
Clean and Unclean (7:17-23)
Children's Bread (7:24-30)
The Wicked Husbandmen/Tenants (12:1-12)
The Budding Fig Tree (13:28-29)
The Doorkeeper/The Waiting Servants (13:33-37)¹⁶

The three well-known methods (Patristic and Medieval allegorizing, Tradition Criticism, and Reader-Response) add beneficial tools to studying the parables but ought not to be taken wholesale. Chapter One begins with these competing views, which need

¹⁵ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002), 48.

¹⁶ This is in contrast with Jeremias' index. According to his list there are 6 parables in Mark (The Sower (4:3-8), The Patient Husbandman/Growing Seed (4:26-29), The Mustard-seed (4:30-32), The Wicked Husbandmen/Tenants (12:1-11), The Budding Fig Tree (13:28f) and the Doorkeeper (13:33-37). Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J: Prentice-Hall, 1972). 247-248.

evaluating. The beneficial tools will be incorporated into the textual analysis of Mark 4:1–20 in Chapters Two through Four because they aid in understanding the text. Chapter Five, Application, ties the passage back together and answers the two key questions regarding the Parable of the Sower which this paper seeks to answer: What is Jesus' approach to his parables? And, what is the application of the Parable of the Sower?

CHAPTER ONE

COMPETING VIEWS

The lessons learned from the history of parable interpretation can be understood in relation to meaning. Madeleine Boucher identifies three elements to determining meaning: (A) author intent, (B) the text itself, and (C) the understanding of the reader. The best way to understand the author's intent is by understanding the text itself.¹ Inductive evidence from the text itself is the best foundation for conclusions about (A). The understanding of the reader (C) often reveals our own assumptions about a text. They are an inevitable part of each person's communication, but if one relies only on one's assumptions then one's thoughts on (A) will be purely subjective.

The scope of the history of parable interpretation will cover Patristic Medieval Allegorizing (2nd to 14th century), Tradition Criticism (Jülicher–Jeremias, 1888–1963), and Reader-Response (1970's to today). Critical scholarship helped correct the problem common among the Patristic and Medieval exegetes who hyper-allegorized Jesus' parables by giving us some tools (form, source, redaction) to examine the text itself (B). Only then can reasonable conclusions be derived about the author's intent. However, Reader-Response has returned to the mistake of jumping to conclusions about what the parables mean (A).

It is of course not that simple. The history of parable interpretation has been a mix of helpful insight and troubling trends. The purpose of this chapter is to navigate through the competing views and arrive at an approach to the Parable of the Sower, which utilizes the

¹ Madeleine I. Boucher, *The Mysterious Parable: A Literary Study* (Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1977), 26.

beneficial aspects from each of these phases of interpretive history, in order to more effectively communicate this parable's message.

Patristic and Medieval Allegorizing (2nd to 14th Century)

Patristic exegetes (2nd to 5th century), such as Augustine (354–430 A.D.) explained that the Bible contained two senses: literal and nonliteral. Throughout the Patristic and Medieval time period, nonliteral was called allegory, spiritual or mystical. Nonliteral senses in the Bible include: moral issues of the soul, spiritual reality of salvation history and the promises and fulfillments in the next world.² The warrant for the senses of Scripture and allegorical interpretation came from the Bible itself and the prevailing methods of interpretation at the time. The method most well-known throughout the Middle Ages (roughly 400 A.D. to 1400 A.D.) was allegorical interpretation.

The only usage of the word “to allegorize” in the Bible is by Paul in Galatians 4:24, “These things are being taken *figuratively*...” The complicating factors regarding the pregnancies of Sarah and Hagar with regard to God’s promise are compared with the present complications which faced the early church with regard to the new relationship Jesus established with the law. The underlying struggle in both historical situations is identified as a struggle between flesh and spirit (Galatians 5:17; cf. 1 Corinthians 10:1-11).

In one of Jesus’ historical parables he says, “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:40). This implies that the story of Jonah still has spiritual

² Stephen L. Wailes, *Medieval Allegories of Jesus’ Parables* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 10.

relevance. The example of Jesus' allegorical interpretation of parables such as the Parable of the Sower (Mark 4), the Tenants (Mark 12), the Wheat and the Tares (Matthew 13) and the Dragnet (Matthew 13) were followed by the Patristic and Medieval exegetes in other parables of Jesus. This involved interpreting the details of a parable allegorically as the first step towards determining their meaning. The substitution of a secondary meaning was considered for almost every detail and word in a parable. The substitutions included: biblical and historical figures, heart attitudes, actions of history or ideas. They looked at every internal detail of the text with great care.

The frequently cited parable is that of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37). For example, Radulfus Ardens (died c. 1200) stated that the Good Samaritan demonstrated four things: "the ruin of the human race, the devil's persecution, the inadequacy of the Law, and Christ's mercy." Wailes summarizes the way the Good Samaritan was allegorically interpreted in the Middle Ages:

We understand the traveler from Jerusalem to Jericho as mankind in the figure of Adam traveling from paradise to this world because of sin; he is waylaid by forces of evil, stripped of spiritual garments, and wounded thru vice and error; the religion of the Old Testament alone cannot help him, so the priest and the Levite pass by; Christ is the good Samaritan who places man upon his own body and brings him to the Church; the leaders of the Church receive a spiritual trust from Christ for the care of the man, with the promise of recompense for additional benefits.³

There is a fair criticism to be leveled against this interpretation of the parable. Robert H. Stein notes that Calvin is the first in fifteen centuries to reject this allegorical interpretation. His rejection is based on the obvious significance of the question at the beginning and end of the parable is, "Who is my neighbor?" (Lk 10:29, 36). Quoting Calvin, the main point of the parable is, "to show that neighbourliness which obliges us to do our

³ Wailes, *Medieval Allegories of Jesus' Parables*, 210.

duty by each other is not restricted to friends and relations, but open to the whole human race.”⁴ There may be more significance to the narrative than just this, but he does anticipate what would become a significant criticism for parable interpretation in the late 19th century: seeking an allegorical interpretation of every detail of a parable as the first step to determining its meaning is taking the interpretation in an inaccurate direction.

To be fair, not all aspects of the decoding of symbols in the parables by Medieval exegetes were this wildly detached from the main point of the parable. Take for example, the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). Scholarship by and large agreed that the Father in the story represented God, but who were the older and younger brothers? Two possibilities were simultaneously considered for the elder brother and younger brother: Jews and gentiles or an ostensibly just person and a penitent sinner. Wailes states that Jerome and Ambrose accepted both as valid readings.⁵

Many varieties of readings existed for the parables and for the same parable but from different gospels. Augustine was aware of these varied interpretations and welcomed them, as long as they were in agreement with other passages of Scripture. He said, “For what could God have more generously and abundantly provided in the divine writings than that the same words might be understood in various ways which other no less divine witnesses approved?”⁶ There was an openness to examining the merits of reasonable suggestions.

⁴ Robert Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), 50. Quote from John Calvin’s, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke*.

⁵ Wailes, *Medieval Allegories of Jesus’ Parables*, 238.

⁶ Wailes, *Medieval Allegories of Jesus’ Parables*, 11. Wailes quotes Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, III. 38.

Today, another alternative is: the elder brother and younger brother represent the Pharisees and Scribes and publicans and sinners of Jesus' day.⁷ Is there a way that they all fit together? Interestingly, the Pharisees and Scribes and publicans and sinners accurately reflects the original setting in the life of Jesus. Jews and Gentiles reflects a distinction that the early church could have had in mind and an ostensibly just person and a penitent sinner reflects the distinctions that anyone could relate to. The need Jesus was meeting by telling the parable to the original audience is also relevant to the needs of today. The critique that Stein would make of Medieval allegorical interpretation is: seek to understand the main point of the parable in the life of Jesus (*Sitz im Leben*) first.⁸

Sometimes the significance of the parable was drawn out by expanding on the meaning of the language used in the parable. For example, The Budding Fig (Matthew 24:32–33, etc.) has a clear general meaning in its context: the signs of the end will be as clear and obvious as a fig tree showing signs of blooming in the summer. Here the word “summer” is used in association with the Kingdom of God. Therefore, Gregory the Great expounded, “... the clouds of our grief will pass away and eternal life will shine with the sun’s splendor,” and John Chrysostom referred to it as the “spiritual summer.”⁹

The range between anachronistic allegorical interpretations, legitimate possibilities of potentially allegorical elements and literary expansion on the meaning of the language can also be seen in the interpretation of the Parable of the Sower during this time period. There are outlandish allegorical interpretations for words such as “went out” (4:3) and the much

⁷ Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*, 117-18.

⁸ Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*, 56.

⁹ Wailes, *Medieval Allegories of Jesus' Parables*, 168.

discussed significance of a harvest of 30, 60 and 100 fold (4:20). Several natural questions arise when reading the Parable of the Sower. A few of them are: Who is the sower? How exactly is soil said to be a person? How ought the four soils be classified? And, how is the seed both the word and a person? Several exegetes discuss these. Finally, the artful connotations of the language of the Parable of the Sower are explored in connection with the agricultural elements of farming, the scientific aspects of the properties of the natural objects in the parable and the moral and psychological challenges of human beings.

Artful expansion of the metaphors include: the birds, untilled ground, thorns, seeds and moral and psychological challenges. Since the birds represented Satan's supernatural influence, Thomas Aquinas expands the image as devils interfering like birds of a celestial nature flying over head. Bede emphasizes the untilled nature of the rocky ground in verse 16-17, which he referred to as the hardness of the heart, not turned or plowed with true faith. Albert the Great examines the scientific qualities of thorns and relates them to the potential insidiousness of wealth in a person's life. Likewise, he closely examined several properties of seeds and related that to how the word is shared. Jerome clarifies the Christian response as not residing in the intelligence but the will and moral capacity to take fruitful actions.¹⁰

Jerome and Chrysostom are examples of the widely held belief that the sower was Christ. Bede added that the sower is also those who preach the word after Christ. Albert the Great said, "He who has the care of souls or the profession of preaching receives the duty of sowing."¹¹

¹⁰ Wailes, *Medieval Allegories of Jesus' Parables*, 99-101.

¹¹ Wailes, *Medieval Allegories of Jesus' Parables*, 98.

The soil was seen by Jerome, Chrysostom and Bede as the souls and hearts of hearers. This was widely agreed upon.¹² The soils were not designated by specific examples of people but by general characterizations found in the gospels: susceptible to devils, weak in commitment, lead away by worldliness and truly devoted. The Scholastics made note that all people could be viewed under these characterizations.¹³

We often think of the seed as only being the word and the people only being the soil, but in the explanation the seed also represents a human sprouting and growing (4:16-20). Albert the Great noted the problem with the devil eating the seed on the path all up (4:14). How can the word be eaten up? Therefore, Albert the Great concluded that it was more accurate to say the man sown with the seed. Bruno of Segni states that mixing the seed and the person in whom the seed is sown is artless, but nevertheless truth. Man was sown first in Creation and then the word was sown in man.¹⁴

One can learn from the extravagant allegorical interpretations offered for “went out” and 30, 60, 100. To Bede, “went out” meant Jesus’ incarnation. Thomas Aquinas thought “went out” referred to Jesus going from private life to public ministry.¹⁵ In Mark the seed in good soil produces a harvest 30, 60 or 100 fold. In Matthew it is 100, 60 and 30 and in Luke it is simply 100.¹⁶ Jerome designates these three numbers as representing the married, widowed and virgins (or martyrdom). Albert the Great and Augustine see married, virgin

¹² Wailes, *Medieval Allegories of Jesus’ Parables*, 98.

¹³ Wailes, *Medieval Allegories of Jesus’ Parables*, 99.

¹⁴ Wailes, *Medieval Allegories of Jesus’ Parables*, 102.

¹⁵ Wailes, *Medieval Allegories of Jesus’ Parables*, 98.

¹⁶ *Gospel of Thomas* has 60, 120.

and martyrs. Augustine also uses numerological reasoning to connect the ages and stages of a person's life with 30, 60 and 100. Gregory the Great saw it as representing faith in the Trinity, good works and a life contemplating eternity. Thomas Aquinas rejected Gregory the Great's interpretation of faith in the Trinity on the basis of the fact that the hearer is bringing forth a yield of fruit. He saw it as an individual's spiritual progression. One can follow parts of the patristic and medieval exegete's method, as well as, learn from their mistakes.

Response

The lesson to be learned from this time period is that one ought not to seek an allegorical interpretation of every detail of a parable as the first step to understanding its significance because of the danger of following into subjective anachronistic interpretations. Additionally, analogies are helpful ways to talk about sensitive realities, but they are not intended to answer all of one's questions about a given topic. Instead, they contain a limited scope of information for a particular message that Jesus had in mind. The patristic and medieval exegetes had a tendency to press the details beyond the limits of the parable form.

The patristic and medieval exegetes accepted that Jesus used allegory and, with the exception of hyper-allegorization, this position ought to be maintained. It is clear that Jesus did use allegory as a figure of speech. From the study of *mashal*, there is Old Testament precedent for using allegory as a figure of speech and providing an interpretation to understand it. Jesus explained many of his parables. These explanations are essential to their understanding. Stein notes 34 New Testament parables that contain some form of interpretation ranging from a phrase, to a sentence, to a detailed explanation (8 in Mark, 8 in Matthew and 18 in Luke). These early interpretations are an inseparable part of

understanding the parables.¹⁷ The Gospel writers provide us with vital canonical interpretations.

Some other valuable methods of parable interpretation from this time period include their literary skill at drawing out and studying the language of the parables, and most significantly, their grasp of the uniqueness of Jesus' parables as containing spiritual insight. So, what makes Jesus' parables unique? Stein states four factors that make Jesus' parables unique: (1) the literary form; (2) truth, divine message in the form; (3) the convicting work of the Holy Spirit working through the form and the message; and (4) the human response to these factors. These factors together bring about a transformative "event."¹⁸ The nature of a parable is more than its literary form, it also has a revelatory nature from God. The purpose of the parables is to bring about a decision or response because of these factors. Understanding the form is important as it relates to determining the truth contained inside, but the greatest reverence is to, "treat them as the parables of Jesus, i.e., as parables Jesus taught and which are filled with his meaning and insight!"¹⁹

Tradition Criticism: Jülicher-Jeremias (1888-1963)

During Patristic and Medieval allegorizing the details of the parables took center stage. Each parable was considered a detailed allegory containing many metaphors which each held their own significance. This was an open door to multiple and varying

¹⁷ Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*, 33.

¹⁸ Robert H. Stein, "The Genre of the Parables," in *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables* ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 38.

¹⁹ Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*, 69.

interpretations. With the publication of Jülicher's work on parables in the early 20th century, his theory intended to replace allegory and metaphor with "one point realism." He believed that Jesus' parables contained absolutely no metaphorical or figurative language of any kind. Allegory, which he defined as a series of metaphors, was metaphorical and therefore required decoding and disguised a thing. He claimed parables were clearly understood propositional speech, which contained one main point, based on a clearly defined simile and they did not contain any mystery or metaphor in them.²⁰ Thus, eliminating the discussion of the competing views of the details and instead looking for one general moral principle as a whole for each parable. Positively, Jülicher aided in the understanding of the inductive logic in the parables, but through rigid definitions and theories a battle line was drawn between parable and allegory.

Jülicher, Dodd and Jeremias' interpretation of the Parable of the Sower all begin from the premise of rejecting the allegorical interpretation and viewed all allegorical interpretation in the Bible as secondary, replacing it with "one point realism." Jeremias said that "...[T]he process of treating the parables as allegories ... concealed the meaning of the parables under a thick layer of dust."²¹ From this point of view, primitive Christianity adopted the allegorical interpretive methods of the Hellenistic world and Hellenistic Judaism and applied them to Jesus' parables to form Christian allegorical interpretation that did not arise from the historical Jesus.

These and other critical scholars did not doubt the presence of allegorical forms and interpretations attributed to Jesus by the Evangelists. For example, Jeremias lays out the

²⁰ Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*, 247.

²¹ Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 13.

examples of allegorical cases in all four gospels and even the *Gospel of Thomas*.²² But, based on form critical theory, they believed that the allegorical elements in the parables were secondary, not original, and they should be forgotten entirely.²³

Jülicher understood Jesus to be “a teacher of wisdom who inculcated moral precepts.”²⁴ For example, a general moral principle of the parable of the Sower, if one rejected the figurative interpretation attached to it, which Jülicher did because it was allegorical, might be: thank God for the harvest.

Likewise, without the allegorical interpretation, Dodd saw the one point of the parable of the Sower to be the harvest symbolism. The harvest in the Hebrew Scriptures is connected to the Day of the Lord, or Day of Judgment (cf. Joel 3:13). Further, Jesus used a reference to harvest for the mission charge of his ministry and that of his apostles (Matthew 9:37-38, Luke 10:2). The disciples are workers who will reap the harvest.²⁵ Dodd believed that Jesus was considering his work in Galilee when he spoke the parable of the Sower. He was, “thinking aloud about the fortunes of His work in Galilee.”²⁶ He saw all the lost seeds as “dramatic machinery of the story, not to be interpreted symbolically.”²⁷ His conclusion was, “[N]o farmer despairs because of such inevitable waste of labour and seed: it is to be

²² Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 77-87.

²³ C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*. Rev. ed. (New York: Scribner, 1961), 146.

²⁴ Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 249. Quoting Jeremias.

²⁵ Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 143.

²⁶ Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 146.

²⁷ Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 146.

expected; in spite of all, he may have an excellent harvest” (cf. Matthew 9:37-38, Luke 10:2).²⁸

Jeremias stated that the parable of the Sower was supposed to make an eschatological point and not a psychological one.²⁹ He saw the harvest-time yield in the parable of the Sower as a miracle and abnormal. The harvest, “[S]ymbolizes the eschatological overflowing of the divine fullness, surpassing all human measure.”³⁰ The meaning of the Sower is: “In spite of every failure and opposition, from hopeless beginnings, God brings forth the triumphant end which he had promised.”³¹

Jülicher, Dodd and Jeremias’ views will briefly be examined. Any helpful tools to textual analysis will be added and their overall views will be broadly evaluated.

Adolf Jülicher (1857-1938)

Positively, Jülicher helped with the classification of the synoptic parables. He identified three key classifications: similitudes, parables (narrow sense) and exemplary parables (The Good Samaritan being one of them). He asserted that a single proportional analogy was the defining feature of the similitudes. A proportional analogy compares two unlike things. Jesus’ theme, *tenor*, and the image Jesus uses for his theme, *vehicle*.³²

²⁸ Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 146.

²⁹ Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 79.

³⁰ Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 150.

³¹ Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 151.

³² Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 29-30.

This simple comparison, or analogy, is helpful as the basic building block of a parable. However, it is not that simple because of the wide range of meanings associated with the word *parabolē* in the New Testament and the importance of the setting of the parables themselves. Missing from the classification of the synoptic parables is “allegory-parable.”

Negatively, Jülicher redefined the word *parable* in the narrowest of terms. He believed parables were all clearly understood similes or extended similes spoken in literal speech with only one point related to a general, religious or moral theme. Jülicher made a sharp distinction between simile and metaphor. Allegorical explanations such as that attached to the Sower, the Tenants and the Matthean Wedding Feast, were rejected by him as inauthentic.³³

C.H. Dodd (1884–1973)

Many have offered critiques to Jülicher’s work on various different levels. Dodd and Jeremias offer the most significant critiques because they agreed with Jülicher’s first premise that parables were not allegory. Dodd believed Jülicher was incorrect on the one point of a parable being a very general moral principle. Instead, he detailed that Jesus intended the one main point to most certainly be related to the kingdom of God. His contribution to parable interpretation centered around the necessity of determining the original intent of the parable in the life of Jesus which centered around the Kingdom of God. The “lesson” taken from a parable must “not [be] incongruous with what we may learn of their original intention.”³⁴

³³ Boucher, *The Mysterious Parable*, 4-5.

³⁴ Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, ix.

Dodd sought this by putting the historical first without dismissing the theological significance of the life of Jesus. Dodd stated, “the sayings which declare the Kingdom of God to have come are explicit and unequivocal... For eternal life is the ultimate issue of the coming of the Kingdom of God, and this coming is manifested in the series of historical events which unfolds itself in the ministry of Jesus.”³⁵

Dodd classified Jesus as using figurative sayings, similitudes and parables, asserting that more specific definitions should not be pressed. He defines allegory as each detail being a separate metaphor with its own significance. He stated, “The details are not intended to have independent significance.”³⁶ However, Dodd admits, “In making this distinction between the parable and the allegory, we must not be too rigorous.” He admits hearers may “see a secondary significance in these details” from time to time. He believes the general rule should be however, that details should be kept “strictly subordinate to the dramatic realism of the story.”³⁷

Joachim Jeremias (1900–1979)

Jülicher and Dodd compared Jesus’ parables with definitions of Greek rhetorical categories and rejected all allegorical elements in the parables as secondary additions. Jeremias also followed Jülicher and Dodd by ignoring all allegorical elements, but he improved on the literary comparison. Instead of comparing Jesus’ parables primarily to Greek literary genre, he saw the Old Testament literary genre of the *masal* as much more

³⁵ Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 35.

³⁶ Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 7.

³⁷ Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 9.

applicable. This remains the most helpful acculturation of the parables of Jesus.³⁸ Jeremias' enduring influence on the study of Jesus' parables was highlighting the cultural understanding of 1st century Palestine and the significance of the background of *mashal* in the Old Testament on understanding *parabolē*. Jeremias saw a pattern of Jesus using common metaphors from the Old Testament as the start of Jesus' parables.³⁹ He saw the allegorical features in the parables as unoriginal. He admitted that it was an easy transition from metaphor to allegory.⁴⁰

Response

Jülicher's definition of parable has been consistently criticized for being unjustifiably binary – simple parable on one side and detailed allegories on the other. Rather, as a literary genre Jesus' parables have a range between, “single point parables,” to story-parable with allegorical details to “detailed allegories.”⁴¹ Additionally, the idea that Jesus' parables can be understood without their attached interpretations is untenable. Critical scholarship's error is cutting off the all-important interpretative elements present in the text which speak to the Gospel author's intent and preferring instead to base opinions of intent on reconstructed speculation of Jesus' history.

Tradition Criticism has given us important tools to examine the texts in the Bible, such as, form, source and redaction criticism. With the parables, Jülicher pointed out the

³⁸ Stein, “The Genre of the Parables,” 34.

³⁹ Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 79.

⁴⁰ Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 89.

⁴¹ Stein, “The Genre of the Parables,” 41–47.

comparison by analogy at the logical heart of each of Jesus' parables. This is a great inductive insight. Dodd sought the meaning of the text through the theological consideration at the heart of Jesus' ministry, the kingdom of God. He also focused on the importance of the two key historical settings in mind for determining a parable's meaning: the original setting and the setting in the life of the early church. The application of divine truth for our situation today ought to be on the foundation of these two settings.⁴² Jeremias significantly aided in the acculturation of parables by accurately linking the Greek word *parabolē* to the Hebrew word *mashal*.

Reader- Response (1970's to Today)

According to Hendrick, a proponent of Reader-Response, a "reading" is a reader's response to a story. He believes in offering a "reading" of a parable and not an "interpretation" because, according to him, parables are poetic fictions. "Read as poetic fictions the stories of Jesus do not inevitably produce a single specific summary 'meaning,' but rather legitimize a limited range of plausible readings."⁴³ Plausible "meaning" is based on an individual's "reading." An "interpretation" is associated with meaning and therefore one is assuming that the parables are presenting something that could be spoken of in a propositional summary. Hendrick assumes this is not the case. He states that meaning is to be found "inside the story" where one can discover *oneself* and the world. Parables cannot be metaphor or symbols for the kingdom of God because that would be taking one "outside the

⁴² Technically these are settings one and three. The second setting is the oral tradition time period in which the passing down of the message of Jesus occurred through preaching and teaching after Pentecost and before the written gospels. It is considered highly probable that they had written note sources during this time.

⁴³ Charles W. Hendrick, *Parables as Poetic Fiction* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994), 4. 5-6.

story.”⁴⁴ He states that parables are “ordinary stories, brief fictions realistically portraying aspects of first century Palestinian life.”⁴⁵ He aligns himself with the work of Dan Otto Via, Jr.

In the 1970’s, Via took an ahistorical approach to the parables. He believed parables could not be allegory because allegory is related to the outside world. “The allegorist does not begin with an image which suggests a meaning, but he begins with an idea or meaning and looks for an image to represent it.”⁴⁶ Therefore, a parable is an aesthetic-art.

[I]n a parable...all of these features...they do not relate primarily and in the first place to an event, events, or ideas outside the parable. They relate first of all to each other within the parable, and the structure of connections of these elements is not determined by events or ideas outside of the parable but by the author's creative composition.⁴⁷

This is similar to views of some literary theorists who think of a writer’s work as “autonomous” from the intention of the author. Madeleine Boucher succinctly sums up Via’s intended contribution to parable interpretation,

The best interpretation is an existential, secular, non-allegorical one, which understands the parables as a statement about human interrelationships and which brings out its permanently relevant meaning. Because the parable presents this statement aesthetically, it has the power to compel the hearer to decision and thus it becomes an “event.”⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Hendrick, *Parables as Poetic Fiction*, x.

⁴⁵ Hendrick, *Parables as Poetic Fiction*, 3.

⁴⁶ Dan Otto Via, Jr., *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967),6.

⁴⁷ Via, *The Parables*, 35.

⁴⁸ Boucher, *The Mysterious Parable: A Literary Study*, 9.

In the narrative of the parables Via is looking at human existence and not the kingdom of God.⁴⁹

Other Modern critical scholars such as Funk, Crossan, Scott and Perrin focus on literary criticism and see the parables as nonliteral metaphorical language.⁵⁰ The main point of this is to remove the parables from propositional speech and thus end the search for each parable's one meaning. These Modern critical scholars all see allegory in the New Testament as secondary additions inauthentic to the historical Jesus. Additionally, the *Gospel of Thomas* is highly regarded among them as an interpretive aid to the understanding of Jesus' parables.

In his book, *The Power of Parable: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction About Jesus*, Crossan states that a parable is metaphoricity plus narrativity, a metaphorical story.⁵¹ The title states his assumption. He argues in the book that each of the gospels is a "book-length *megaparable* about the life, death and resurrection of the historical character Jesus of Nazareth."⁵² When he says *megaparable*, he means that the Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, each wrote book length fiction, not history, about Jesus. Here is Crossan's conclusion of the meaning of Jesus' parables: "The *power* of Jesus' parables challenged and enabled his followers to co-create with God a world of justice and love, peace and nonviolence."⁵³ Crossan's assumption is that the historical Jesus, a mere man, created inspiring moral fiction that modern readers today can also read as inspiring moral fiction.

⁴⁹ Hendrick, *Parables as Poetic Fiction*, 10.

⁵⁰ Hendrick, *Parables as Poetic Fiction*, 98-99.

⁵¹ John Dominic Crossan, *The Power of Parable: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction About Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 8.

⁵² Crossan, *The Power of Parable*, 6.

⁵³ Crossan, *The Power of Parable*, 252.

Response

The postmodern scholarly claim is that Jesus' parables are aesthetic works possessing "an innate power that can and should interpret us."⁵⁴ The focus is on the power of the words affecting a person. The problem with this claim is a matter of focusing on the affective nature of the parables to the exclusion of the informative dimension.⁵⁵ Mary Ann Tolbert and Robert Stein have separately responded to this strange perspective by insisting that parables must be interpreted, as it is a function of human nature. Mary Ann Tolbert kindly warns, "Exaggerated claims of power for the parables are present in much current scholarship.... This kind of inflated language ... may be in the case of the parables a result of confusing the speaker with that which is spoken."⁵⁶ Stein sees this as a confusion of giving metaphor and parable powers associated with God. Stein quotes another scholar, John Donahue, who also finds this trend perplexing, "The impression arises that at times salvation comes from metaphor alone!"⁵⁷

The dual nature to Jesus' parables can be expressed in a variety of ways: Reality Part, Picture Part; Informative, Affective; Literal Meaning, Figurative Meaning; Tenor, Vehicle; Focus, Frame; Illustrated, Illustration; Principal Part, Subsidiary Subject; Signified,

⁵⁴ Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*, 67.

⁵⁵ Stein, "The Genre of the Parables," 48.

⁵⁶ Mary Ann Tolbert, *Perspectives on the Parables: An Approach to Multiple Interpretations* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 42.

⁵⁷ Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*, 68.

Signifier.⁵⁸ The beauty of Jesus' parables is that both parts have an important role. The informative nature of Jesus' parables can be expressed in non-metaphorical language. However, the affective part is significant as well because it contains the persuasive, disarming element. They were effectively and brilliantly used by Jesus to teach the word (Mark 4:33). The positive focus of the Reader-Response method is that Jesus' words should have a personal effect on a person. There is a decision, challenge or response that Jesus is seeking.

The word of God did personally affect John the Baptist's disciples. They were baptized and confessed their sins (Mark 1:5). Following this, those sick and hurting reached out to Jesus. A man with leprosy pleads with Jesus, "If you are willing, you can make me clean" (Mark 1:40). Jesus replied, "I am willing...Be clean!" (Mark 1:41). Men took action and brought their paralytic friend to Jesus. Jesus "saw their faith" (Mark 2:5) and told the paralytic his sins were forgiven. Jesus famously said, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners" (Mark 1:17). Sinners are ones who know they need help to change. "For Jesus a parable served as a superb means of communication, but it was never an end in itself."⁵⁹

Summary

The developments throughout the three phases of parable interpretation have been a mix of helpful insight and troubling trends. The problem of the Patristic and Medieval exegetes could be described as jumping to conclusions about the author's intent and the parable's meaning from an allegorical or spiritual standpoint. Critical scholarship's error is

⁵⁸ Stein, "The Genre of the Parables," 48.

⁵⁹ Stein, "The Genre of the Parables," 48.

cutting off the all-important interpretative elements present in the text which speak to the Gospel author’s intent and preferring instead to base opinions of intent on reconstructed speculation of Jesus’ history. Today, postmodern scholarship now denies that finding the author’s intent is even possible, and postmodern scholars are by and large content with staying focused on understanding themselves as the reader. This long and winding road of parable interpretation includes many questions. The following chart summarizes the beneficial and detrimental approaches to the parables.

How to Approach the Parables

<i>History of Interpretation</i>	Beneficial	Detrimental
Patristic and Medieval	Divine nature of Jesus’ words Inauguration of the kingdom of God Jesus used allegory <i>Theological Considerations</i>	Jumps to too many spiritual conclusions without warrant from the historical or cultural context hyperlallegorization
Tradition Criticism	Logic of comparison historical context cultural context textual analysis and comparison <i>Tools to analyze the text</i>	Bases answers on speculative reconstruction Assumes Jesus did not use any allegory All allegorizing in NT removed “One point” has been disproven
Reader-Response	Challenge/Personal response More literary tools <i>Affective nature of parables</i>	The aesthetic form of the parables takes on the divine qualities which should be ascribed to God Ignores original meaning as unrecoverable

When used properly the tools that have come from Tradition Criticism can help one hear and see the text more accurately. A few tools include: the literary logic of comparison in most of parables, the historical context and the cultural context. These tools will be highlighted in the textual analysis of Mark 4:1–9. The insight from Reader- Response can help one discover the emotive tone and communicative intent of Jesus’ parables and reinforce the personal response he exhorted through them. These will be discussed with Mark 4:10–12. The example of the Patristic and Medieval exegetes can inspire proper reverence for the person and preaching of Jesus. These theological considerations will be highlighted under Jesus’ explanation of the parable. Jesus also did use allegory. The degree to which he did make allegorical connections will also be discussed under the explanation of the parable (4:13–20).

CHAPTER TWO

THE SETTING AND THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER (4:1–9)

The historical setting in the life of Jesus is an important context tool to help properly understand the text. The cultural setting of the parable relating to farming is another example of a textual help. Additionally, the logic of analogy that Jülicher identified in Jesus' parables is an important literary tool. This sampling of tools from Tradition Criticism will be used to aid the textual analysis of Mark 4:1–9.¹

What is the historical context in Mark prior to Jesus speaking The Parable of the Sower in Mark 4:1–20? Prior to the discursive sequence of Mark chapter four, several thoughts and questions from various sectors of people are presented in Mark regarding Jesus and his Galilean ministry. Some were amazed, “What is this? A new teaching – and with authority!” (Mark 1:27). Crowds flock to him, but the Pharisees skeptically question Jesus (2:18–3:12). Subsequent to this Jesus is further misunderstood. Jesus' family misunderstands and says, “He is out of his mind” (3:21). The teachers of the law misunderstand and say, “He is possessed by Beelzebub!” (3:22a). Jesus, who has by this time appointed the twelve disciples and calls them apostles (3:13–19), responds to each of these misunderstandings directly. Regarding his family he states, “Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother”(3:25). To the teachers of the law he had strong words for their misunderstanding, which begins with the statement, "How can Satan drive out Satan?" (3:23–

¹ The significance of the acculturation of *parabolē* with *mashal* was previously discussed in the Introduction.

30). Some of the cultural setting relating to farming is interspersed throughout the textual analysis. Then it is discussed specifically at the end of the chapter along with the discussion of the logic of analogy present in this parable.

Mark 4:1

Καὶ πάλιν ἤρξατο διδάσκειν παρὰ τὴν θάλασσαν; καὶ συνάγεται πρὸς αὐτὸν ὄχλος πλεῖστος, ὥστε αὐτὸν εἰς πλοῖον ἐμβάντα καθῆσθαι ἐν τῇ θαλάσῃ, καὶ πᾶς ὁ ὄχλος πρὸς τὴν θάλασσαν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἦσαν.

Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land.

"Καὶ πάλιν" ("and again") refers back to Mark's previous reference to Jesus teaching by the sea (3:7-9). Mark 2:13 also has καὶ πάλιν and it relates back to 1:16. This suggests that Jesus teaching by the sea was a common occurrence. The focus of the action in this verse is Jesus' teaching. The response to Jesus and his teaching was a gathering of an ὄχλος πλεῖστος "very (or exceedingly) large crowd".² As a result (ὥστε) of the crowds, Jesus got into a boat and sat in it on the sea (cf. 3:9). The great crowds sat along the shore. People from all over the region were coming to hear and see Jesus (3:8). People wanted to see and hear him because news about him had spread quickly (1:28). There was something special about Jesus relationally, socially, intellectually and spiritually. Relationally, people wanted to get close to Jesus to the point that he had to create space so that everyone could hear him (3:9, 4:1). Also, Jesus had appointed twelve apostles; he was training them to carry out ministry with him. Socially, Jesus' goal was to be with people and preach (1:14 –15, 38). Intellectually, people

² A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 4th ed. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), 670. Here, πλεῖστος is an example of the elative superlative.

were talking about him all over town and in effect saying, "What do you make of Jesus, his teaching and his healing?" Jesus' ministry enlarged on the heels of the illustrious ministry of John the Baptist (1:1–8, 14). Jesus must have spent hours and hours teaching and preaching from town after town, over and over, in order for his message to be remembered. People marveled at his teachings. Spiritually, Jesus is said to have spoken with authority (1:21–22, 27). The miracles of Jesus concern his ability to heal and cast out demons. People clearly felt that Jesus was illuminating God's truth (1:15, 21–22). Detailed discussions would arise as to who Jesus was – John the Baptist come back from the dead? Elijah? A prophet? (6:14–15).

Mark 4:2

καὶ ἐδίδασκεν αὐτοὺς ἐν παραβολαῖς πολλὰ καὶ ἔλεγεν αὐτοῖς ἐν τῇ διδαχῇ αὐτοῦ,

And he was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them:...

Teaching is the focus of this sentence as well, with forms of the word occurring two more times (ἐδίδασκεν, ἐν τῇ διδαχῇ). The first form is the verb ἐδίδασκεν “he was teaching,” and it relates to whom he taught (αὐτούς “them”) and how he taught (ἐν παραβολαῖς πολλὰ, “in many parables”). This can refer both to the form of teaching³ and its content. The form is straightforward: Jesus taught in the form of parables. Additionally, Walter Bauer, in his lexicon, observes that wherever Mark used parable/parables in the dative (Mark 3:23, 4:2, 4:30, 12:1) the meaning takes the force of “present the Kingdom of God in a parable.”⁴ The second use is, ἐν τῇ διδαχῇ αὐτοῦ (“in his teaching”), which relates to the act

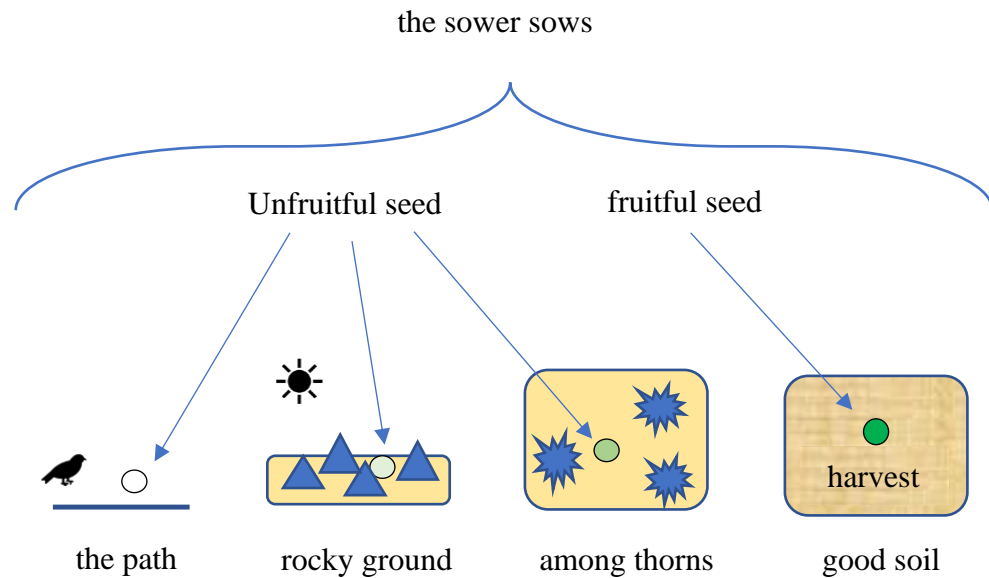
³ Ibid., 73. Reference is made to Guelich stating that “Dat. indicates the vehicle used for teaching.”

⁴ Walter Bauer and others, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 4th revised and augmented ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1957), s.v. παραβολή.

of teaching.⁵ Verse 4:2 corresponds to 4:33-34 which marks the end of the teaching discourse section.

The Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:3–9)

Here is a representation of the narrative structure of the parable.



The Outline of the Sower Parable is as follows:

- 4:3 The sower sows
- 4:4 Seed on the path
- 4:5–6 Seed on the rocky ground
- 4:7 Seed among the thorns
- 4:8 Seed in good soil
- 4:9 Refrain – call to consider and respond

⁵ Cleon L. Rogers, Cleon L. Rogers, and Fritz Rienecker, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 73. The imperfect indicative active form, ἐδίδασκεν, "he was teaching", could also be "he began to teach" if this is an example of an inceptive imperfect.

Mark 4:3

Ἀκούετε. ἰδοὺ ἐξῆλθεν ὁ σπείρων σπεῖραι.

“Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow.”

“Ἀκούετε,” ((you) Listen) is an important theme in this parable. This verb is used seven times in 4:1–20. It is at the beginning and end of the parable (4:3, 9), in between the parable and explanation (4:12) and four times in the explanation (4:15, 16, 18, 20).⁶ As an exhortation, the meaning here is pay attention and respond.⁷ The word Ἀκούετε is unique to Mark's retelling of this parable and may connect to Jesus' challenge in 4:13. The word ἰδοὺ (behold, look, see) is used seven times in the book of Mark (1:2, 3:32, 4:3, 10:28, 33, 14:41, 42). In the ESV, ἰδοὺ in Mark 1:2 and 4:3 is translated “behold.” In 10:28, 10:33 and 14:42 is translated “see.” In 3:32 and 14:41 it is not translated which is common in English translations.

The sower (ὁ σπείρων) is a substantive participle, and one could translate it, “The one who sows (seed) went out to sow.” The verb σπείρω is common throughout the gospels and epistles. There are other verses in which Jesus shows familiarity with farming methods (vv.26-29, 30-32; Matthew 13:24-30; cf. John 4:35-38).⁸

⁶ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002), 184.

⁷ Rogers, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament*, 73.

⁸ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 190.

Mark 4:4

καὶ ἐγένετο ἐν τῷ σπείρειν ὃ μὲν ἔπεσεν παρὰ τὴν ὁδόν, καὶ ἦλθεν τὰ πετεινὰ καὶ κατέφαγεν αὐτό.

And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it.

Is it better to translate it as “a seed fell” or “some seed fell?” This question is related to the overall pattern of the parable. N.T. France sees the pattern as three failed single seeds followed by the plural which he sees as indicating three successful seeds ((ὃ μὲν (v.4), καὶ ἄλλο (v. 5), καὶ ἄλλο (v. 7), ἄλλα (plural seeds, v. 8)), thus balancing the story.⁹ Vincent Taylor sees ὃ μὲν to mean, “a part (of the seeds).” The pattern he sees would be equivalent to: some, some, some, and the rest.¹⁰

The last part of the verse is the natural phenomenon of birds coming down from the air to eat up the seed on the road. Birds are also featured in the Mustard Seed parable (4:32). The word for eat, κατέφαγεν (root κατεσθίω) is used two times in Mark, here and in Mark 12:40. It is different from the common verb ἐσθίω (to eat) used 23 times in Mark.

Mark 4:5–6

⁵καὶ ἄλλο ἔπεσεν ἐπὶ τὸ πετρῶδες ὅπου οὐκ εἶχεν γῆν πολλήν, καὶ εὐθὺς ἐξανέτειλεν διὰ τὸ μὴ ἔχειν βάθος γῆς; ⁶καὶ ὅτε ἀνέτειλεν ὁ ἥλιος ἐκαυματίσθη καὶ διὰ τὸ μὴ ἔχειν ῥίζαν ἐξηράνθη.

⁵ Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. ⁶ And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away.

⁹ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 190-91.

¹⁰ Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1966), 252.

Here Jesus describes the rocky ground in Palestine. Seed falling on this soil has only a thin layer of earth on which to grow because of the rocky ground underneath it. Immediately (εὐθύς) is a common word used by Mark to drive a narrative. In this case, the story has moved on to the sprouting phase of the seed. The seedling springs up (ἐξανέτειλεν) as nature intended, and one sees the young seedling right away because of the shallow (μὴ βάθος) soil. A process of time, several days perhaps, is assumed between the young seedling beginning to sprout and the sun rising and scorching the plant because of its lack of roots. This detailed discussion about the death of a small seedling might have alerted the hearer to be thinking about possible secondary meaning. Frank Stern, a Jewish Rabbi, notes that most Jews were farmers in first-century Palestine. Their focus would not have been on observing the small dying plants in unfertile soil.¹¹

Mark 4:7

καὶ ἄλλο ἔπεσεν εἰς τὰς ἀκάνθας, καὶ ἀνέβησαν αἱ ἄκανθαι καὶ συνέπνιξαν αὐτο, καὶ καρπὸν οὐκ ἔδωκεν.

Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain.

“Other [seed] fell” (καὶ ἄλλο ἔπεσεν), this time among thorn plants (τὰς ἀκάνθας). In this example, the references may be to a farmer who cut down and burned the thorn plants, but did not uproot them. Therefore, when seeds, fell on this soil, the thorn bushes grew back stronger and choked the wheat plants before they could produce fruit.¹² The progress of the

¹¹ Frank Stern, *A Rabbi Looks at Jesus' Parables* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 27–28.

¹² Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, 253.

seed sprouting and growing taller is a greater amount of time than the young seedling on the rocks. It is still of no value to the farmer. So far we have a seed that did not even sprout, then one that sprouted but shortly died and finally one that grew for a while but died before it produced any grain.

Mark 4:8

καὶ ἄλλα ἔπεσεν εἰς τὴν γῆν τὴν καλὴν καὶ ἐδίδου καρπὸν ἀναβαίνοντα καὶ αὐξανόμενα καὶ ἔφερον ἐν τριάκοντα καὶ ἐν ἐξήκοντα καὶ ἐν ἑκατόν.

And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.

First, there is the plural form, “other [seeds] fell” (καὶ ἄλλα ἔπεσεν), which may very well imply that, like in any decent sowing of seeds, the majority of seeds will fall on good soil (τὴν γῆν τὴν καλὴν) – soil fit for producing a harvest of grain. This is a very active verse beginning with the imperfect verb: “yielded” (ἐδίδου) and a second imperfect, “brought forth” (ἔφερον). To add to this imagery are two present participles “growing” (ἀναβαίνοντα) and “increasing” (αὐξανόμενα) which describe the lively manner of the grain being brought forth. The thirtyfold, sixtyfold and a hundredfold refer to the number of grains yielded per plant.¹³ It is not to be considered a reference to a miraculous amount of bushels, but rather a successful harvest.¹⁴ Genesis 26:12 says, “And Isaac sowed in that land and reaped in the same year a hundredfold. The Lord blessed him...”

¹³ Matthew has the reverse order: a hundredfold, sixtyfold and thirtyfold (Matthew 13:8). Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, 254. Mark's retelling may be closer to the Aramaic according to V. Taylor because of Mark's use of the preposition ἐν, ἐν, ἐν as compared to Matthew's use of (ὃ, ὃ, ὃ). Luke simply uses "a hundred times" (ἑκατονταπλασίονα) (Luke 8:8).

¹⁴ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 191-92.

Mark 4:9

καὶ ἔλεγεν, Ὅς ἔχει ὦτα ἀκούειν ἀκούετω.

And he said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

This was a common phrase of Jesus. There are several comparative examples of Jesus using this phrase in his teaching (Mark 4:23, Matthew 11:15, 13:43, Luke 14:35). Jesus also said similar things like: Mark 4:24, “Pay attention to what you hear...”¹⁵ and Mark 7:14b, “Hear me, all of you, and understand...”

Does everyone always consider what he or she hears? Does everyone always listen? The obvious answer is, “No.” This can be a problem when the message is about important issues. Following the parables, chapter four ends with another miracle displaying God's power – Jesus calming the storm (4:35–41). Here we see that the struggle to understand Jesus also lies in the hearts of the disciples. Jesus asks the disciples, “Do you still have no faith?” Another striking discussion between Jesus and his disciples is in Mark 8. Jesus spoke frankly with them: “Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember?” (Mark 8:17b-18) There was clearly a message that Jesus was intending his disciples to take to heart and remember. In the Old Testament there are several references with similar calls to listen and heed God's words (Deuteronomy 29:4 (cf. 29:29), Jeremiah 5:21, Ezekiel 12:2, Isaiah 6:9-10).¹⁶ C.F.D.

¹⁵ Cf. Luke 8:18, “Take care then how you hear...”

¹⁶ Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, 254. He cross-references Deuteronomy 29:4 (29:2). France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 193. He references Jeremiah 5:21, Ezekiel 12:2.

Moule interprets Jesus phrase in Mark 4:9 as, “Now think that one out for yourself, if you can!”¹⁷

The Cultural Setting

The cultural setting of the parable was relatable to Jesus' audience because most of the Palestinian Jews were farmers. In the history of interpretation of this parable discussions have arisen as to whether the situation in the parable involved sowing before ploughing (Jeremias) or ploughing before sowing (K.D. White). P.B. Payne analyzed the discussion and laid out the details relevant to the sequences of ploughing to sowing in Mediterranean Palestine. The Old Testament uses the illustration of ploughing and sowing in several places (Job 4:8, Isaiah 28:24-6, Jeremiah 4:3, Ezekiel 36:9, Hosea 10:11-13 and Amos 9:13). All of the Old Testament references refer to ploughing before sowing. Other documents referenced in the article show examples of farmers sowing before ploughing.

Generally, sowing could have occurred before ploughing if it was done before the autumn rain. If the October rain had already come it would be standard to plough first and then sow. Regardless of which came first, it was general practice to plough immediately after sowing, in order to keep the birds from eating the seed.¹⁸ Additionally, Payne states that sowing occurred twice a year: once in autumn and once in the spring. The autumn sowing was more important and thus Payne suggests a situation during the autumn sowing season as a more probable setting for the parable and therefore a suggested reference to the major

¹⁷ C.F.D. Moule, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 35.

¹⁸ Philip Barton Payne, “The Order of Sowing and Ploughing in the Parable of the Sower,” *New Testament Studies* 25 (1978): 123-29.

autumn crop of wheat.¹⁹ Payne concludes that the parable is generalized and does not answer the question of whether or not this particular farmer ploughed before sowing or sowed before ploughing because both could have been possible.

Another question that Jeremias brings up is whether or not the Sower intentionally or unintentionally sowed on the various soils. Jeremias argues that the farmer in this parable intentionally sowed on all the various soils because after sowing, the ploughshares would have ploughed in all the seed, on the rocky ground, among the thorn bushes and even on the path.²⁰ Payne disagrees and instead suggests that the sowing on the path, rocky ground and among the thorns was not intentional on the part of the farmer because the result was unfruitful.²¹ Additionally, Payne finds it unlikely that a road would be plowed for growing wheat each year and then used as a road again. Stern agrees with Payne. Instead of caring equally for all of the soils, Stern states that the farmer simply ignored the seeds on soils that were unlikely to yield a crop.²²

In addition to the cultural understanding of Jewish farming methods, the references to ploughing and sowing in the Hebrew Scriptures points to their ancient Palestinian Jewish theology (Genesis 26:12; Psalm 107:35–38; Isaiah 37:30; Jeremiah 12:13; 31:27; Hosea 2:23; Zechariah 10:9). Other traditional symbols that have references in the Hebrew Scriptures are thorns and birds. Sowing and ploughing is a helpful cultural discussion, but according to the text, subsequently discussed, the earnest crowds and disciples were more

¹⁹ Payne, “The Order of Sowing and Ploughing in the Parable of the Sower,” 123-29.

²⁰ Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 12.

²¹ Payne, “The Order of Sowing and Ploughing in the Parable of the Sower,” 128.

²² Stern, *A Rabbi Looks at Jesus' Parables*, 28.

likely pondering the theological questions related to the meaning of the Parable of the Sower and the Kingdom of God.

Summary

Jesus often taught by the sea and often to very large crowds. The Parable of the Sower is one among many fascinating parables of Jesus. The relatable nature of farming and the cyclical cycle of seedtime and harvest make the parable easy to remember and contemplate. The cycle of the seasons, an archetypal symbol, is used elsewhere by Jesus (The Seed Growing Secretly, Mk. 4:26–29 and the Mustard Seed, 4:30–32. cf. Tree and its Fruit Mt. 7:15–20). In the Parable of the Sower, the presence of analogy is implied. Jesus, a rabbi, is not simply talking about farming. Which ideas to lay side-by-side are not explicitly laid out. When this parable is separated from its interpretation it can mean different things.²³ The structure follows the rule of 3: three parallel and the fourth a contrast (cf. The Fable of the Trees, Judges 9:7–21).

Jülicher's best contribution to literary theory is identifying the proportional analogy, ideas "laid side by side," as the basic component of the similitudes.²⁴ The similitude parable of the Budding Fig Tree (Mark 13. 28-9; cf. Matthew 24. 32-3, Luke 21. 19-31) is an explicit example. Sider states, "As soon as its branch becomes tender...you know that summer is

²³ Stern, *A Rabbi Looks at Jesus' Parables*, 1–23.

²⁴ John W. Sider, "Proportional analogy in the Gospel Parables," *New Testament Studies* 31(1985): 1–23.

near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near.”²⁵ The form of statement is nearly the same as the form of thought.

Sider sees the proportional analogy as the basic component of all of Jesus’ parables not just the simpler similitudes. Therefore, the form of thought is the same in the two complex parables in Mark, The Sower (Mark 4:1–20) and The Tenants (Mark 12:1–12). In the Parable of the Tenants the comparison is not explicit like it was in The Budding Fig Tree, but in this case the audience understood the analogy even though it was not spelled out (Mark 12:12). Jesus did not say that the tenants in the story were the leaders of Israel or that God was the vineyard owner, but “they knew he had spoken the parable against them” (Mark 12:12).

What has Jesus illustrated with his illustration of the Parable of the Sower? There is an ellipsis in Jesus’ narrative here that makes its message uncertain. Sider states, “The riddle of the Sower tested the hearers’ sincerity...”²⁶ The crowds may have had a mix of curious onlookers, hecklers, antagonists, and attentive hearers. In any event, “those around him with the twelve,” (Mark 4:10) come to Jesus with their questions about the parables.

²⁵ Sider, "Proportional analogy in the Gospel Parables," 1–23.

²⁶ Sider, *Interpreting the Parables*, 198.

CHAPTER THREE

THE DISCIPLES' QUESTIONS AND JESUS' ANSWER (4:10–12)

Contemplating the emotive tone and reinforcing the personal response Jesus exhorted through his parables is a positive contribution of the Reader-Response method. This tool is appropriate to include in the textual analysis of Mark 4:10–12. The indirect and unexpected form of a parable makes confrontational communication easier. In these verses the verb “to hear” is used nine times. The desired communicative effect of Jesus' parables is not to keep people from hearing and prevent God's forgiveness but just the opposite. Hearing is important and it is easy to fail at it. Jesus is encouraging genuine hearing, as well as, warning those outside of the dangers of hearing poorly.¹

The harshness of the indictment on the failure to hear in vv.10–12 must be taken together with vv.1–34. Snodgrass notes two brackets in the Mark 4:1–20 pericope that add commentary. The first is the bracket created by those “outside” used in 3:31-35 and 4:11. The parable is in the center of these brackets. The second is the parable itself and the parable's interpretation which serves as brackets for Mark 4:10–12.

Mark 4:10

Καὶ ὅτε ἐγένετο κατὰ μόνας, ἠρώτων αὐτὸν οἱ περὶ αὐτὸν σὺν τοῖς δώδεκα τὰς παραβολάς.

And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables.

¹ Klyne Snodgrass, “Between Text and Sermon,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 67 no. 3(2013): 284-286.

The setting has changed. Jesus is no longer in the boat. He is now alone (ἐγένετο κατὰ μόνας) – at least away from the very great crowd. "Those around him with the twelve" (οἱ περὶ αὐτὸν σὺν τοῖς δώδεκα) ask Jesus about the parables (τὰς παραβολάς, plural). In addition to the Twelve, how ought "those around him" be defined? In the parallel accounts Matt. 13:10 and Luke 8:9 use the word "disciples." "Those around him with the twelve" is a description of the composition of Jesus' disciples, which includes more than just the Twelve. Additionally, on a separate occasion, Mark states that *the disciples* (οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ) asked Jesus a question about a different parable (Mark 7:17, cf. Matt. 15:15). The imperfect tense-form may suggest that people asked Jesus about his parables (and teaching) privately on a regular basis.

At the end of the discourse section, in Mark 4:33–34, the verses include several different groups to whom Jesus taught parables. First, we have "them," the crowds. They were taught as far as they could understand. Then you have the additional time Jesus took with own disciples explaining everything (4:34b). It was most certainly progressive knowledge and not perfect knowledge. The repeated predictive nature of Jesus' words often baffled the disciples. They did not fully understand until after Jesus' death and resurrection. Peter's very great blunder (Mark 8:32–33), after recognizing Jesus as the Messiah, is an excellent case in point.

Mark 4:11

καὶ ἔλεγεν αὐτοῖς, Ὑμῖν τὸ μυστήριον δέδοται τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ θεοῦ; ἐκείνοις δὲ τοῖς ἔξω ἐν παραβολαῖς τὰ πάντα γίνεται

And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables"

Apparently, the etymology of μυστήριον from the old Greek comes from the combination of μῦς and τηρεῖν!² The word μῦς means mouse³ and the word τηρεῖν is the infinitive form of the verb τηρέω, which means to keep watch over. This entertaining fact is insignificant, but what is not is the word's history with Greek "mystery religions." The secret teachings, esoteric knowledge, were associated with strange customs and ceremonies. Death was threatened if initiates revealed the religious secrets.⁴

Christianity, by contrast, added a deeper, spiritual sense to this common κοινή Greek word and is described by N.T. France as "open secret." The Biblical background to the meaning of the word in Mark is its use in the LXX, especially in Daniel 2:18–19, 27–30, 40 (cf. 4:6). Here God gives Daniel the "secret" to understanding Nebuchadnezzar's dream. God does not give it to the wise men of Babylon. But, Daniel shares his God given revelation with Nebuchadnezzar.⁵

Among the synoptic evangelists, the word is only found in association with the telling of the Parable of the Sower. Mark has the only use of the word τὸ μυστήριον in the singular. The plural form, τὰ μυστήρια, is used in the parallel accounts with the addition of the verb "to know" (γινῶναι) (Matthew 13:11 and Luke 8:10). A literal translation of Mark would be, "to you the secret has been given of the kingdom of God." A look at the parallels is helpful.

² A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 4th ed. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), 145-46.

³ Walter Bauer and others, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 4th revised and augmented ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1957), s.v. μῦς.

⁴ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002), 196-199.

⁵ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 196-199.

Luke 8:10 states, “to you has been granted to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of God.” (ὕμῖν δέδοται γνῶναι τὰ μυστήρια τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ θεοῦ...). Mathew 13:11 states, “to you has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.” (ὕμῖν δέδοται γνῶναι τὰ μυστήρια τῆς βασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν...). All three accounts use the verb “has been given” (δέδοται) in the perfect passive tense-form. This emphasizes a completeness of that which was given and implies that what has been given is from God. Therefore, the “secret” can be understood as knowledge from God.

For a fuller grasp of the meaning of the word it is necessary to look at the foreground of its use and the abundant 21 times it occurs in Paul's writings (e.g., Colossians 1:26-27, 2:2, 4:3) and the several uses of the word in Revelation (1:20, 10:7 and 17:7).⁶ V. Taylor concludes, “In the NT, and especially in the Pauline Epistles it means an 'open secret' made known by God, and is used of the Gospel, or the inclusion of the Gentiles. There is no case in which it connotes secret rites or esoteric knowledge communicated to 'initiates.’”⁷ N. T. France describes the secret as, “hidden but not incomprehensible ... privileged information but not a puzzle.”⁸ The summation would be knowledge not attributed to human ingenuity, but to divine revelation.

τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ θεοῦ. The secret pertains to the Kingdom of God. It is not a complete understanding, otherwise they would not have asked so many questions. Nor is it clarity in all things because the disciples were often subjected to Jesus' rebuke for still not grasping it (cf. 4:40–41, 8:17–18). C.H. Dodd masterfully articulates the eschatological

⁶ Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 530. s.v. μυστήριον.

⁷ Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1966), 255-56.

⁸ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 196-99.

aspect⁹ that Jesus was communicating during his earthly ministry – the arrival of the Kingdom of God on earth and its progressive unfolding.

ἐκείνοις δὲ τοῖς ἔξω. The verse states that “those around him with the twelve” have something which “those outside” (ἐκείνοις δὲ τοῖς ἔξω) do not have. Continuing from verse 10, verse 11a suggests that “those around him with the twelve” are those who are devoted to Jesus because he says, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God.” This is in contrast to what Jesus says in v 11b “... but for those outside everything is in parables.”

Those who understand are characterized by their presence with and attentiveness to Jesus and his teachings.

ἐν παραβολαῖς τὰ πάντα γίνεται. How is “everything is in parables” to be understood in this verse? V. Taylor defines “in parables” as “in riddles.” This is in keeping with some of the uses of the word *mashal* translated παραβολή in the LXX meaning “riddle,” as well as, with the difficulty even the disciples had in understanding Jesus at times (Mark 8:17–18).¹⁰ N.T. France offers a simpler interpretation. He thinks it means simply “parables.” In Mark 4:2 it says, “he spoke to them in parables” (cf. 4:33-34). Those outside have the parables and parabolic words of Jesus, but they must not have a sufficient understanding of them.

J. Arthur Baird argues that the general principle expressed in Mark 4:11 and 33–34 was the practice of Jesus. Of the 63 synoptic parables, which he analyzed, twice as many were explained than were left unexplained, 41 to 22. Jesus intended to be understood, but sometimes his message was veiled. Of the 41 explained, twice as many were explained to the disciples than to general outsiders or his opposition, 28 to 13. Of the 22 unexplained, only 7

⁹ C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, Rev. ed. (New York: Scribner, 1961), 34-35.

¹⁰ Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, 255-56.

were unexplained to the disciples, twice as many, 15, as were left unexplained to outsiders. The veiling of the message is largely a part of what is stated in Mark 4:34, "...Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand." There are exceptions to this general inner testimony, which further shows that this is not just a work of art, but it is a historical reality.¹¹

Additional warrants for God's sovereignty over concealing and revealing are found in Luke 10:21, Matthew 11:25, Luke 10:23, and Matthew 13:16.¹² It is evident that Jesus did give distinct revelation to his disciples that the crowds did not have. N.T. France observes that in Mark Jesus did not want all to be revealed at once (8:30, 9:9). Not all was visible yet (9:1). However, this soon would become an open secret (4:22).¹³

Mark 4:12

ἵνα
βλέποντες βλέπωσιν καὶ μὴ ἰδῶσιν,
καὶ ἀκούοντες ἀκούωσιν καὶ μὴ συνιῶσιν,
μήποτε ἐπιστρεψωσιν καὶ ἀφεθῆ ἰαυτοῖς.

so that
"they may indeed see but not perceive,
and may indeed hear but not understand,
lest they should turn and be forgiven."

In addition to the three synoptic gospels, Isaiah 6:9ff is also quoted in John 12:40 and Acts 28:26-27. Mark abbreviates Isaiah 6:9-10. Matthew 13:15 quotes more of the Isaiah verses and has ὅτι. Luke omits μὴ ποτε clause. When ἵνα ("so that") is used in connection

¹¹ J. Arthur Baird, "A Pragmatic Approach to Parable Exegesis: Some New Evidence on Mark 4:11, 33-34," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 76, no. 3 (1957): 201-207.

¹² Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, 256-58.

¹³ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 201.

with μήποτε ("lest" or "so that they will not") it is a negative purpose. The troubling literal sense translated in terms of Isaiah's ministry would be, "...make sure [the] message is unintelligible."¹⁴ The odd literal meaning for parables might be, "parables were designed to be obscure and to prevent response."¹⁵

C.F.D. Moule sees the Isaiah 6:9ff quotation as part of explaining 1:9. The secret is revealed to the responsive, but the unresponsive get no further than hearing the parable (cf. 1:15). Those unresponsive to Jesus' ministry are like those unresponsive to Isaiah's ministry. Moule sees some sarcasm implied in the Isaiah quote, "They will hear without hearing and see without seeing; otherwise –...they might actually repent!"¹⁶ B. Hollenbach also sees the verse containing irony, he translates, "...because the last thing they want is to turn and have their sins forgiven!"¹⁷ Moule concludes, "Does it not mean: 'You cannot teach people by spoon-feeding: you must set them a puzzle to think out for themselves; those who start to crack it are getting somewhere. There is no short-cut to understanding?'"¹⁸

So, what is the context of the Isaiah passage? The Song of the Vineyard parable (5:1–7) identifies key themes throughout the book of Isaiah. God loves Israel, but Israel is not fruitful. Israel needs to pay attention because if she does not bear fruit there will be consequences. In Isaiah 6, Isaiah is given a specific task – to speak to a people who will not

¹⁴ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 201.

¹⁵ C.F.D. Moule, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 36.

¹⁶ Moule, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 35.

¹⁷ Bruce Hollenbach, "Lest They Should Turn and Be Forgiven: Irony," *The Bible Translator* 34, no. 3 (1983): 320.

¹⁸ Moule, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 36.

listen to his words. This precedes the Immanuel oracle (ch. 7).¹⁹ For Isaiah, the people will not pay attention to his message. The sins Israel and Judah have committed are expressed in Isaiah 1-5. Isaiah's preaching will go unheeded and it will lead to destruction.²⁰ As a preacher and teacher for God, Isaiah may accomplish something secretly, but the appearance will be fruitless. Punishment on Israel is now inevitable. However, there is a glimmer of hope, an indestructible holy seed will survive.²¹

The ministry of Isaiah is a type or foreshadowing of Jesus' ministry as an antitype or climax. Jesus' words are prophetic words. Isaiah is used because of the urgency of the message and God's concern. The purpose of Isaiah 6:9-10 is to urge people to hear and repent (cf. 29:18, 35:5).²² France states, "The ultimate outcome falls within the overall purpose of God, and, as Is. 6:9-10 reminds us, this can embrace the rejection as well as the acceptance of the prophet's message."²³

God's warning to Isaiah was not specifically targeted toward parables. Jesus applied it in the narrower context of parables, but the principle applies more broadly to public expressions of the word. The oft-repeated reality is that prophets speak truth to people who do not want to listen. Throughout history prophets of God have virtually always been

¹⁹ Steven L. McKenzie and John Kaltner, *The Old Testament: Its Background, Growth and Content* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 211, 215.

²⁰ Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 322.

²¹ S. R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (New York: Meridian Library, 1956), 207-08.

²² Snodgrass, "Between Text and Sermon," 284-286.

²³ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 199. Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 46. Blomberg adds, "There is nothing here that requires a doctrine of predestination to damnation...some of those Jesus excoriates may yet repent."

opposed by the people to whom their messages were delivered. The few noteworthy exceptions, like Nathan's rebuke to king David (2 Samuel 12) and the message of Jonah to the Ninevites (Jonah 3), highlight the nearly universal reality that truth in whatever form, prophetic or parabolic, is welcome only to hearts prepared by God to discern and receive truth.

Summary

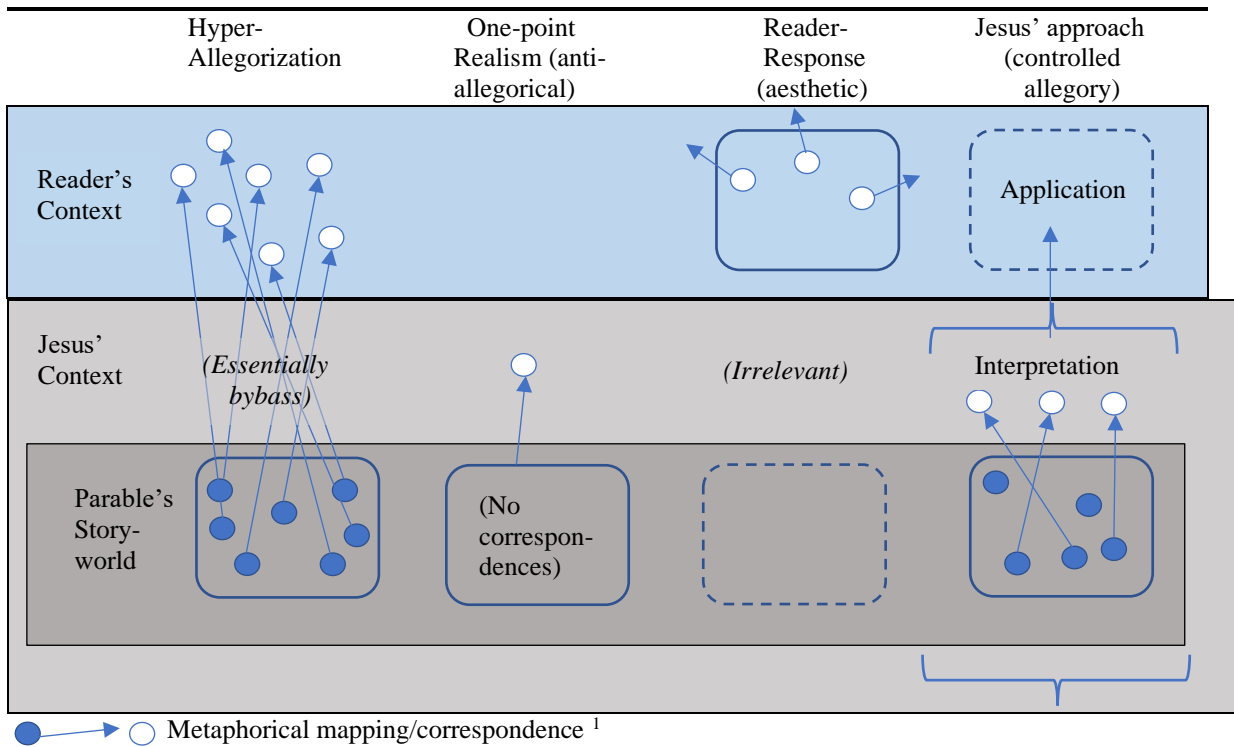
There is a shock to Mark 4:10–12. The quote from Isaiah 6:9ff is pointedly about hardheartedness. One element that is often overlooked is the emotional tenor of these verses. The shock of Isaiah 6:9ff has important commentary around it. The emotional tenor of 4:10–12 is hyperbolic language. The fact that Jesus is experiencing a failure to communicate is not calm literal speech or a theological presentation of double predestination. The confrontation Jesus is addressing is the hardest barriers to hearing. Jesus seeks to encourage responsible hearing (v.11) and persuade and confront the hardest heart to hear and positively respond (v.12).²⁴ Jesus' interpretation of the parable (Mark 4:13–20), which he gives to a privileged group of people as apart of the “open secret”, is also a bracket around vv10–12 and serves as additional context for its understanding.

²⁴ The urgency of Jesus' message is not just pointedly at his opponents. In Mark 8:18, Jeremiah 5:21 is quoted towards the disciples. Klyne Snodgrass, “Between Text and Sermon,” 284-286.

CHAPTER FOUR

JESUS EXPLAINS THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER (4:13–20)

Jesus' example of how to understand the parables is not one of hyper-allegorizing, one point realism or open-ended subjectivism. Instead, it is a controlled allegory in which select elements in Jesus' parables point to real world principles. There is no allegorical correspondence to every image in the Parable of the Sower. There are select images for which Jesus states this means that. The seed is the word. The soils are four types of responses to the word (path, rocky ground, among thorns, good soil). The bird represents the role of Satan. The scorching sun represents trials. The thorn bush portrays the cares of the world and the temptation of wealth. Jesus' use of allegory point to the theological meaning he intends to communicate. It is not necessary to find allegory in all the details. The meaning of the story does not fully represent the elements in the story if one rejects all allegory and looks only for a single point. Additionally, Jesus' parables are not polyvalent in the Reader-Response definition, which often takes them out of their historical context. Jesus' approach to his parables admits more than one point depending on his intended function of his parable. One factor determining function is how many allegorical elements are present. The following chart shows the comparison of the three competing views with Jesus' approach.



Regarding allegory, Blomberg states, “Jesus never likens the kingdom just to an individual subject or object in a given parable but to the situation described by the entire narrative.”² For example, in the Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Seed Growing Secretly, also found in Mark chapter 4, the Kingdom of God is compared with the natural process from beginning to end of the life of the seed. This is also the case with the Parable of the Sower – the span of time that the parable covers is a significant part of the intent of the illustration.

The following analysis will take into consideration the broader context of the synoptic gospels. Each verse will have a small chart showing a side-by-side comparison. This comparison is intended to help show the scope of expression and meaning of each verse.

¹ Greg Lanier, “Mark 4 and the Parable of the Sower.” Lecture Notes, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, FL, October 2019. A recreation of Greg Lanier’s Chart.

² Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 416.

Additionally, the beneficial tools of the patristic and medieval exegetes will be considered with the textual analysis of these verses: their acceptance of Jesus' use of allegory (albeit with a redefined limited scope); their acceptance of Jesus' explanation as a vital and necessary early interpretation; and their acceptance of the spiritual insight and revelatory nature of his words.

Mark 4:13

Καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς, Οὐκ οἶδατε τὴν παραβολὴν ταύτην, καὶ πῶς πάσας τὰς παραβολὰς γνῶσεσθε;

And he said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?”

Vincent Taylor notes that the challenge questions found in Mark contain two different words for ‘to know’. The first is οἶδα, knowledge by insight and intuition and the second is γινώσκω, knowledge by observation and experience.³ The difference should not be exaggerated, but the first question may highlight the challenge that though they have the capacity to understand, given the fact that ‘the secret of the kingdom of God’ had been imparted to them, they must utilize this capacity. Understanding of the kingdom of God is not immediate or complete. Rather, they have the capacity to begin to understand, which would take place through the patient and frequent private explanations that Jesus would have with his disciples.⁴

³ Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1966), 258.

⁴ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002), 204.

In Matthew, we have the name given by Jesus as, “the parable of the Sower” (Matthew 13:18). This is the name that has been most often used for the parable, but other names such as the Sower and the Soils (or the Soils) have also been used effectively. It is interesting that the name with which one assigns a parable may set the stage for the emphasis one intends to make.

God must internally prepare the hearer to fully receive the message in the parables. He has done this by giving them the secret of the kingdom of God. The human responsibility to think through and apply the principles in the parables is evident by Jesus’ challenge to the disciples in Mark 4:13. If one does not understand the example explained in the Parable of the Sower, than one will not properly understand the other parables. This is a challenge to the disciples to continue to excel at hearing well.

Mark 4:14–20

This is a summary of the nine objections to the authenticity of Mark 4:14–20 and a summary response of each. The nine objections are:

1. Jesus did not use allegory
2. Most of Jesus’ parables do not have interpretations
3. The style of the explanation is not Hebraic
4. The vocabulary used in the explanation is Christian
5. The situation described in the explanation is like the early church situation
6. The focus on the soils misses the focus on the harvest
7. The balance of three bad soils with three good soils is not in the interpretation
8. There is not an interpretation in the *G. of Thomas*

9. The focus on the seeds in the parable contradicts the focus on the soils in the explanation⁵

Here are the responses to these objections:

1. To assume that Jesus did not use allegory is unlikely given the presence of allegory in the *mashal* (Hebrew word in the OT, translated as parable in the LXX).
2. Actually many of Jesus' parables do have interpretations. They could be as short as, "the kingdom of God is like...", or one sentence or a question.
3. This is not true. The Hebrew *meshalim*, plural of *mashal*, has many interpretations, such as, the Parable of the Ewe Lamb, 2 Samuel 12:1–15.
4. This objection highlights the fact that the disciples likely rephrased or translated the vocabulary to that which was understood in that day.
5. This is understandable. However, one can see the same problems in the *Sitz im Leben* of the original audience in Jesus' day as well.
6. If parables make only one point then the lack of focus on the harvest could be a problem, but if the parable makes more than one point, which Blomberg defends, then it is not a problem.
7. When Mark uses the plural for the good soils he easily could mean, 'the rest' and not necessarily 3 separate good soils.
8. This is irrelevant because the *G. of Thomas* is a secondary text.
9. The seed and the soil are a natural part of the metaphor of sowing in the parable.⁶

⁵ Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 293.

⁶ Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 293.

What the Sower Sows		
Mark 4:14	The sower sows [implied seed]	the word
Luke 8:11	The seed is the	Word of God
Matthew 13:19	What has been sown [implied seed] in his heart	Word of the kingdom

The sower is not identified. The word is the “good news” (Mark 1:15 “εὐαγγέλιον”) and the teachings of Jesus in Galilee (Mark 4:2 “ἐν παραβολαῖς”)⁷

Mark 4:15

οὗτοι δὲ εἰσὶν οἱ παρὰ τὴν ὁδόν; ὅπου σπείρεται ὁ λόγος καὶ ὅταν ἀκούσωσιν, εὐθὺς ἔρχεται ὁ Σατανᾶς καὶ αἶρει τὸν λόγον τὸν ἐσπαρμένον εἰς αὐτοὺς.

And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them.

The parable is spoken from the point of view of the Sower and the explanation shifts to the point of view of the people and how they hear. The combination of seed and soil is integral to the metaphors in this parable. Matthew and Luke mention the heart. The parable is about the responses of those who hear the word of the kingdom, which the sower sows. The responses will be those on the path, rocky ground, among thorns and the good soil. The people are not the seeds but the soil along the path, οἱ παρὰ τὴν ὁδόν = those along the path.

⁷ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 204. For the early church audience, V. Taylor sees this to be understood as the Christian message. (1 Thessalonians 2:13). Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, 259. “And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe” 1 Thessalonians 2:13.

The path (Mark 4:4)	These [people] along the path where the word is sown (Mark 4:15).
	Ones [people] along the path...word in their heart (Luke 8:12).
	What was sown along the path in his heart (Matthew 13:19).

Here, birds are used as a metaphor for Satan. Each evangelist uses a different word for the enemy of God – Satan (Mark), evil one (Matthew) and the devil (Luke). They all refer to the same thing. Luke includes the enemy’s reason for snatching away the seed, “so that they may not believe and be saved” (Luke 8:12).

Birds devoured it (Mark 4:4)	Satan takes away (Mark 4:15).
	Evil one snatches (Matthew 13:19)
	The devil comes and takes away (Luke 8:12) ⁸

Jesus came to heal and forgive. The enemy’s work is to destroy. The seed was a potential plant, but the snatching away immediately implies that the word was not received. There is a connection with Mark 3:22-27 where Σατανάς is shown to be the cause of the problem. Also, Jesus rebuke’s Satan when talking to Peter in 8:33. The explanation he gives is that Σατανᾶς focuses on the things of men not the things of God. It is often the case that the message of God is completely overlooked because of a lack of hearing well (Ezekiel 33:32, Luke 7:31-35). N.T. France notes that the sentence formula in this first frame is precise in Mark, but that the subsequent sentence formulas will be shorthand (vv. 16, 18 and 20).⁹

⁸ Luke additionally has ‘trampled underfoot and devoured’ in the parable (Luke 8:5).

⁹ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 204.

Mark 4:16–17

καὶ οὗτοί εἰσιν οἱ ἐπὶ τὰ πετρώδη σπειρόμενοι, οἱ ὅταν ἀκούσωσιν τὸν λόγον εὐθὺς μετὰ χαρᾶς λαμβάνουσιν αὐτόν. ¹⁷ καὶ οὐκ ἔχουσιν ρίζαν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς ἀλλὰ πρόσκαιροί εἰσιν, εἶτα γενομένης θλίψεως ἢ διωγμοῦ διὰ τὸν λόγον εὐθὺς σκανδαλίζονται.

And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. ¹⁷And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.

The description of the seed that falls on rocky ground is the longest description in Mark. Mark and Matthew (13:20) have on rocky ground and Luke has on rock (8:13). The sun scorching the plant is linked to tribulation or persecution in Mark and Matthew. In Luke it was a lack of moisture associated with the time of testing. In all three the result is the same – they do not produce fruit but fall away because they do not have any root.

[A]nd when the sun rose, it was scorched...it withered away (Mark 4:6).	Tribulation or persecution arise (Mark 4:17) They...fall away (Mark 4:16).
[I]t withered away because it had no moisture. (Luke 8:6)	Tribulation or persecution arise...he falls away. (Matthew 13:21) And in time of testing falls away. (Luke 8:13)

Vincent Taylor identifies the words such as θλίψεως (“tribulation”) and ἡ διωγμοῦ (“persecution”) as examples that reflect the experience and vocabulary of the Christian community.¹⁰ That the vocabulary reflects the early church may be the result of rephrasing or translating in order to be understood among the present audience. That the early church did face official persecution is also a fact. However, this setting, or *Sitz im Leben*, can also be

¹⁰ Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, 206.

seen in the setting of the original audience in Jesus' day. Between the Pharisees skeptical questioning, the teachers of the law saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebub!" (3:22a), and John the Baptist being thrown into prison (1-3), Jesus' own apostles and disciples no doubt faced difficulties. Jesus warned that difficulty would accompany following him (8:35, 10:29–30).

The meaning of the word σκανδαλίζω, "fall away," is associated with the bait stick in a trap. V. Taylor says it could be translated "set a trap for." The meaning being, that the persecution one experiences because of the word causes one to stumble or be trapped because of their shallow faith.¹¹ This danger of tripping or trapping people is something Jesus took very seriously as described in 9:42-47 where σκανδαλίζω is prominent. Additionally, Jesus warns the disciples of their own temporary desertion of Jesus (σκανδαλίζομαι), which Peter found incredibly hard to believe (Mark 14:27, 29).¹² The ending of the gospel at Mark 16:8 may be to highlight the significance of Jesus' desire to reinstate Peter despite his monumental sin.

Mark's gospel ends abruptly with Mary Magdalene, Mary and Salome leaving in astonishment from the empty tomb with orders to tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus had risen and would meet them in Galilee (Mark 16:1-8). The emphasis on stating Peter by name may highlight the fact that Jesus wanted to see Peter, who had denied him just days before. Jesus' mission had been and will always continue to be seeking and saving the sinner.

¹¹ Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, 260.

¹² France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 205.

Mark 4:18–19

¹⁸καὶ ἄλλοι εἰσὶν οἱ εἰς τὰς ἀκάνθας σπειρόμενοι; οὗτοί εἰσιν οἱ τὸν λόγον ἀκούσαντες, ¹⁹καὶ αἱ μέριμναι τοῦ αἰῶνος καὶ ἡ ἀπάτη τοῦ πλούτου καὶ αἱ περὶ τὰ λοιπὰ ἐπιθυμίαι εἰσπορευόμεναι συμπνίγουσιν τὸν λόγον καὶ ἄκαρπος γίνεται.

¹⁸And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, ¹⁹but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.

The ones among thorns are the soil that produces a plant but it does not produce fruit and is deemed unproductive.

The thorns grew up...choked it...it yielded no grain (Mark 4:7).	Cares world, deceitfulness wealth, desire things...choke the word....it proves unfruitful (Mark 4:18–19).
	Cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. (Matthew 13:22)
	Cares, riches and pleasures of life they are choked...Fruit does not mature (Luke 8:14)

Unlike the external threat of persecution and tribulation, this is the internal problem of divided loyalty.

αἱ μέριμναι τοῦ αἰῶνος = worldly care, worries that arise from one's time
 ἡ ἀπάτη τοῦ πλούτου = pleasure of wealth or deceitfulness of wealth
 αἱ περὶ τὰ λοιπὰ ἐπιθυμίαι = general expression covers objects of desire other than riches.

Peculiar to Mark is the half-personified phrase “εἰσπορεύομαι συμπνίγουσιν τὸν λόγον” – “they come to choke the word.”¹³ Mark 10:17-27 is about the rich man. Here, the man’s attitude towards his wealth is revealed. France points out that it is not the wealth itself but the

¹³ Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, 260-61.

attitude. He identifies μέριμνα, ἀπάτη and ἐπιθυμία as “thought” words, which point to the challenge of faithfulness due to the seduction of allegiance.¹⁴

Mark 4:20

καὶ ἐκεῖνοί εἰσιν οἱ ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν καλὴν σπαρέωτες, οἵτινες ἀκούουσιν τὸν λόγον καὶ παραδέχονται καὶ καρποφοροῦσιν ἕν τριάκοντα καὶ ἕν ἑξήκοντα καὶ ἕν ἑκατόν.

But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.

The positive results of the good fruit mark the end stress of Jesus’ parable. The people, which make up the good soil, are those who hear the word, accept it and bear fruit. There are no other allegorical elements besides the seed being the word and the good soil being people who produce fruit. In Matthew, those who do not understand the message (Matthew 13:19) are contrasted with those who hear and understand (Matthew 13:23). In Luke, the wording is between the word being taken from heart (Luke 8:12) versus the word being maintained in the heart (Luke 8:15). In Mark, the focus is the quality of hearing the word; it is either taken away (Mark 4:14), or one hears, accepts (παραδέχονται) and bears fruit. This is the same message with slight variation.

In Mark the yield goes up: thirtyfold, sixtyfold and hundredfold. In Matthew it goes down: “in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty” (Matthew 13:23). In Luke, the parable has “a hundredfold” and the explanation defines this as “bear fruit with patience” (Luke 8:15).¹⁵ In Mark, the three levels of yield may be a balance to the three

¹⁴ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 206.

¹⁵ The *G. of Thomas* has, “...It yielded sixty per measure and a hundred and twenty per measure.”

unproductive soils. In Matthew, the aspect of various results is more present. In Luke it might be a simple contrast of good seeds versus bad seeds. The most one can say is that there are varying yields based on the nonuniform nature of discipleship, responsibilities and results.¹⁶ Even though the end stress is on the good soil, there is a greater amount of space taken up with the three unproductive soils, which ought not to be minimized.

Good fruit in this context is most closely defined by what it is not: it does not have a divided loyalty as does the seed among thorns. It would be one who is doing God's will (Mark 3:35). In terms of the good soil, the context seems to define this as both something received from God (4:11) and a personal choice by the hearer. Jesus did not use a pure allegory form where every detail has a match, but rather allegorical elements in the service of a rhetorical message.

Central Truth

The central truth is not simply the harvest like Dodd and Jeremias suggest, partly, because this view overlooks the significant amount of space given to the three failed seeds. The central truth of the parable of the Sower ought to be understood in terms of its relationship to the kingdom of God (4:26, 30). The comparison in the parable is between unreceptive hearers to receptive hearers with unfruitful soil to fruitful soil. This is in relation to responsibility towards God's initiative. Three reasons from the text support responsibility. First, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (4:9) comes at the end of the parable and twice immediately following the explanation (4:23, 24). Second, "The action of the sower gave

¹⁶ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 206-07.

way to the results of that action.”¹⁷ What the soils do with the seed is the focus of the parable. Third, the response of the fruitful soil is highlighted. This most important differential feature between the soils results in a harvest. This is at once an example of responsible hearing and symbolic of the initiative, activity, gift and blessing from God.

Within this big picture framework there are several points made. Snodgrass identifies at least six theological considerations covered in the Parable of the Sower: (1) the presence of the kingdom, (2) the proclamation of the word, (3) the role of evil/Satan, (4) hardheartedness, (5) obstacles to responsible hearing, and (6) productive living doing the will of God.¹⁸ Jesus has given the secret of the kingdom of God to the disciples (4:11). This internal gift has prepared them to understand. Why do some not accept the message Jesus shares? Why do some not produce fruit in keeping with God’s will? The Parable of the Sower speaks to these theological concerns.

How does the Parable of the Sower connect with the rest of the parables in Mark chapter four? The Lampstand points to the temporary veiling of the kingdom of God which soon would be made known (4:21–23). The Measure is a reminder that those given the secret are expected to produce fruit abundantly (Mk. 4:24–25). The Seed Growing Secretly reinforces the mysterious way in which the kingdom of God advances (4:26–29). The Mustard Seed is a reminder of how huge results can come from a single seed, such as the

¹⁷ Mark L. Bailey, “The Parable of the Sower and the Soils,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155 (1998): 186.

¹⁸ Snodgrass, “Between Text and Sermon Mark 4:1–20,” 284–286.

proclamation of the word. God produces successful results from the simplest and smallest of beginnings (4:30–32).

Summary

The text has been taken apart through textual analysis, and some of the beneficial methods from the three phases of the history of parable interpretation have been utilized. The goal of walking through the interpretive maze has been to evaluate the merits of the three main methods of parable interpretation. Tools from Tradition Criticism have been employed to better understanding the parable in the situation in the life of Jesus, better understanding the cultural context in which the historical events occurred, and better understand the logic of Jesus' parables. Reader-Response has highlighted an important aspect of parables that ought not to be overlooked - their affective nature. The affective nature and the informative nature of Jesus' parables have been discussed. The patristic and medieval view of allegory has been modified from hyperallegorizing to controlled allegorizing, which affirms the fact that Jesus did use allegory, while not engaging in an overreach of the details.

Chapter Five, Application, will tie all of the textual analysis back together. The central truth of the Parable of the Sower in the setting in the life of Jesus will be the foundation for the application of it for the modern reader. Additionally, any principles for interpreting other parables will be based on an understanding of Jesus' overall approach to parables as he paradigmatically discussed it in Mark 4:13ff.

CHAPTER FIVE

APPLICATION

When, after delivering the Parable of the Sower, Jesus' disciples asked him to explain his parables, Mark records that Jesus asked them "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?" (Mark 4:13). What did Jesus mean by declaring that understanding the parable of the sower is essential to understanding all parables? The text and context of the synoptic gospels suggest several elements of special significance concerning the Parable of the Sower.

The first unique component to understanding the Parable of the Sower is that the very purpose of the parable is to explain how to receive and understand the word. That is, the parable explains how to understand spiritual principles themselves. The seed in the parable is the word and the story explains succinctly why some people do not accept and understand the word while others do understand and obey it, represented by the four soils and the competing factors that either prevent it from growing (rocks, depth of soil, birds, weeds) or enable its growth to maturity (good soil, degrees of productivity). This is a parable about the word of God. In a sense, this is a parable about how to understand parables.

According to the sequence of the gospel narrative as given in Mark, Jesus had already used several parabolic sayings earlier in his teaching. To explain why his teaching and the actions of his disciples were different from the message of John the Baptist and the behavior of his disciples, Mark records that Jesus told them that no one uses new cloth to repair an old garment or puts new wine into old wineskins (Mark 2:21-22 cf. Luke 5:36-39). Then, Jesus

responds to his growing opposition with a parable in Mark 3:23ff (Divided Kingdom and Strong Man Bound). Which brings the Gospel narrative to the Parable of the Sower, which Jesus accompanied by a detailed explanation and interpretation intended to equip his disciples to understand all of his parables.

Jesus explained that his parables are a form of communication capable of being understood by his disciples and believers guided by the Holy Spirit but not capable of being grasped accurately by people who are not truly seeking guidance from God.

To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, ¹² so that “they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.” (Mark 4:11–12)

The apostle Paul later expressed the same principle in these terms:

⁶ Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. ⁷ But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. ⁸ None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory....¹⁴ The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Corinthians 2:6-8, 14)

An essential part of understanding parables is anticipating that an unbeliever will not comprehend the parables and will oppose their proper interpretation because “the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” Parables are primarily teaching tools for believers.

Here is a rhyme to help remember a few key points about the form of Jesus' parables: "one thing relatable, one thing unheard, one thing tangible, one thing assured."¹ Jesus' parables connect to others through *relatable* daily activities and nature. There is often something "*unheard*" or unexpected in them as well. This can help identify possible allegorical elements and aid in determining the central truth related to the kingdom of God. Seeing and hearing Jesus' ministry and experiencing the presence of the kingdom of God before one's eyes is the *tangible* part. That which is *assured* is the future hope, that despite present distress and discouragement, there is a future hope because of God's promises in Jesus.

The Parable of the Sower teaches that the word is proclaimed to all, but its reception is based on spiritual activity and heart issues which affect hearing. Hardheartedness is detrimental and play's into Satan's hand. External and internal trials are a challenge to faith and spiritual transformation. However, the believer, who is diligent in their walk with Jesus, can rest assured that growth and maturity that pleases God and benefits others is possible. Christians are called to clearly explain the good news, despite opposition, demonstrate wisdom for living and seek authentic discipleship.²

Even joy and an outward show of commitment may not identify a true heart change. A positive temporary show of faith if not followed up by additional devotion and commitment is not what Jesus has in mind. Additionally, it is not enough to just pay lip service to following Jesus. Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls

¹ This rhyme is my own and was inspired by Alyce McKenzie, *The Parables For Today* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 22. Her rhyme is, "Something realistic, something strange, something within reach, something out of range."

² Klyne Snodgrass, "Between Text and Sermon," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 67, no. 3(2013): 284-286.

into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit...If anyone serves me, he must follow me..." (John 12:24, 25a). Following Jesus will require a loyal commitment to live and walk in the way that Jesus taught.

A big part of wisdom for living and authentic discipleship is ones' responsiveness and attentiveness to Jesus and his teaching. As Augustine said in his *Confessions*, "I myself comprehend not all the things I am."³ Listening and trusting God's word is a big part of one's commitment to their relationship with Jesus. Believers seek to cooperate with Jesus and his transformation process for them.

Closely observe how the plant, by little and little progressing,
Step by step guided on, changeth to blossom and fruit!
First from the seed it unravels itself, as soon as the silent
Fruit-bearing womb of the earth kindly allows its escape...

-Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
The Metamorphosis of Plants

Conclusion

Utilizing parable interpretive history is advantageous, but not without evaluating each tool for its merits. The history of parable interpretation is long and winding and filled with lots of questions, but one can utilize many beneficial lessons and tools from each of the stages. In this case, what are the helpful tools among these three influential theories which aid in analyzing The Parable of the Sower in Mark 4:1–20.

The Patristic and Medieval Church focused heavily on finding the spiritual import of every detail in a parable because they understood them to contain the mysteries of the Kingdom of God. With the modification from hyperallegorization to controlled allegory, the

³ Augustine, *Confessions*, vi.iii.

acceptance of Jesus' words as the word of God and the acceptance of Jesus' use of allegory are their beneficial contributions.

The Tradition criticism of the parables has a broad accumulative focus covering the logic, history, culture and comparative text questions surrounding Jesus and his parables. They each have produced positive discoveries, but they also waged a war against allegory that is still ongoing.

The focus of Modern scholarship has widely been literary criticism. The logic, history, cultural and comparative text questions have been overshadowed with literary theories. Despite the fact that the prevailing postmodern belief is that the "original" meaning of the parables is not possible to recover, there are helpful elements in their theories. The main beneficial element used here was the affective nature of Jesus' parables.⁴

The figurative language of the parables can be difficult to understand, but there is value in studying them. The Parable of the Sower in Mark 4:1–20 contains an important message centered on the person and preaching of Jesus and the inauguration of the kingdom of God. Understanding the competing factors that accompany the proclamation of the word is beneficial for personal discipleship, evangelism and apologetics. His good news is for all and Jesus' disciples love and serve indiscriminately.

⁴ Such as structuralism, deconstruction, rhetorical criticism, discourse analysis, social-science criticism, ideological criticism, parables as aesthetic art and reader-response. D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 116.

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