

Mark's Parables of the Kingdom

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One long stretch of Jesus teaching in Mark is the Parables of the Kingdom, 4:1-33. At the end Mark tells us, “and with *many such* parables (παραβολαῖς; similitudes, not story parables) spake he the word unto them, as they were able to hear it.” So this is an assemblage of *typical* parables, and not a consecutive sermon. I here take up the reinterpretation of the first parable given in Mk 4:10-20, and its implications.

Meaning. Most of the parables¹ describe the small growing large, or the hidden revealed. It is not hard to see these as reflecting covert preaching of the Messianic Kingdom which would soon exist in its fullness. Covert, because realizing God's promise to David in real time would involve expulsion of the Romans, who were concerned to prevent anything of the kind. Messianic, because that is the charge on which Jesus was later executed by those same Romans.² Here are the Mk 4 parables:

- 4:3-9. Parable of the Sower: Only some seed yields fruit
- 4:21-23. There is nothing secret that will not be revealed
- 4:26-29. The seed will grow secretly until the harvest comes
- 4:30-32. The tiny mustard seed grows to give shelter to the birds of the air

Reinterpretation. The Parable of the Sower is evidently addressed to the crowd, but 4:10-20 (suddenly addressing the disciples) intrudes to *eliminate* the crowd; it says that *only* the disciples can understand Jesus' preaching (and they, not all that clearly).³ So far the reinterpretation of the Sower. But what is it that is being reinterpreted? What did the Sower Parable originally mean? It means what 4:10-20 says it means: it encourages those spreading the Word but finding their efforts sometimes unavailing.

But 4:10-20 restricts understanding to the *disciples*, whereas the parable as written *encourages the crowd*. Then it originally *envisioned many as preaching the Word*.⁴ The issue is the contrast between contact preaching (each convert tells others) and the orderly preaching of the Apostles. Mk 4:10-20 has been seen as rebuking the disciples.⁵ Rather, its function is to *reject the crowd* as carriers of the Word.

¹The exception is the ethical 4:24-25 (The Measure You Give), which has no Kingdom symbolism, and belongs instead to Mark's poverty theme. See the Appendix.

²For this conclusion, doubtless uncomfortable to many, see Brooks **Resurrection** 86f.

³By Mk 4:12b, it is not intelligible to the crowds: “and hearing they may hear and not understand, lest haply they should turn again, and it should be forgiven them” (Isaiah 6:9-10). That is, *Jesus intends to be misunderstood* – easily the most repugnant statement in the Bible.

⁴Räsänen **Messianic** 140, “If one pays attention to the contents of the parables in Mk 4, they look like consolation and admonition for a community engaged in mission.” Exactly so.

⁵As at first (Mk 4:13) it somewhat seems to do; see Weeden **Mark** 27-29.

Contact Missionarizing

We can test this by considering a point which the commentaries do not address: What is the meaning of sixtyfold? A preacher makes a convert. That convert counts as 1 (if a household, maybe 6). There is no way he could register as 30, or 60, or 100. *With contact missionarizing, the case is different.* Probably some converts *do* merely count as 1; they carry the Word no further. But fruitful individuals will tell others and persuade the village (30), the neighbors together will persuade the next village (60), and both villages together, a bigger village (100). Their fruitfulness more than offsets the failures, who do not accept the Word at all, or do so only temporarily.

Early Preaching. What evidence supports this idea of contact missionarizing? Consider the list of early bishops in Apostolic Constitutions 7:46; the evidence consists of the *gaps* in that survey. ApCon holds that Apostolic connections are necessary for the doctrinal soundness of the churches. It gives, for each church listed, its first bishop and the Apostle who appointed him. The evidence is the churches which are *not* mentioned, or whose Apostolic credentials are fantastic. Unmentioned are Armenia, Cyprus, Corinth, Damascus, Edessa, Ethiopia, Philippi, Sinope, and Thessalonica. Mentioned but fantastic is Caesarea, whose bishops are said to be Luke's Zacchaeus and Theophilus, plus Acts' Cornelius, none of whom ever existed.

Many centers included what I call Alpha (pre-Resurrection) Christians. From Alexandria came Apollos, who (Ac 18:24-26) had to be reinstructed by Priscilla and Aquila before he could preach Pauline doctrine. Paul in Romans (3:20-24, 4:1-3)⁶ clearly argues with people who do not share his doctrines; note the curse on them, the ἀνάθεμα, at 1 Cor 16:22. As for the Christians of Sinope, as late as the early 2c they preserved a Christianity indistinguishable from the recommendations of the Didache, the Epistle of Jacob, and the Jesus of the early layers of Mark.⁷

There is very little surviving evidence of this earliest missionarizing, but what does exist seems to be consistent. It suggests an early wildfire spreading of the Word, as distinct from the more organized approach which we might associate with the Twelve.

The Twelve, as Eduard Meyer saw (**Ursprung** 1a/264-291), are extraneous in Mark. Meyer envisioned a Twelve Source, for which there is no scenario. They are instead likely to be later interpolations, updating Mark in this organizational sense. How do we know they are interpolated? Because this Twelve passage is interpolated:

Mk 6:6b. And he went round the villages teaching.

[7] And he calleth unto him the Twelve, and began to send them forth by two and two, and he gave them authority over the unclean spirits . . .

[14] And King Herod heard thereof, for his name had become known, and he said, John the Baptizer is risen from the dead, and therefore do these powers work in him.

Herod looks past the Twelve and reacts to Jesus' preaching. Then when Mk 6:14 was written, Mk 6:7-13, the Sending of the Twelve, *was not yet part of the text.*

⁶Bitterly contested by the Epistle of Jacob 2:18, 2:20-24. Jacob is an Alpha document.

⁷See respectively Brooks **Didache**, Brooks **Jacob**, and Brooks **Pliny**.

We have now reached this position: (1) The Mk 4 parables are an assemblage, not a sermon. They covertly preach a coming Kingdom of God, not to mislead the crowds (to whom Jesus appeals: "Who hath ears to hear, let him hear"), but to keep the Messianic Plan from reaching the ears of the Roman authorities. (2) This appeal to the crowd as spreaders of the Word was later reinterpreted in Mk 4:10-20 to restrict knowledge of Jesus' message to an accredited elite. (3) We know that Mk 4:10-20 is interpolated because it interrupts the series of parables, it involves a sudden change of audience, and it imposes an elite meaning on the first parable. (4) We know that the Twelve or their precursors, the likely beneficiaries of the elite reading of Mk 4:10-20, are themselves interpolated in Mark, one example being Mk 6:7-13, noted above.

What this implies is early contact missionarizing, which perhaps because of its lack of structure went fast and far: Rome in the west, Sinope in the north, Alexandria in the south. Apostolic tradition either knows nothing of this effort, or else has filled the gap with fantastical inventions (Caesarea) or known but post-Neronian leaders (Rome).

Appendix: Mark 4:24-25

This is the only one of the Mark 4 Parables that is not a metaphor of the coming of the Kingdom, or the spread of the Word concerning it. It reads as follows:

Mk 4:24. And he said unto them, Take heed what ye hear: with what measure ye mete it shall be measured unto you, and more shall be given unto you. [25]
For he that hath, to him shall be given, and he that hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he hath.

There are two things wrong with this as one of the Mark 4 Parables. First, as an ethical pronouncement, it is at odds with the covert parables of the Kingdom. Second, a small point, the command to hear comes at the beginning, and not, as in the earlier parables, at the end ("Who hath ears to hear, let him hear," Mk 4:9 and 4:23).

An economic analogue to Mk 4:24-25 is Mk 10:29-30 (the second of two addenda to the Rich Young Man story, 10:17-22), where Jesus says that those who lose family or property *will receive it again* as communal brotherliness and community property. The point of the Woman with Two Mites (12:41-44) is that even a tiny divestment counts as large. 10:29-30 and 12:41-44 are reinforced by the emphatic Verily (Ἀμὴν), and together with 4:24-25, may be taken as constituting a Poverty (P) layer in Mark.

That late idea is much further developed in Luke, whose Sermon in the Plain preaches a discipleship of complete divestment.

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