

WHY PARABLES? A STUDY OF MARK IV¹

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THIRTY years ago, in November 1946, my University, which had recently gone back to its home town of Strasbourg after six years of exile at Clermont-Ferrand in central France, held its first Commencement ceremony since 1939. Eight honorary degrees were granted on that moving occasion. The first of these went to Professor T. W. Manson, whose memory we are here to celebrate this evening. Could a better proof be offered of the high esteem in which your University is held in Strasbourg, of the friendly feelings felt in our Faculty of Protestant Theology towards your Faculty of Theology and—last but not least—of the deep admiration of French scholars for T. W. Manson? I may be allowed to add that I share in these three attachments of my predecessors, that I should like to develop existing ties between your University and mine, that I am deeply impressed by the contributions made by Mancunian theologians to the scientific study of religion, particularly in Biblical scholarship, and that I always derived help and inspiration from my reading of the remarkable work of T. W. Manson on the New Testament. I hope this paper will be seen as a fitting tribute to that great scholar.

I. CONTENTS AND CONTEXT OF MARK IV

“Mark IV”—by which is really meant, as you no doubt assumed, verses 1 to 34 of the fourth chapter of the Markan Gospel—is the second largest collection of sayings of Jesus in this, the oldest of the Gospels, the largest of all being the Apocalypse in chapter xiii, 37 verses, to the 34 in chapter iv. It deserves special attention because of its size in a Gospel in which the sayings of Jesus do not take as much space as they do in Matthew or John and seem to have been selected with some care by the Evangelist. Another reason for a close

¹ An expansion of the Manson Memorial Lecture for 1976 delivered in the University of Manchester on Friday, 12th November 1976.

examination of this collection of sayings is that it includes three full-size parables, although parables are few and far between in Mark, which differs widely from Matthew and Luke in this respect. Add to this the fact that Mark iv. 10–12 contain an extremely provocative saying of Jesus attributing to parable teaching—or so it seems at first reading—the strange effect of hardening the hearts of most hearers; and also an interesting statement in verses 33–34 about the use of parables by Jesus. It is not surprising, considering all these facts, that so many scholars turn their attention to this chapter and find in it the key to Markan theology or even to the message of Jesus.

If we stop for one moment to consider what the contents of this collection of sayings are, we shall see that it is a fairly well balanced and careful piece of writing. A brief introductory narrative (verses 1–2) and a conclusion in the form of a generalizing summary (verses 33–34) set the collection apart from its context and give it its keynote: it is teaching *to the crowd* and teaching in *parables*, the disciples being given further instruction afterwards. This is, of course, Markan redaction, as the vocabulary and the themes in these four verses show.

Between these two landmarks we find first of all parables: the Sower in verses 3–9 and in verses 26–32 the two parables of the Seed that grows secretly and of the Mustard Seed. But interestingly enough, the rest of the collection (verses 10–25) is not made up of parables in the usual sense: a heavily redacted saying in verses 10–13 to which we shall return at length; an interpretation of the Parable of the Sower in verses 14–20, which looks conspicuously like a later allegorization of the parable; and lastly a group of sayings, some of them in metaphoric language, which have nothing to do either with the parable of the Sower or with its interpretation, or even, for that matter, with the last two parables in the collection, unless one discovers a logical relationship with the main themes of the collection as the evangelist conceived them.

In other words, this collection is to be understood as the work of the evangelist, who used materials coming from various origins in the tradition and played a very active part in organizing these small pieces into a fairly coherent whole. Any

attempt at reconstructing a pre-Markan collection is doomed to failure, because there is no similarity in form between the various elements here assembled, whether it be the parables or the rest of the collection.

If this is true, it is all the more important that we should turn our attention to the context of chapter iv, provided, of course, we do not deny the existence of any order in Mark—a rather extreme theory which is not as widely held today as it was at one time and which is contradicted by the existence of a clear-cut outline in this Gospel, as most commentators admit nowadays. Mark gives us his story of the Calling of the Twelve in iii. 13–19 and that of the Sending of the Twelve in vi. 6b–13. Next to the first of these we find a strongly worded attack against the relatives of Jesus, accused of sharing in the hostility of the Jerusalem scribes against him (iii. 20–35); next to the second of these, a stern condemnation of Jesus' fellow-townpeople, including his relatives, it seems (vi. 1–6a).

This is too symmetrical to be considered as meaningless. It appears to be a kind of framework in which the evangelist inserted chapters iv and v of his Gospel. If we note that the Twelve are called to be sent to preach and to cast out demons (iii. 15) and then actually sent to preach, cast out demons and heal the sick (vi. 12, 13), we are bound to note also that chapter iv. 1–34 concerns preaching and iv. 35 to v. 43 describe a number of healing miracles. In other words, in these two chapters, Jesus sets an example for the Twelve and encourages them to do likewise, both as preachers and healers. As the relatives and fellow-townpeople of Jesus reject him both as teacher and as healer (iii. 20–35; vi. 2–5) in the same context and are condemned for their lack of faith, it is fair to say that the whole section extending from iii. 13 to vi. 13 is centred on the theme of the training of the Twelve as missionaries, as opposed to the rejection of the natural companions of Jesus, who are totally rebellious to his calling. We shall have to interpret chapter iv in that framework.

II. WHY PARABLES?

This would be fairly easy to deal with were it not for the strange dialogue between Jesus and “those around him with

the Twelve"—as v. 10 has it—which finds place after the Parable of the Sower. To a very simple and straightforward question ("they asked him the parables"), Jesus gives a surprising answer (verses 11–12): parables, he seems to say, are meant to harden the hearts of those who are not disciples already; they make it impossible for most people to understand the Gospel; only those who are granted a special grace can get hold of the secret of the Kingdom of God. Many commentators consider this to be Mark's own contribution and tie it to the theory of the Messianic Secret, as W. Wrede first stated it. To them, Mark wants to stress the esoteric nature of the Gospel when he says in verses 33–34 that Jesus did not address the people without parables.

I want to challenge radically this interpretation of Mark iv. 10–12, because to my mind it is a complete misunderstanding of this saying and of the whole Gospel of Mark. And first of all I should like to question the usual meaning given to the request of "those around him with the Twelve". As I wrote in my book on *Jesus of Nazareth*, it is far from certain that Mark uses the word *παραβολή* in the sense which it assumed later in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, that is an "account of a particular case intended to support an argument from analogy" (p. 81).

Indeed, *παραβολή* seems to be used in the oldest layers of the Synoptic tradition in the sense of Heb. *māshāl* (Aramaic *methal*), which it renders in the Septuagint. That is: all the teaching of Jesus which was expressed in gnomic form, particularly when that included the use of metaphors. As examples of this older and wider use of *παραβολή* I may mention Mark vii. 15 and parallels, or Luke iv. 23, or, again, Luke vi. 39. There is every reason to think that Mark still uses the word in the broader sense, as meaning "proverb" or "example".

As a matter of fact, it is most likely that Mark understands the question of the disciples in iv. 10 as meaning: "What do these four examples you just gave in the story of the Sower really mean?" Matthew does not interpret it in that way, as the dialogue with him is about "parables" in general (Matthew xiii. 10); but Luke does, because the question of the disciples, with him, becomes: "His disciples asked him what *that parable*

was," that is, the Sower as a whole, which in his words is to be called *a* parable, not a set of *meshālîm* as it was to Mark (Luke viii. 9).

If "parables" means that in Mark iv. 10, the answer given by Jesus in verses 11–12 is not a "theory of parables", but an interpretation of the "metaphorical sayings of the Sower", just as it is in Luke also. The first sentence in the reply of Jesus then applies to the seed sown on fertile soil, as described in verse 8. Perhaps some readers will find it difficult to admit that this sentence might not be a description of a cognitive event such as the "knowledge of the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew xiii. 11). But in Mark iv. 11 we read "mystery" in the singular and there is no mention of a *knowledge* of this mystery. The "mystery of the Kingdom" is *given* to the disciples because they are blessed by God every time they preach: their weak human words bring the Kingdom near through God's action and men are made to receive it in large numbers.

If we now turn to the second part of verse 11, we must avoid introducing the idea of a *knowledge* acquired from parables, since this idea does not occur in the first sentence of the same verse. "Everything *happens* in parables" to the other group, opposed to the disciples. What is here described is their failure to bring forth any fruit, as is described in the first three accounts of the fate of seeds outside the good soil (verses 4–7). Things happen in such a way that these people do not see, or understand, and that they cannot get hold of the Kingdom of God. It is God's will that they should not, not only when parables are used, but under any circumstances. The Sower is a description of this action of God, both to save some and to damn others.

These others are described in verse 11 as "those people who are outside", a somewhat lame phrase which looks like Markan redaction, just as does the phrase "those around him with the Twelve" in verse 10. Does Mark mean the crowd gathered to hear Jesus teach (verse 1)? That is most unlikely, as the crowd is described as "gathered towards Jesus" (iv. 1) or even as "sitting around him" (iii. 32)—not at all as being "outside". But some people are indeed said to be "outside"

in the context of chapter iv : Jesus' relatives who came to get hold of him because they felt he was out of his mind (iii. 31-32). It is the same people Mark has in mind here : like the scribes, they are totally unable to understand what is happening in Jesus' ministry ; they are blind and deaf and nothing can help them out of this tragic *impasse*, because God has decided to punish them for their unbelief.

This is a very harsh and difficult message which " those around Jesus with the Twelve " cannot understand without help. So Mark feels he has to explain at greater length and does it by adding verses 13 to 20. We shall come back to verses 14 to 20 later. For the time being, we must deal with verse 13, and particularly with the use of *παραβολή* in it. It is usually taken to refer to the " parable of the Sower ". But, as we saw, this story was not to Mark *a parable*, but *a series of examples*. So that, when he says here " this parable ", he refers either to the last example, that of the good earth, or to the *māshāl* quoted in verse 12 not as a scriptural text but as a kind of proverb. The disciples do not understand this of their own accord. They will thus have to be given a detailed explanation (verses 14-20). And each time Jesus uses " parables ", they will need one (verse 34).

In other words, the reason for the use of parables as Mark sees it is to be found only in iv. 33-34. It is a form of teaching adapted to the spontaneous ability of the crowd to understand the teaching of Jesus about the Kingdom. It speaks to the instinct of people, as God operates it. For disciples, parables are more difficult to understand and they need further comment and explanation. Perhaps this particular theory can be accounted for by the objectionable interpretation Jerusalem Christians had given of the Parables of the Sower. This brings us to the traditions used by Mark in chapter iv and to his redactional contribution.

III. A READING OF MARK IV

Let us begin with Mark's own contribution to, and understanding of, this collection of sayings.

As we said earlier, there is every reason to think that the evangelist chose freely the context in which he inserted this discourse, since there is no narrow connection between Mark iv. 1-34 and the sayings and narratives in chapters iii and v—where he brings together isolated sayings and stories from various strands of tradition. His redactional work can be seen everywhere in this section of the Gospel. In other words, Mark here develops one main theme, that of the training of the Twelve for their missionary tasks as preachers and healers confronted with the “crowd”.

(1) Verses iv. 1-2, a Markan creation, insist on the size of the crowd and, interestingly enough, on the technical device used by Jesus to address such a vast number of people and be heard by them all. This is no introduction to some kind of esoteric teaching! In verse 2, the use of parables is mentioned in such terms that it appears as the normal method for teaching the crowd. Mark no doubt implies that the Twelve and those around them should use the same tool as Jesus in their missionary work among the masses—that is, parabolic language.

(2) The story of the Sower in verses 3-9 is probably just as it was in tradition, although Mark may have put his imprint on it by making minor changes (the addition of verse 9, for instance—but this is far from certain). As for verses 10-13, opinions differ widely, although most critics agree that verse 13 is a redactional transition written by the evangelist to connect verses 10-12 and the interpretation of the Sower given in verses 14-20. We can reject at once the opinion of some, who take the whole of verses 10-12 to be redactional: phrases like “those around him with the Twelve” or “those people who are outside” are clumsy enough in the Greek text for us to say that Mark added at these points a few words to a previously straightforward text saying “the Twelve” in verse 10 and “those people” in verse 11.

But should we consider verses 10-12 as an independent saying of Jesus which Mark placed here on his own initiative (Jeremias)¹ or as an old interpretation of the story of the Sower,

¹ J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (E.T.), London, 1954, pp. 11 ff.

which Mark found already attached to the story? It would be difficult to account for the insertion of these verses by Mark between the story of the Sower and his own interpretation of it. On the contrary, if Mark found these verses attached to the story, it becomes easier to understand why they are in that unlikely place. So we shall consider these verses as a previous interpretation of the story of the Sower which Mark leaves there out of respect for tradition and because he wants to turn it to the advantage of his own ideas.

How does Mark achieve that re-orientation of the oldest interpretation of the Sower episode? By adding a few words which connect these verses with the context in the last lines of chapter iii, where the ideas of an inner circle made up of the closest disciples plus the crowd (iii. 32a-34) and of a group of outsiders who try to avail themselves of their relationship with Jesus to break up this circle (iii. 31, 32b) are developed. The people who are outside are the enemies of Jesus, who try to put an end to his ministry by accusing him of being in league with the devil. *These* people, not all those who do not belong to the group of the Twelve, form the sterile ground, where nothing will grow in spite of all the seed sown amongst them. God will not condone their rebellion any longer. He shows them up as his enemies by having the Gospel preached to all, so that the real friends of Jesus are revealed at the same time as the blindness of the others is exposed and confirmed.

It is one of the surprising features of the Gospel of Mark that these enemies of God and of Jesus are his mother and his brothers. Mark iii. 20-35 carries a most brutal attack against the relatives of our Lord, who are depicted as sinners against the Holy Spirit (iii. 28-30). Mark iv. 10-12 adds a fresh denunciation of their failure to accept the Gospel, which can only be compared to that of the scribes from Jerusalem.

(3) If we now turn to the interpretation of the story of the Sower in verses 14-20, we can first of all say that, as Vincent Taylor pointed out so clearly a quarter of a century ago, to many scholars, several reasons " suggest that this is secondary tradition : (1) the un-Hebraic character of the style ; (2) the vocabulary, which includes several words found only in the Epistles, (3)

the impression conveyed of an existing Christian community ; (4) the concentration of the interpretation on important details rather than the main point of the parable.”¹ I should go one step further and say that it is most likely this interpretation was written by the evangelist himself to supersede the earlier interpretation to which he objected in its original form and which he found too allusive in the form he had given it by adding a few words. There is no time for us to go into a detailed discussion of these verses. But I should like to suggest that it is meant in its various parts as an extension of what had been said in chapter iii. 20–35. The first group of people, which he compares with the roadside, is that of the hearers of the Word in whom Satan is at work to prevent them from accepting any element of it. This probably refers to the scribes from Jerusalem, who are Jesus’ arch-enemies and guilty of blasphemy against the Holy Ghost ; those people are totally in the hands of Satan. The second group, compared to the stony ground (verses 16–17), might well be Jesus’ relatives and natural friends, who were bound to be well-disposed towards him in the first place but then became frightened and hostile (iii. 20–21 and iii. 31–35). The third group, compared to the thorny place, in verses 18–19, are the ordinary disciples or hearers of Jesus, who have not broken with society and remain tied in all sorts of ways (cf. x. 17–30). Finally, the fourth group (verse 20) is that of “ those around him with the Twelve ”, who have accepted all the implications of their missionary calling and bear fruit, that is, gain converts, in a miraculous way, thanks to the blessing of God on them. To sum up these remarks, let us say that Mark understands the story of the Sower as a description of the situation he lives in—that is, in my opinion, Palestine around A.D. 50.

(4) The miscellaneous sayings that follow in verses 21–25 are for the most part expressed in metaphoric language and no doubt considered by the evangelist as “ parables ”. There is no previous unity between these sayings, which we find in scattered form in Matthew and Luke. The parable of the lamp in verse 21 of course means in this context that Christians must preach

¹ *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, London, 1952, p. 258.

the gospel around them, not as in Matthew v. 15 that they must be known for their good deeds. Verse 22 refers here to iv. 11–12 : the secret entrusted to the disciples is to be publicized now—not, as in Matthew and Luke, at the end of days. Verse 23 is to be understood as the positive statement of the saying in iv. 9 : all men have ears to hear the Gospel, so let them hear the secret of the Kingdom of God. Verse 24 applies the idea of measure to the judgement of God on one side, but, on the other, not to the judgement of men on one another, but to the generosity of the missionary engagement of the disciples. If this is too cautious and meagre, God's verdict will be harsher. Verse 25 emphasizes the same idea, so that this group of sayings can be read from beginning to end as a call to fearless preaching, with the additional promise of God's grace for those who will have heard it.

(5) It is this aspect of grace, of God's miraculous support for the missionaries, which is stressed in the last two parables (verses 26–32). The parable of Seed which grows secretly receives its interpretation in part from verse 14 : the Sower is the preacher of the Word—undoubtedly in this context the missionary word and action ; he does what he should and God does the rest till the time of the eschatological harvest comes. A clear appeal to brave commitment to the spreading of the Gospel and to full trust in God's help!

The parable of the Mustard Seed also alludes to sowing (verse 32a), that is, to missionary preaching, in this context. The emphasis here is slightly different. Very small beginnings, the efforts of a humble preacher, lead to impressive results, thanks to the help of God. The Kingdom of God extends to all men through the agency of a little preaching by disciples.

(6) As for the conclusion (verses 33–34), it suggests that “parables of this kind” are necessarily the core of the preaching addressed to the crowd. Just as the “Kingdom of God” appeared as the central theme in the summary of Jesus' message in i. 15, the metaphors of sowing, of light, etc., as similes of the Kingdom are here essential. The Gospel does not exist without them and they convey its appeal to all men in a way which they

can easily understand. The disciples need more ; they have to be told what all this means. Whereas the crowd understands by instinct what they are taught " in parables ", the disciples have to be instructed in a rational way.

Taken as a whole, this collection of parables is an encouragement to popular preaching at large and to using simple devices to make the message understood. But it is also a reminder of the rejection of the natural companions of Jesus : his relatives, who refused his message in the first place, and the learned scribes of Jerusalem, who ought to have known better than to brush aside the message of Jesus.

IV. BEHIND MARK IV

(1) The enthusiasm for missionary action shown by the Evangelist, his polemics against Jesus' relatives and against the Jerusalem scribes, his great effort to overcome the traditional interpretation of the Parable of the Sower as an encouragement to a sectarian view of the Christian Church—all these features could not be accounted for if the Gospel of Mark had not been conceived and written in a historical situation in which a discussion on the nature of mission went along with lively debates on the authority of scribes and of the only famous relative of Jesus, that is, James, first bishop of Jerusalem. This is not the place to discuss at length the origin of the earliest Gospel. But we must note a few facts.

The various features mentioned above take us back to Palestine before the death of James (A.D. 62) and the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70), at a time when all authority, whether Jewish or Christian, had its seat in the City of David. To a later generation, to a Christian church used to the congregational anarchy which existed from the death of James, Peter and Paul to the beginning of the second century A.D., these features of Mark iv and its context would have lost a great part of their meaning as the comparison with Matthew and Luke shows.

But can we imagine that the Palestinian churches were torn by violent controversies and divided on the attitude towards Jewish authorities? Yes, we can, since the Book of the Acts,

in its cautious way, lets it be seen that there were tensions between "Hebrews" and "Hellenists", between the "Twelve" and the "Seven", in the Jerusalem congregation at an early date and later in Samaria and elsewhere in Palestine and Syria (chapters vi to viii, xi. 19 ff.). The Gospel of Mark originates in the midst of this conflict and throws a very crude light on its dimension, particularly in chapters iii and iv. It gives us an interesting view on the Hellenists' passions and ideas, which confirms and deepens what we learn from the Book of Acts.

(2) What matters even more than the knowledge of that splinter group, is the fact that Mark helps us to re-discover early Christian tradition, not only in scraps, but as a whole, in its inner life, and, through this, to get a better picture of the Jerusalem church of A.D. 30 to 60. To take but a few examples in chapter iv, let us say that it gives us priceless information about *the shape of tradition, the place of parables in tradition and the early interpretation of the Parable of the Sower.*

As to *the shape of tradition*, Mark iv suggests that it was hardly organized in collections. Sayings of Jesus, like these in iv. 21-25, were independent of one another. There is no reason to think that the Evangelist used a collection of parables, although the parables in verses 26-29 and 30-32 may have been combined before he intervened, judging from their similarities; but even that is far from certain. It is highly unlikely that the story of the Sower was joined to these two parables in pre-Markan tradition. And the story of the Sower was accompanied by its interpretation in verses 10-12, which gave to it the value of a justification of Christian exclusiveness, as we shall see shortly. In other words, traditions about Jesus were still unsystematized, either for practical or historical reasons.

As for *the place of parables in early Christian tradition*, Mark iv gives evidence that at least one and possibly three "parables" in the classical sense were used by the Christian church at an early date, but that other sayings were considered as parables also, because of their metaphoric languages and proverbial nature. On the other hand, teaching in parables does not appear central in tradition, since Mark leaves aside most parables of some size. If the parables of Mark iv. 26-29 and 30-32 come

from Christian tradition, they show how important the theme of the Kingdom of God was at an early date and how it was connected with parabolic teaching.

Finally, the early interpretation of the story of the Sower gives us an image of the thinking of the early Church about its own nature and mission. If we leave aside the Markan additions in verses 10 and 11, we have a coherent doctrine of election and of its manifestation. These additions tend to widen the circle of the elect: instead of just "the Twelve" in verse 10, we have "those around him with the Twelve"; instead of a very sweeping *τοῖς ἔξω* we hear of *ἐκείνοις τοῖς ἔξω*. If we leave the Markan additions aside, we find a firm assertion of the election of the Twelve, who will bear fruit for their Lord, and a stern rebuttal of the claims of "those outside", whose hearts are hardened by the message they hear. Thus, in the eyes of the early Jerusalem church, the Twelve were the only source of the Gospel and of its expansion. "Mark", who wants to oppose the claims of James, brother of the Lord, simply revives that early assertion of the role of the Twelve as the nucleus of the Church and widens their circle to make room for his own group.

(3) May we go one step further and raise the question of the meaning of the sayings and parables *in the preaching of Jesus?* This, of course, is a difficult task, but I do not consider it an impossible one, provided we use some caution. I find it difficult, for instance, to assert that verses 10–12 are an authentic saying of Jesus. It is no doubt an early interpretation of the story of the Sower, but whether it was originally an independent saying of Jesus, as Jeremias thinks, has to remain a sheer conjecture. The other sayings in iv. 3–9, 21–25, 26–32 are most likely to be authentic sayings of Jesus, and thus give us a direct insight into his understanding of the proclamation of the Gospel.

This is another theme which we cannot discuss at length today. Let us note simply that Jesus puts the emphasis on small beginnings—and even difficult ones—as the first step towards a triumphant eschatological harvest. And also that he insists on the disciples' responsibility in taking their share in preparing the miraculous harvest, which will be far greater and far more

widespread than we imagine. The evangelist may have understood this message in a somewhat more polemical sense, but he no doubt struggles to make it prevail against all obstacles and all fears. It is, therefore, fair to say that he is a faithful interpreter of the message of Jesus and to us, tired sceptics, a faithful echo of our Lord's call to fearless witness among men.