

The importance of parables for Mark's depiction of Jesus' ministry

Jonathan Appleby, June 2008

The purpose of Mark's gospel is indicated in the first verse of the gospel: Mark is presenting the good news of Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God.

Cranfield notes that in addition Mark aims also 'to supply the catechetical and liturgical needs of the church in Rome, to support its faith in the face of the threat of martyrdom and to provide material for missionary preachers'.¹

Mark has some of the characteristics of the Greek *bioi*, a life of Jesus, but with some differences. Mark's account, being a gospel, focusses increasingly on the events leading up to Jesus' death and resurrection. So what part do the parables and miracles play in the gospel? Are they merely incidental details which happen en route to the cross, or do they have value in themselves? The miracles demonstrate Jesus' power (and Mark mentions 18 miracles in his gospel; the highest 'density' of the four gospels), but what do the parables do?

Mark only mentions 9 parables in his gospel; much less than in the other synoptic gospels. This may perhaps be explained by noting that (according to Papias) Mark only wrote down that which he could accurately remember of Peter's teaching about the sayings or doings of Jesus.² Weight is given to the parables' authenticity even by sceptical scholars such as J.D. Crossan, who concludes that

¹ C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge University Press, 1959), p15.

² R.A. Cole, 'Gospel of Mark', in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Leicester: IVP, 1980), p948.

the parables were the most securely original material in the Jesus tradition because of the application of the dissimilarity principle to the form as well as the content of Jesus' words. . . [The] narrative parables seemed to be most surely his own characteristic pedagogic genre as distinct from the usage of the primitive church and also contemporary Judaism.³

Thus the parables are regarded as being genuine sayings of Jesus by a wide cross-section of scholars.

Mark 4:33 records that Jesus used many parables - most not recorded in Mark - and that they were the primary vehicle which Jesus used for teaching. Many scholars agree with C.H. Dodd that 'the parables represent the interpretation which our Lord offered of his own ministry', and that they therefore have a pivotal role in the understanding of Jesus.⁴

The parables in Mark are all related to the kingdom of God in some respect; its nature, its coming, its value, its growth, and so on, thus indicating that the kingdom of God was central to Jesus' teaching.⁵ What did Jesus mean by the kingdom of God? Jesus regarded the kingdom of God as being present in his own words and actions, in fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies. However there also seems to have been an element of 'not yet fulfilled' in his teaching, anticipating future events.

³ J.D. Crossan, 'The Parables of Jesus', *Interpretation*, 56.03 (2002), p248.

⁴ C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, rev. ed., (London: Collins, 1961), p158.

⁵ I.H. Marshall, 'Parables', in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Leicester: IVP, 1980), p1154.

Another key feature of the parables in Mark is that they 'function almost exclusively to separate the insiders from the outsiders'.⁶ Whereas a parable was usually told to make a point more easily understood, in Mark it is used to camouflage the true meaning, thus requiring effort, insight or instruction to gain understanding.

The remainder of this essay will attempt to describe the importance of the parables by reference to the Parable of the Sower in Mark 4:1-20. This parable is chosen because it has the characteristics outlined above, and its interpretation 'may be a model for interpreting the parables generally, since it has a simple focus on seed in soil and on different responses to hearing the word of the kingdom, but still makes a variety of points about that theme'.⁷

The parable of the Sower has as its main characters the farmer, sowing seed, and the four types of soil. Most commentators agree that 'the action of the farmer parallels Jesus' ministry', and note the similarity between the farmer's broadcasting technique and the indiscriminate (or unrestricted) nature of Jesus' ministry.⁸ The seed is explained by Jesus himself in verse 14 as being the word of God. The four types of soil and their response to the word have been the subject of many literary studies; the following interpretation reflects a frequently-reached conclusion within the context of first-century Palestine.

⁶ W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical interpretation: an integrated approach*, rev. ed., (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), p128.

⁷ David Wenham & Steve Walton, *Exploring the New Testament, Volume 1, The Gospels and Acts*, 1st edn, (London: SPCK, 2001), p103.

⁸ Donald H. Juel, 'Encountering the Sower - Mark 4:1-20', *Interpretation*, 56.03 (2002), p277.

The seed along the path is generally regarded as being typified by the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day, immediately opposing Jesus. They had already been mentioned in chapters 1-3, including their accusation in Mark 3:22 that Jesus was demon-possessed.

The seed sown on rocky places gets special mention by Jesus in verses 16-17. Keegan, in common with many scholars, notes that 'the description of those who receive the word with joy but subsequently fall away in time of persecution clearly fits the behaviour of the disciples'.⁹ This may not seem obvious at first, especially at this point in the Gospel, but becomes clearer when reading through to the end of the Gospel.

The seed sown among thorns has generated much debate. It is suggested by Keegan and others that this group is typified by Herod, who heard John's message gladly, but succumbed to worldly pressures. Another plausible explanation is that this group is exemplified by the crowds. 'Like Herod . . . the crowd heard Jesus gladly. . . Stirred up by the chief priests, however, the crowd soon cries out for Jesus' crucifixion, and Pilate, playing a role that parallels Herod's in wishing to satisfy the crowds, orders Jesus' crucifixion'.¹⁰

The seed sown on good soil refers to those who respond to Jesus with faith. Examples are not easy to find in the Gospel, except for isolated individuals, and it

⁹ Terence J. Keegan, 'The Parable of the Sower and Mark's Jewish Leaders', *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 56 (1994), p509.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p511.

is possible that here Jesus is effectively looking forward to ‘fulfilment in the anticipated future that is beyond the limits of the story time of the Gospel’.¹¹

The brief discussion above highlights two significant points: Firstly, the original meaning of this parable is not immediately obvious, but the meaning becomes clearer on re-reading the narrative. This is a characteristic of parables generally in Mark; understanding requires effort on the part of the hearer. Secondly, this parable is in effect a plot of the whole Gospel. Keegan notes that ‘this parable serves as a summary of the entire plot’ of the Gospel, with the principle character groups in the Gospel corresponding to those in the parable.¹²

The choice of parables as a vehicle for Jesus’ message can be understood in terms of a need for a certain “veiledness”, ‘like a politician gathering support for a new and highly risky movement’ which would be unpopular in certain quarters.¹³ Cranfield notes of Jesus that ‘throughout the ministry we can see the two motives (revealing and veiling) at work. . . Both . . . are necessary to the divine purpose, are constantly in tension’.¹⁴

Many commentators have noticed that Jesus’ words in this parable develop Old Testament themes about the kingdom of God. N.T. Wright states that this parable is ‘a typically Jewish story about the way in which the Kingdom of God was coming’, going on to show that it is rooted in the ‘prophetic language of the

¹¹ Terence J. Keegan, ‘The Parable of the Sower and Mark’s Jewish Leaders’, p512.

¹² *ibid.*, p508.

¹³ N.T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, p25.

¹⁴ C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to St. Mark*, p157.

return from exile'.¹⁵ Wright also notes that the image of the sower is significant in the Old Testament, particularly in Jeremiah and Psalms.

Most significant of all however, is the Isaianic background to the parable. In Isaiah 6, the prophet 'sees Israel like a tree being cut down in judgement, and then the stump being burnt; but the holy seed is the stump, and from that stump there shall come forth new shoots'.¹⁶ Wright suggests that God was in Jesus 'calling into being a new people, a renewed Israel', but in a way that was unexpected by the Herodians, the Zealots or the Essenes of his day. This is not just a recent insight; Jerome observed that the holy seed of Isaiah 6:13 sprouted into the church.¹⁷

Another parallel may be found in Isaiah 55:10-11. Craig Evans proposes that 'the unifying theme found in Isaiah and Mark 4 is the idea of the efficacy of God's word. God's spoken word accomplishes his purposes, as Isaiah 55:10-11 declares and as the Sower Parable illustrates'.¹⁸ Evans also notes that the theology of Isaiah and Mark 4:1-20 are essentially the same: 'out of judgement comes salvation'.¹⁹ We can say in conclusion that the parables clearly illustrate that Jesus saw his own ministry in terms of the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy.

¹⁵ N.T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, (London, SPCK, 2000), p23.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p23.

¹⁷ Craig A. Evans, 'On the Isaianic Background of the Sower Parable', *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 47 (1985), p466 (in footnote).

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p467.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p467.

What about the words of Mark 4:10-12 – is Jesus saying that the parables are meant to obscure meaning? Robert Arida helpfully draws on the teaching of Irenaeus, noting that the message is ‘neither inherently revealed nor intentionally obscured. On the contrary, the Word . . . even in its parabolic form, places the audience in a context to receive or reject what was spoken by Jesus’.²⁰ Arida also notes the teaching of Victor of Antioch (the earliest commentary on Mark) that ‘the parable was understood as a means to draw the audience into a state of reflection that in turn would give rise to questions posed to Jesus’.²¹

This idea of the parable creating thoughtful reflection and discussion was one of the reasons for Mark including it in his account. In a world where reading aloud was the norm, this parable with its repetition and summary was easy to remember, thus helping early Christian believers to be oriented to the plot and to reflect on its significance.²² And the need for reflection is of course equally valid for contemporary hearers/readers. What kind of soil are we? Will we be one of the unproductive soils? Juel writes that this parable, ‘particularly when read aloud, has an immediacy that makes such a discussion seem appropriate’.²³

In conclusion, I have tried to show that the parables were Jesus’ main teaching style, and shed light on how he viewed his ministry. I have also tried to show that parables are an important component of Mark’s narrative; they provide instruction

²⁰ Arida, Robert M., ‘Hearing, Receiving and Entering. Το ΜυστηριονΤα Μυστηρια: Patristic Insights Unveiling the *Crux Interpretum* (Isaiah 6:9-10) of the Sower Parable’, *St.Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, 38 no.2 (1994), p224.

²¹ *ibid.*, p227.

²² Mary Ann Tolbert, ‘How the Gospel of Mark Builds Character’, *Interpretation*, 47 (1993), p350.

²³ Donald H. Juel, ‘Encountering the Sower - Mark 4:1-20’, p278.

and challenge to his audience, and they help to show Jesus as the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies.

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