

A Gospel-oriented Approach to Jesus' Parable of the Mustard Seed

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Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

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Abstract

Parable scholarship, by definition, focuses on parable texts rather than specific sources. A parable is often studied as an autonomous unit and, where more than one canonical version exists, the accounts are conflated or expounded together. Yet, much of a parable's meaning is derived from its context, and this parable-oriented method runs the risk of muting the individual Evangelists' voices and obscuring their message. This dissertation, therefore, proposes the use of a Gospel-oriented approach that expounds each account separately within its own Gospel context. This approach will allow the writers to speak on their own terms and enable us to consider the full breadth of the parable's canonical use. We will be open to the prospect that each writer may have been illustrating a different point when they recorded the specific parable, and that this is reflected in their choice of wording and context. After discussing the basis for this approach, we will then apply the method to the parable of the Mustard Seed, conducting a detailed study of each of its three canonical versions. We will discuss the wording, as well as the wider and immediate context in which each writer places their account, and how it fits into their narrative. Finally, we will seek the most likely interpretation for the parable in each Gospel, contrasting our findings to determine whether one or more of the Evangelists was seeking to convey a different message through their specific use of the parable.

Introduction

Jesus' parable of the Mustard Seed stands out from among his parable corpus as something of an enigma. It is one of a handful of parables that is recorded by all three of the Synoptic writers (Mt. 13:31–32; Mk 4:30–32; Lk. 13:18–19),¹ and yet in all three instances of its telling, the wording and context are different, and no specific application or interpretation is given. All three versions record it as an illustration of the kingdom of God, but none of them explicitly states what aspect of the kingdom is being highlighted. Because of this, scholarly opinion has been divided over the parable's precise meaning, and developments in parable research have yielded a variety of results. However, one aspect of the interpretative process has remained largely unchanged. Despite the variations in wording and context, the parable is viewed as its own literary unit and the respective accounts are brought together and subjected to critical study as though they represent a single entity. This is what I shall term a parable-oriented interpretative approach.

¹ The parable is also included in the Gospel of Thomas logion 20, however this dissertation will focus on the canonical accounts. For discussion on Thomas' version, see William G. Duffy, *The Hidden Gospel of Thomas: Commentaries in the Non-Dual Sayings of Jesus* (Bristol, UK: SilverWood Books Ltd, 2020), pp. 89–91; Simon Gathercole, *The Gospel of Thomas: Introduction and Commentary*, Texts and Editions for New Testament Study (Leiden; Boston, MA: Brill, 2014), pp. 297–99; Jean-Yves Leloup, *The Gospel of Thomas: The Gnostic Wisdom of Jesus* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2005), pp. 125–26.

I. Parable-oriented Interpretative Approaches

a. Monovalent² Interpretation

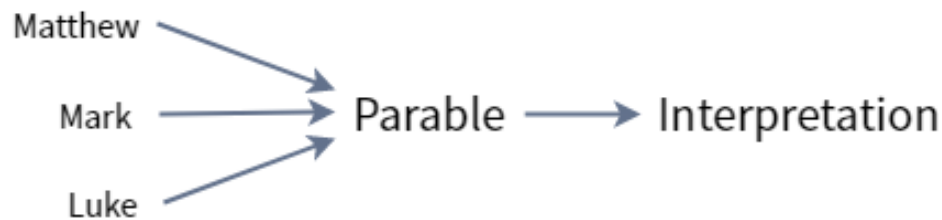
Many parable studies seek to find *the* meaning of each of Jesus' recorded parables and, in the case of parables like that of the Mustard Seed, different gospel accounts are considered together to determine a single interpretation for them all. Although there are three differing accounts, they are treated as three accounts of one single parable, and the differences are either reconciled, explained away, or ignored, so that an integrative interpretation is formulated. Thus, a parable-oriented approach is where the parable is taken as an entity in itself, and all of the respective accounts are conflated or expounded together. An example of this approach may be seen in the work of Craig Blomberg. Whilst writing about the Mustard Seed, he comments that 'parallel versions of a given parable often differ in imagery employed, even though the message remains unaltered'.³ When an interpreter approaches a parable with this preconceived idea, then there is no reason to allow the separate accounts to speak for themselves. One interpretation will be formulated on the basis of their shared or

² Here, and throughout, the terms 'monovalent' and 'polyvalent' will be used to refer to the potential range of valid interpretation of Jesus' parables. The term 'monovalent' is used to refer to the view that only one valid interpretation exists for each parable. Scholars who take this view may accept that this interpretation has multiple points, and that it is open to a wide range of contemporary application, but its original message, as formulated by Jesus, is the only legitimate interpretation and uncovering this meaning should be the exegete's intended goal. The term 'polyvalent' is used to refer to the view that the parables can be legitimately interpreted in multiple ways, to give an indeterminate number of valid meanings. These variations of legitimate interpretation can be based on a variety of factors including, but not limited to, differences in the recorded context, contemporary interpretative setting and considerations of literary devices and structures. Examples of scholars who take these different approaches will be given below.

³ Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (second edition) (Downers Grove, IL; Nottingham, UK: InterVarsity Press; Apollos, 2012), p. 94.

common elements, with the differences viewed as cultural adaptations to better fit the intended audience of each respective text.⁴ This approach may be illustrated in the following way:

Figure 1: A Monovalent Parable-oriented Interpretative Approach



b. Polyvalent Interpretation

Yet, recent developments in parable research have led to a shift in the way that many scholars understand the parable genre. The largely historical concerns of much 20th century research and the quest for the historical Jesus have given way to the inclusion of literary and reader-oriented considerations, opening up new horizons for the way the parables are viewed.⁵ This has led to an increasing number of scholars accepting that the parables may not have been intended to convey only one meaning.⁶ It may be that interpreters throughout the history of the Church have failed to agree on one universally accepted interpretation for each of Jesus' parables because that was never

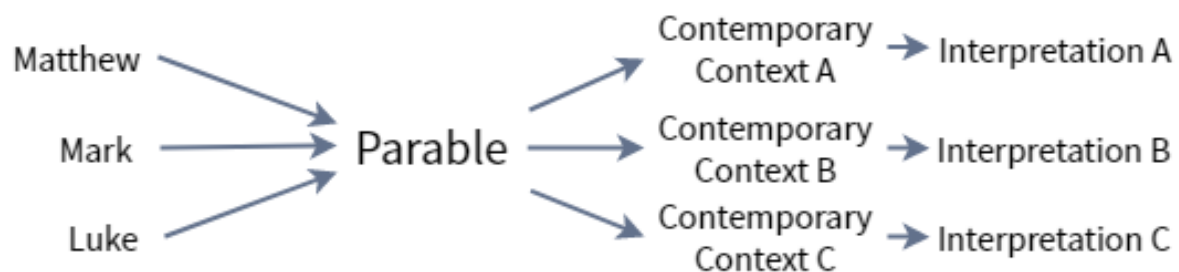
⁴ This is how Blomberg explains aspects such as the mustard seed being planted in a garden in Luke's version of the parable. See Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, p. 94.

⁵ For a detailed discussion of literary and hermeneutical methods in relation to parable studies, see Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, pp. 151–91.

⁶ See, for example, Mary Ann Tolbert, *Perspectives on the Parables: An Approach to Multiple Interpretations* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1979).

the intended function of the parable genre.⁷ Thus, a greater focus has been placed on their literary structure and the reader's interpretative setting than on the historical background and what message Jesus may have been conveying to his original audience.⁸ The result is that the structure and framework of each account can become little more than a boundary that prevents the text from being misused and virtually any meaning imposed upon it. If an interpreter is seeking to uncover Jesus' original intention, then the historical context is critical; but if an interpreter is seeking to expound the literary form in their own contemporary cultural setting, then historical context becomes much less important. Thus, a parable-oriented approach is still adopted, but a single 'correct' interpretation is no longer sought. Instead, the potential for polyvalent meaning is opened up. This approach may be illustrated in the following way:

Figure 2: A Polyvalent Parable-oriented Interpretative Approach



⁷ Richard Lischer, *Reading the Parables*, Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), pp. 151–66, discusses six different interpretations of the parable of the Good Samaritan from across Church history.

⁸ For articles by the most notable proponents of structuralism (Robert W. Funk, John Dominic Crossan and Dan O. Via, Jr.), see Robert W. Funk, ed., *Semeia 1: A Structuralist Approach to the Parables* (1974).

The common element in these monovalent and polyvalent approaches is that the parable is interpreted as an entity in itself and, in some cases, as an autonomous unit. Because parable research, by definition, focuses on the parable rather than upon the source, the accounts are brought together to become the subject of a unified study. Interpreters seek to understand the parable of the Mustard Seed through its respective accounts in the Gospels, but in doing so, the Gospels are in danger of losing their respective voices. If Matthew is not allowed to speak as Matthew, but is instead either merged with, or placed alongside, the other Gospels, then it is not Matthew who speaks. Instead, it is an attempt to unite the accounts into a more complete or less redacted form – to return, as much as possible, to Jesus' original words. In this way, a parable-oriented approach may still, in a sense, be a quest for the historical Jesus.

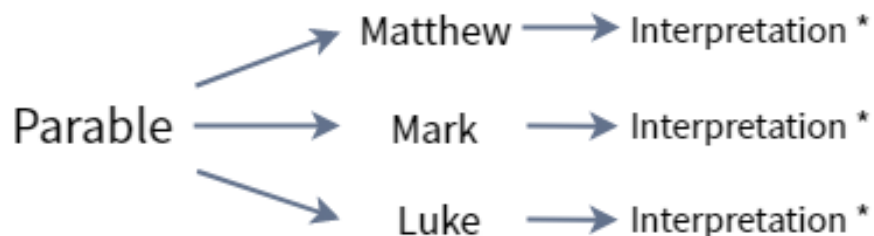
If the interpreter is seeking one 'correct' interpretation for the parable, then this is an understandable approach. If only one appropriate interpretation exists, then it must surely be the one originally intended by Jesus. However, we only have the parables as the Evangelists recorded them, and there is good reason within the Gospels to suggest that at least some of these recorded versions are open to polyvalent interpretation. We will explore two examples of this phenomenon in the first chapter of this study, considering how, in some cases, the Gospel writers clearly use the same parable to convey different messages. This observation, relating to parables where the intended meaning is clearly stated, has logical implications on parables where the interpretation is less forthright. The variations of wording and setting in the respective Gospels' retelling of the parable of the Mustard Seed may not be just aesthetic or cultural. We must consider the possibility that each Gospel writer may have been trying

to convey a different message or illustrate a different point when they recorded this parable. Therefore, in this dissertation, we will approach the parable in a different way.

II. A Gospel-oriented Interpretative Approach

Rather than taking a parable-oriented approach that conflates the accounts, this dissertation employs what I shall term a Gospel-oriented interpretative approach, whereby each account is considered and interpreted separately on its own terms. We will seek to understand the message each Gospel writer was trying to convey through their respective use of the parable of the Mustard Seed, as opposed to seeking to understand the message of the parable through its respective accounts in the Gospels. This approach may be illustrated in the following way:

Figure 3: A Gospel-oriented Interpretative Approach



Using this method, we shall be open to the possibility that the parable has polyvalent meaning, whilst also accepting that each Gospel writer likely had a specific interpretation in mind. In the illustration above, the interpretations are given an asterisk rather than a letter, as in Figure 2. This is because we will not assume that the interpretations will all be different, but we will be open to that prospect. In this way, we

will seek a specific interpretation for each account, whilst also being open to the polyvalency of the parable.

Taking this approach will not only give us a broader understanding of how the Evangelists used this particular parable, but it may also have wider implications on methods of parable interpretation. If our findings suggest that the Synoptic writers were using this parable to convey different messages, then this may also be the case with other parables that appear in more than one Gospel. It may, therefore, imply that the legitimate interpretative range of Jesus' wider parable corpus is restricted or obscured by a parable-oriented approach, particularly where a monovalent interpretative presupposition is adopted. We will explore these issues and the basis for a Gospel-oriented approach in greater detail in the first chapter of this dissertation. After this, we will use the Mustard Seed parable as a case study for the method, considering each one of the synoptic accounts of the parable in turn, seeking the most likely interpretation in each of its three canonical settings. We will compare and contrast these resultant interpretations, allowing each Gospel to speak for itself, and considering whether the differences in wording and context suggest that one or more of the Evangelists had a different meaning in mind when they wrote their accounts. Finally, we will review our findings and assess the contribution of the Gospel-oriented method to the study of the parable.

1. Formulating a Gospel-oriented Approach

1.1. Polyvalency Within the Gospel Accounts

Before discussing the reasons for conducting a Gospel-oriented study of the Parable of the Mustard Seed, we will first consider two other examples where the Gospel writers draw a different meaning or emphasis from the same parable. The first is the parable of the Lost Sheep (Mt. 18:10–14; Lk. 15:1–7), where a careful reading of the two accounts in Matthew and Luke demonstrates that the authors are giving the parable a different emphasis.⁹ This can be seen through variations in the recorded contexts, and the respective concluding statements. In Matthew, the context of chapter 18 is the disciples' question regarding who is the greatest in the kingdom (18:1). Jesus brings forth a child and says that they must become humble like a child if they are to enter the kingdom (18:2–5). He then goes on to warn them regarding the consequences of causing one of these 'little ones' to fall (18:6–7). The focus is then turned on the disciples themselves and their own susceptibility to sin: they must get rid of anything that causes them to stumble (18:8–9). The parable of the Lost Sheep is ultimately given as an illustration of the instruction not to 'despise' these little ones

⁹ The differences in the two versions of this parable lead Blomberg to question whether they are parallel accounts at all. He subsequently gives the two versions different names: The Lost Sheep and The Wandering Sheep. See Craig L. Blomberg, 'When is a Parallel Really a Parallel? A Test Case: The Lucan Parables', *Westminster Theological Journal* 46 (1984), pp. 96–100. However, this is a minority view, with most scholars accepting that they are two versions of the same parable. See, for example, Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (revised edition) (London, UK: SCM Press Ltd, 1972), pp. 38–40; Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (second edition) (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2018), pp. 95–110.

(the childlike). Jesus concludes by saying, 'So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost' (18:14).

In Luke 15, the context is the Pharisees' criticism of Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners (15:1–2). Jesus tells the parable in response to this criticism and emphasises the joy in heaven over the repentance of one sinner, as opposed to ninety-nine who did not need to repent (15:3–7).

Thus, Jesus' conclusion in Matthew is:

It is not the Father's will that one (of the childlike) should be lost.

And in Luke it is:

There is great joy over one (sinner) who repents.

We see, then, that a slightly different point is illustrated. In Matthew it seems to be the fragility and value of the childlike, and the disciples' responsibility to care for them so that none are lost. In Luke it seems to be the importance of leading sinners to repentance because of the joy that God feels over their recovery. Therefore, whilst the parable appears to have broadly the same *meaning*, there is a different *emphasis* and, therefore, a different point of application is highlighted.

1.2. The Lamp Under a Basket

This example of multiple meanings or applications being present in various gospel accounts of parables, is not a unique occurrence. Another more clearly stated example is the parable of a lamp being hidden under a basket or jar. Jesus says that a lamp is not lit so it can be hidden, it is put on a stand so that it can cast its light. As with the Mustard Seed, this parable appears in all three Synoptic Gospels, but with variations in context, wording and application. In Matthew 5:14–16 the parable is paired with the example of a city on a hill as part of Jesus' teaching about being salt and light. In this passage, the light refers to his listeners, as they are encouraged to, 'let your light shine before others' (15:16). Thus, it is a call to action so that people will see the good works of Jesus' followers and subsequently give glory to God.¹⁰

In Mark 4:21–23¹¹ the illustration is given immediately after the interpretation of the parable of the Sower, and it appears to be a continuation of Jesus' response to the question of why he taught using parables. Here, his point of application is that 'there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light' (4:22). The exact meaning of this is disputed, but it might be a statement about the intended function of a parable. At the immediate time, Jesus' parables may have concealed his message from the masses, whilst the secrets were being revealed to the disciples in private (4:11–12). However, this is not so that the disciples can keep these secrets to themselves. Nothing is to be kept secret except to be revealed. This

¹⁰ For a fuller discussion, see Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word, Incorporated, 1993), pp. 101–2.

¹¹ For more discussion on this passage, see section 2.3.

could be a reflection of the sentiment expressed in Mark 8:29–30 where Jesus strictly instructs the disciples not to tell anyone that he is the Christ (cf. Mt. 16:20; Lk. 9:21). Yet, this is not a permanent instruction; he ultimately wants them to spread his message as far as they can (cf. Mk 16:15). Thus, the message of the parables may have been hidden for a time, but only so it can ultimately be revealed.¹²

Luke 8:16–17 parallels this section of Mark 4. However, in Luke, Jesus uses the same parable a second time to illustrate a different point. In Luke 11:33 Jesus gives this illustration before his teaching about the eye being the lamp of the body (paralleled in Mt. 6:22–23, but without the parable). Again, the meaning of this is disputed, but with its preceding section about that generation's desire for a sign (11:29–32) and the subsequent statement about the eye (11:34–36) it seems that Jesus is referring to the potential for people to obscure their own spiritual vision through stubbornness and unbelief. They do not need more signs. They already have everything they need to believe in him, if they are willing to see it.¹³

Therefore, the same short parable is being used in at least three different ways within the canonical Gospels. In each of these examples, the same illustration is used – no one lights a lamp and hides it; they let the light shine – yet Jesus uses it to make three different statements:

¹² For a fuller discussion, see R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, UK: Wm. B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2002), pp. 207–10.

¹³ For a fuller discussion, see Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), pp. 465–66.

1. Let people see your good works so they will give glory to God (Mt. 5).
2. The message of the kingdom may be concealed for a time, but ultimately it is to be revealed to all (Mk 4; Lk. 8).
3. Do not be blind to the truth – open your eyes and see (Lk. 11).

Whilst this is a clear example of the different Gospel writers using the same parable to illustrate multiple points, it is particularly significant that one author records two variations. This suggests that it is not simply a case of the writers representing conflicting views. If the parable genre was used rigidly so that there could only be one correct meaning, then the author of Luke would have recorded the one instance that they believed to be accurate. Its dual use in the same Gospel suggests that either Jesus himself used it to illustrate multiple points, or that the author, or Early Church tradition that preceded them, regarded the parable to be flexible enough to reapply it themselves.

However, despite the multiple uses of the Lamp Under a Basket, the parable does appear to have a particular meaning in each recorded instance. The point that we drew from Matthew 5 could not be drawn from the same parable in Mark 4. It is given as an illustration to reinforce or clarify the surrounding material. This material is so crucial to our understanding of the parable, that it completely loses the meaning without it. The statement, 'No one lights a lamp and hides it; they let the light shine', works best as an illustration for something related to light or vision (as per the Gospel uses), but it is sufficiently non-specific that it could be used in relation to almost any warning to not do something that is paradoxically self-defeating or foolish. Even in the case of the Lost Sheep, whilst the difference is more subtle, it is the context that enables us to determine its intended meaning within each Gospel setting. Thus, the construction and

context of each Gospel writer's parable passages is key to understanding their intended meaning within their specific retelling.

1.3. The Implications of the Gospel Contexts

These observations demonstrate that, although a parable may legitimately be used to illustrate more than one point, the individual Gospel contexts restrict this range towards a specific message. Yet despite this, it is unusual for an interpreter to seek a specific interpretation for each Gospel account of the same parable. In the case of the parable of the Mustard Seed this seems unjustified since the wording and context of the parable is different in each of the three canonical versions, and no in-text interpretation is given for any of them. This interpretative trend appears to be because parable scholars, by definition, take a parable-oriented approach. Mary Ann Tolbert's ground-breaking work on polyvalent parable interpretation is a prime example of this. When considering how to approach a parable that is recorded in more than one Gospel setting, Tolbert says that there are three options: 'One may arbitrarily select one gospel version to explore, or one may choose a gospel version based upon a predetermined criterion, or again, one may try to reconstruct a hypothetical text.'¹⁴ It seems that she believes the only options available are to choose one Gospel to interpret or to amalgamate the accounts into a single, hypothetically more original, version. This is despite her earlier assertion that, when employing a rhetorical

¹⁴ Tolbert, *Perspectives on the Parables*, p. 72.

interpretative model, a parable's meaning is so dependent upon the context that, 'different contexts necessarily result in different interpretations'.¹⁵

If the Gospel's provide us with multiple contexts for a given parable, and different contexts result in different interpretations, then it would seem logical to conduct a study of each one of the given contexts to determine the intended meaning of each one. Yet Tolbert's parable-oriented focus appears to have blinded her to that conclusion. Her goal, as with most parable scholars, is to interpret the parable as an entity in itself. Because it is one parable; it is one study. Therefore, it will either be one study of one text, or one study of multiple texts. Tolbert never considers that it could be multiple studies of each individual text.

A more recent example of this interpretative trend may also be seen in the work of Ruben Zimmermann. His methodology takes each respective source as 'a memory text that has remembered and preserved a version of Jesus' parables'.¹⁶ Zimmermann accepts the polyvalent nature of the parables but believes that the text in which they are conveyed plays an important role in preventing extensive deconstruction that would result in no objectivity at all. He writes, 'It is the context that suggests the direction of interpretation but also sets its limitations. Because parables are bound to

¹⁵ *Perspectives on the Parables*, p. 68.

¹⁶ Ruben Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables of Jesus: Methods and Interpretation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), p. 189.

a context, both the direct and the broader contexts of the macro text can correct against reshaping that is overly loose.¹⁷

Zimmermann repeatedly describes parable interpretation by utilizing the metaphor of a game.¹⁸ The boundaries set out by historical and linguistic considerations limit the range of valid interpretation in the same way that the boundaries of a playing field limit the area where a game can be played. Yet, just as there is a great degree of freedom within those boundaries for the game to have multiple outcomes, there is freedom within the contextual boundaries of a parable to find a spectrum of meaning. Thus, a parable cannot mean anything, but it can mean more than one thing. The limits of its interpretative range are set out by the socio-historical, textual, and linguistic construction, but there is freedom of meaning within those limitations.

Yet, there are two issues that this approach creates. The first is that, in the case of a parable that is recorded in multiple Gospels, each author is likely to have had a specific message in mind when they wrote it. As previously observed in the above examples of the Lost Sheep and Lamp Under a Basket, whilst parables can sometimes be used to convey different points, the writer constructs their account in such a way as to communicate a specific message. Thus, by seeking a spectrum of meaning within the boundaries of the contextual playing field, Zimmermann is, again, taking a parable-

¹⁷ *Puzzling the Parables*, pp. 170–71.

¹⁸ See, for example, *Puzzling the Parables*, pp. 170, 173, 205–6.

oriented approach. Despite his emphasis on the importance of the sources, he is not seeking the text's intended meaning; he is still interpreting the parable as its own entity.

The second issue concerns the same decision that Tolbert was faced with regarding *what* to interpret. Where a parable appears in multiple Gospels, with varieties of wording and context, then, to borrow Zimmermann's analogy, the interpreter is faced with playing the same game on multiple playing fields that have different boundaries. For example, an interpreter who is reading the Mustard Seed parable in Matthew 13 may ask what role the man plays in the parable, or why his seed grows into a tree. However, these are not questions that someone reading Mark 4 would think of, because neither the man, nor the tree, are present. Instead, the reader of Mark 4 may be left questioning how the parable relates to the previous parable – the Growing Seed – but this, in turn, would not occur to someone studying Luke 13, where that parable is absent. Therefore, even if a polyvalent approach is accepted, the range of potentially valid interpretations will be different depending on which text is being studied.

To continue Zimmermann's metaphor and reframe Tolbert's question, an interpreter must choose whether to merge the playing fields – to draw all the accounts together and seek the full interpretative spectrum for the parable as its own distinct entity – or to pick one of the fields and just play the game within its boundaries – to study just one text and ignore the details from the other accounts. Zimmermann chooses the second option. In the case of the parable of the Mustard Seed, Zimmermann selects

Mark's version and, although he considers several interpretations, they are just based on Mark's text.¹⁹

1.4. A Gospel-oriented Alternative

Yet, both Tolbert and Zimmermann fail to consider that there is a third option – to play the games separately on their own terms – to treat each retelling of the parable individually. By doing this, an interpreter will not only consider the full range of literary evidence for the parable; they will also do justice to the individual Gospel writers and their respective messages. Adopting this Gospel-oriented approach creates the opportunity to frame the study in a different way and to pose questions that a parable-oriented study does not answer. For example, a parable-oriented approach to Matthew 13:31–32 will ask what Matthew's account contributes to our understanding of the parable of the Mustard Seed. It may compare Matthew's text with the other Gospel versions and draw conclusions from that comparison. Blomberg does this when, very early in his treatment of the Mustard Seed, he says that Mark's exclusion of the man demonstrates that he has no significant role in the parable.²⁰ Thus, Matthew and Luke's inclusion of the man is never given any serious consideration in his interpretation.

A Gospel-oriented approach, by contrast, will ask how we should understand the parable of the Mustard Seed in Matthew's Gospel and how it fits into his message. We

¹⁹ *Puzzling the Parables*, pp. 237–59.

²⁰ Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, p. 391.

will ask questions such as why the author of Matthew has worded and located the parable in the way that they have, how it relates to the surrounding material, and what it contributes to the message of Matthew 13. These findings will inevitably be different to the study that we do of the same parable in the other Gospels. Thus, a change in our methodology determines our interpretative end. If we take a parable-oriented approach, we may consider all the interpretations that would be uncovered by a Gospel-oriented approach, but we will unify them as a body of potential meaning that can be drawn from the parable of the Mustard Seed as its own autonomous unit. Whereas, if we take a Gospel-oriented approach, we will consider our findings within their respective settings. Rather than the Gospels informing our understanding of the parable, the parable will inform our understanding of the Gospels. By considering how the parable contributes to what each Gospel writer is saying within the passage that they locate it, a Gospel-oriented approach is similar to a biblical commentary, but it differs in that it is still a parable study. Through an exploration of the respective Gospel writers' use of the parable, we will gain a broader understanding of its potential for polyvalency within its canonical retelling.

1.5. Specificity and Polyvalency

This approach to polyvalency allows us to consider multiple meanings for the parable whilst also seeking a specific interpretation for each passage. Thus, we will guard against overly subjective recontextualization by seeking specificity within the original Gospel settings. Because context has such a bearing on interpretation of parabolic material, the presence of multiple versions and contexts gives weight to the argument for polyvalent interpretation; however, it restricts it on the level of the individual account. The specific context and wording that each writer gives to the parable

restricts its meaning within its specific use. So, whilst taking a parable-oriented stance discloses evidence that the parable can be used in multiple ways and given a range of meanings, a Gospel-oriented approach demonstrates that the writers were restricting the potential interpretative range in different ways and were likely to be seeking to convey a particular, and potentially different, message. Whilst, as previously noted, this is clearly the case with the parable of the Lamp Under a Basket, the implications of this on parables like the Mustard Seed, which have a less clearly stated application within the Gospel texts, is significant but rarely considered.

These observations, regarding polyvalency within the Gospel uses of the parables, form the basis for the following Gospel-oriented study of the parable of the Mustard Seed. We will begin with Mark's version²¹ and conduct a detailed study of each of the canonical accounts in turn, focusing particularly on differences in wording and context, and contrasting the versions in order to highlight the variations, and consider the interpretative implications.

²¹ This dissertation will work on the basis of the two-document, or two source, hypothesis for the Synoptic problem. Therefore, we will study Mark's account first (on the assumption of Markan priority), followed by Luke's (who is thought to most closely represent the version in Q) and finally, Matthew's (who conflates the material from the other two). For discussion on the synoptic problem in general, see D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (second edition) (Leicester, UK: Apollos, 2005), pp. 77–133. The decision to work on the basis of the two-document hypothesis has been greatly influenced by the conclusions reached in Zeba Antonin Crook's study of the Synoptic problem as it specifically relates to the parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven. See, Zeba Antonin Crook, 'The Synoptic Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven: A Test-Case for the Two-Document, Two-Gospel, and Farrer-Goulder Hypothesis', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 78 (2000), pp. 23–48.

2. Mark's Version of the Mustard Seed Parable (Mk 4:30–32)

2.1. The Context and Structure of Mark 4

Mark's version of the Mustard Seed parable comes at the end of an extended discourse that is unusual for the style of his Gospel. Mark has often been described as vivid and fast paced, rapidly transitioning between scenes, and having a much greater focus on Jesus' actions than in the other Gospels.²² As a result, Mark records less of Jesus' speech than the other Evangelists and, consequently, fewer parables.²³

Mark's focus on Jesus' deeds as well as his identity and authority is evident in the three chapters that precede the parable discourse. Unlike the other two Synoptics, Mark does not include a birth narrative, and John's ministry is only briefly described in setting up Jesus' baptism (1:4–11). The account of Jesus' temptation also comprises of only two verses (1:12–13), compared to eleven in Matthew (4:1–11), and thirteen in Luke (4:1–13). Mark describes Jesus as one who has authority, in his teaching (1:22, 27), over the demons whom he casts out (1:25, 34; 3:11), over sickness and disease (1:31, 34, 41–42; 2:11–12; 3:5, 10), and even over sin (2:10), and the Sabbath (2:28). Thus, despite Jesus repeatedly instructing the demons and those he heals to be silent about his identity (1:34, 44; 3:12), the reader is clearly told who he is. Jesus is declared

²² See, for example, Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 169; William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), pp. 25–27.

²³ The precise number of parables that a scholar believes Mark records varies depending on their definition of a parable. For example, Zimmermann, who includes any saying that is designated παραβολή in the text, as well as those that fulfil his own criteria, proposes that Mark includes seventeen parable texts (*Puzzling the Parables*, p. 238), whilst Lischer's, much narrower definition leads him to propose, only six (*Reading the Parables*, p. 73).

to be the Son of God by the narrator (1:1), by God himself (1:11), and even by the demons (3:11), who also call him the Holy One of God (1:24). Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man (2:10, 28) which is likely a reference to the messianic figure from Daniel's apocalyptic vision (Dan. 7:13–14).²⁴ Yet, despite these messianic references, there is a clear contrast between the reaction of the crowds, who flock to Jesus (Mk 1:32–33, 37, 45; 2:2, 12, 15; 3:7–8, 20, 32), and that of the scribes and Pharisees, who oppose him (2:6–7, 16, 18, 24) and subsequently plot his destruction (3:6). Even Jesus' family misunderstand him (3:21, 31–35) and he is accused of performing exorcisms by the power of Satan, rather than God (3:22).

Thus, in chapter 4, the breathless pace of Mark's narrative is paused to offer an explanation. Here, Jesus uses parables and a quotation from Isaiah 6 to explain these different responses to his ministry and why he teaches in parables.²⁵ Mark uses a very carefully crafted structure, which Klyne Snodgrass identifies as crucial to understanding the discourse's intent.²⁶ The whole section forms an extended chiasm that Snodgrass labels as follows:

²⁴ Cf. Mk 13:26; 14:62. For a detailed discussion of Jesus' use of the term, 'Son of Man', see W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *Matthew 8–18*, International Critical Commentary (London, UK; New York, NY: T&T Clark Ltd, 1991), pp. 43–52.

²⁵ Morna Hooker believes that the two detailed parables that are recorded by Mark – the Sower (4:3–8) and the Vineyard (12:1–9) – encapsulate Jesus' ministry and are strategically placed within Mark's narrative as allegorical explanations at key points. See Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London, UK: Continuum, 1991), pp.121–22.

²⁶ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, p. 156.

- A 4:1–2 *Narrative Introduction*
- B 4:3–9 *A Seed Parable (the Sower)*
- C 4:10–12 *General Statement on the Purpose of Parables*
- D 4:13–20 *Interpretation of the Sower*
- C' 4:21–25 *General Statements Applied to Parables*
- B' 4:26–32 *Two Seed Parables*
- A' 4:33–34 *Narrative Conclusion on the Use of Parables*²⁷

This structure highlights the importance of recognising corresponding material and the emphasis on its central sections: the interpretation of the Sower and purpose of parables. A proper understanding of this material is so important that it may be regarded as the key to the whole discourse.²⁸ For this reason, before we discuss the Mustard Seed parable specifically, we will consider the wider passage in more detail and how a fuller understanding of its teaching impacts the way we interpret the Mustard Seed in Mark.

2.2. The Parable of the Sower and its Interpretation (Mk 4:3–20)

In the parable of the Sower, Jesus describes four types of ground and their respective receptivity to the seed that is cast upon it. This parable is the only one in Mark's Gospel that receives a detailed explanation, but it is bracketed by a short transitional section

²⁷ *Stories with Intent*, p. 157. A careful reading may, in fact, highlight further points of correspondence, for example, with the birds, which feature in the first section of the Sower and at the end of the Mustard Seed, and the fruitful plant produced by the ground at the end of the Sower and in the Growing Seed, that is the first of the two corresponding seed parables. See also John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 31, who identifies similar word counts to the corresponding sections.

²⁸ Morna D. Hooker, 'Mark's Parables of the Kingdom (Mark 4:1–34)', in *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, ed. by Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), pp. 87–90.

(4:10–13), and corresponding parabolic illustrations (4:21–25) that shed further light upon the message of the wider passage.

In verses 10–12 Jesus' followers ask him about the parables, and he responds with a quotation from Isaiah 6:9–10. His statement here has proved to be one of the most controversial in the Gospels and some have seen it as suggesting that Jesus intentionally conceals his message from the masses and only reveals it to those whom he selects.²⁹ Yet, a big part of this controversy hinges on the identification of 'those outside' in Mark 4:11. The contrast with 'you', which appears to refer to 'those who were around him along with the twelve' (4:10) has led many commentators to draw the conclusion that 'those outside' means everyone who was not in Jesus' privileged inner circle of disciples.³⁰ Yet, this does not do justice to the wider context of Mark's Gospel. Minor characters such as the leper in 1:40–45 and the Syrophoenician woman in 7:24–30 often show greater understanding of who Jesus is than his disciples do (cf. 4:35–41; 6:47–52; 8:14–21). Instead, 'those outside' is better understood in the context of the previous chapter, where two separate designations of people begin to oppose Jesus. Firstly, the Pharisees, who 'went out' to begin plotting his destruction with the Herodians (3:6), and secondly, Jesus' family who, thinking he was mad, 'went out to restrain him' (3:21) and stood outside, calling for him (3:31–32). Thus, it seems that

²⁹ C. H. Dodd dismisses the statement as a later addition of the early church that does not accurately reflect Jesus' teaching. See C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (revised edition) (Glasgow, UK: William Collins Sons & Co Ltd, 1961), p. 15. Cf. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, pp. 13–18, who believes that Mark inappropriately positioned the statement due to his misunderstanding of the word παραβολή, which should here be translated 'riddles'.

³⁰ See, for example, R. Alan Cole's statement, 'God had been pleased to reveal to this little group the "mystery of the kingdom" still hidden from others' (R. Alan Cole, *Mark: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), p. 151).

4:11–12 is further evidence to suggest that the wider parable discourse of 4:1–34 is placed here as an explanation for these varying responses to Jesus and his ministry.³¹

Yet, Jesus' statement is not about him *intentionally* producing these divergent reactions; it is simply an explanation for *why* people respond in these different ways. France summarises this well when he points out that the parable of the Sower illustrates a man whose intention is to produce a crop. Whether or not the seed grows depends on the ground it falls on, not on a change in the seed or the man's intention. France writes, 'So it is with parables. The same parable produces enlightenment in one and no response in another; the result is appropriate to the condition of the hearer [...]. The focus throughout is not on the aim of the teacher so much as on the receptivity of the hearers'.³²

2.3. The Lamp and the Measure (Mk 4:21–25)

This focus on the hearer is further highlighted by the two parabolic statements in 4:21–25. Mark's version of the parable of the Lamp Under a Basket demonstrates the futility of taking a lamp in and then covering it up. A person who does this is unable to see because they prevent the lamp from casting its light. Yet, this is not because of a flaw in the lamp, just as it was not due to a flaw in the seed that the ground was unfruitful in the parable of the Sower. Some people understand Jesus' identity and teaching,

³¹ For a fuller discussion of Mk 4:11–12 and the identity of 'those outside', see Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, pp. 157–64; France, *Mark*, pp. 196–201.

³² France, *Mark*, p. 198.

whilst others do not, but that is not because they see a different Jesus or receive different teaching; it is down to their own receptivity.

This then leads onto the second parabolic statement, which seems to be connected thematically via the basket.³³ The statement about the measure given and received, again, reinforces the emphasis on receptivity. The importance of hearing and listening is emphasised in the link between the two parables, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” And he said to them, “Pay attention to what you hear...” (4:23–24a). Whether someone hears, depends on whether they listen and pay attention. The measure that someone receives is dependent on the measure that they give. Thus, these two parables, again, reinforce the teaching of the Sower.³⁴

2.4. The Growing Seed (Mk 4:26–29)

Mark closes his parable discourse with two more seed parables; these are the only two parables in his Gospel that are specifically said to illustrate the kingdom of God.³⁵ Both parables – the Growing Seed and the Mustard Seed – are very similar in style and structure, and they seem to have been paired together for this reason. Tolbert

³³ Ben Witherington believes that the statement in Mk 4:24–25 has been placed after the parable of the Lamp Under a Basket because the bushel basket was a measuring device. Thus, there is a ‘catchword connection’. See Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), p. 170. See also, Lane, *Mark*, p. 167.

³⁴ Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, pp. 134–35; France, *Mark*, p. 210.

³⁵ Despite this, Jesus’ statement in Mk 4:11 suggests that he understands the parables to teach about the kingdom much more widely. This is a view that has famously been put forward in Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, but has subsequently been accepted and further developed by many other scholars. See, for example, Hooker, *Mark’s Parables of the Kingdom*, p. 81. Hooker believes that all of the parables in Mark’s Gospel are about the kingdom, in that they are about the person of Jesus, the king.

points out that, in addition to the obvious similarity in their introduction and their agricultural theme, both parables have central sections with patterns of repetition, and both conclude with allusions to Hebrew scripture.³⁶ The Growing Seed (Mk 4:26–29) has a parallel structure (a, b, a' b') where a man sows seed (a) on the ground (b) and this seed (a') sprouts and grows, but it is the ground (b') that produces the plant, which ultimately becomes fruitful. In fact, the structure of 4:28 gives the impression that it is the ground that produces the different stages of the plant's development, ultimately resulting in the ground producing 'the full head of grain'. Thus, the parable emphasises the relationship between the seed and the ground. It is the seed that grows, but it is the ground that produces this growth and ultimately the fruitfulness. Both good seed and fertile ground are needed to produce a fruitful plant. In this way, the parable again reinforces the teaching of the Sower, by mirroring the final type of ground that is described in 4:8.³⁷

However, with the Growing Seed, there is greater emphasis on the process of the growth and subsequent harvest. Therefore, although there are clear similarities with the Sower, a new dimension is highlighted. Once the seed is sown on fertile ground, the growth happens naturally, or even inevitably, resulting in a harvest that is described in a way that strongly alludes to Joel 3:13.³⁸ This inevitable aspect of the growth is quite different from that depicted in the Sower, and it may be that it is specifically designated as an illustration of the kingdom for this reason. It is no longer

³⁶ Tolbert, *Perspectives*, pp. 79–81.

³⁷ Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, p. 355.

³⁸ Lane, *Mark*, p. 169.

a demonstration of the varying responses to Jesus and his message, but a positive statement about guaranteed growth and ultimate harvest.³⁹ Thus, the kingdom will not only grow inevitably in the lives of those who are receptive (cf. Mk 4:8–9, 20, 23–25), the fruit that is produced will have eschatological significance.

2.5. The Mustard Seed (Mk 4:30–32)

Mark follows the Growing Seed with his version of the Mustard Seed parable. As we have seen, the parable comes at a point where Mark has paused his narrative to explain the divergent responses to Jesus and his ministry. He has done this through Jesus' parable of the Sower, thus tying in the reasons for Jesus' parabolic teaching method, before focusing on the fruitful plant to give more specific teaching about the kingdom of God. Finally, Mark records another parable about the growth of a seed, only this time the process of growth and the fruitfulness of the plant are not mentioned. Instead, it appears to be a contrast between the beginning and end state of the seed and the plant.

Mark emphasises the small size of the mustard seed more than any of the other gospel writers. Just as Tolbert identifies a pattern of repetition in the Growing Seed, Mark

³⁹ France points out that, despite the strong echoing of Joel 3:13, the negative aspect of Joel's prophecy seems to be completely absent. This may be because it did not need to be overtly stated in order to be brought to the minds of readers who were familiar with Joel, or it may be that Mark is using Joel's terminology without any intention of evoking his context. See France, *Mark*, pp. 214–15. See also Duane A. Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), pp. 387–91, for a discussion of biblical prophecy and varied levels of fulfilment, particularly in relation to Joel's eschatological message.

Bailey highlights a similar arrangement in the Mustard Seed. The small size of the seed is emphasised through the following chiasm in the central section:

when [it is] sown
upon the ground
it is smaller than all the seeds
upon the ground
when it is sown.⁴⁰

Multiple varieties of mustard were grown in first-century Palestine, but the word that Mark uses (σίναπι) allows us to identify the variety more specifically as black mustard.⁴¹ Whilst not, strictly speaking, ‘the smallest of all the seeds’ (Mk 4:31), black mustard was proverbially used to represent something very small in early rabbinic writings.⁴² There is no reference to this proverbial use from before the time of the Gospels, but most scholars accept that this is the point being made by the specific reference to a mustard seed.⁴³ Mustard seed rapidly grows into a particularly large

⁴⁰ Mark L. Bailey, ‘The Parable of the Mustard Seed’, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155.4 (1998), p. 450.

⁴¹ Whilst not being universally accepted, most scholars accept that this is the variety in view. See, for example, France, *Mark*, p. 216; Claus-Hunno Hunzinger, ‘σίναπι’, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Volume 7*, ed. by Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 289; Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, pp. 245–46.

⁴² See, for example, *m. Nid.* 5:2; *m. Toh.* 8:8; *m. Naz.* 1:5.

⁴³ See Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, p. 392; Hunzinger, *σίναπι*, p. 288; Lane, *Mark*, p. 171; Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, p. 220; Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), p. 171. Dodd disputes this point on the basis that Mark’s emphasis of the smallness is an intrusive addition. Instead, Dodd regards the final state of the plant being big enough to shelter the birds as the point of the parable. See Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, p. 142. Amy-Jill Levine also disputes the emphasis placed on the proverbial smallness of the seed. She cites two examples – one from the Mishnah and one from the Talmud – where mustard seed is used to represent genital discharge. Levine suggests that these examples may even be poking fun at the Gospels’ use of the metaphor. See, Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2014), pp. 153–55. Yet neither of these disputes do justice to Mark’s retelling of the parable, where the smallness of the seed is specifically mentioned. They are both borne out of the desire to recapture Jesus’ original intention.

shrub, that can be as much as three meters tall.⁴⁴ However, despite the proverbial nature of the mustard seed, a mustard plant was not a recognised metaphor for something large. Instead, the contrast is made through a realistic agricultural reference. As France puts it, the parable is ‘not so much a “story” as an observation of the normal course of nature’.⁴⁵ This realistic aspect can be seen through a comparison with one of the other references to mustard seed within the Gospels. In Matthew 17:20 mustard seed is again used to represent something tiny, in an illustration of the power of faith. Here, the size comparison is more extreme, with the tiny seed being contrasted with a mountain.⁴⁶ Yet, in this example, the seed and the mountain represent two different entities; the seed does not *become* a mountain. In the Mustard Seed parable, the seed and the plant are the same entity at two different stages. Thus, the size comparison between something small and something large is not the point; it is that something small *becomes* something large. Yet, this transition of size is not the only issue either. If a grain of sand grew into a mountain, the size comparison would be greater, but it would not represent something realistic. Thus, it is likely that mustard is used because of its real properties and the vivid imagery that its reference would evoke in the minds of the original audiences of both Jesus and Mark.

⁴⁴ Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, p. 246.

⁴⁵ France, *Mark*, pp. 215–16.

⁴⁶ This verse has a parallel in Mk 11:22–23 but without the reference to mustard seed. It is also paralleled in Lk. 17:6, but instead of a mountain being moved, a mulberry tree is uprooted and replanted in the sea. Again, this appears to be a reference to something impossible being achieved with a tiny amount of faith.

Black mustard was cultivated in the region so that its seed could be used for spice and for its medicinal properties.⁴⁷ Yet, there are also references to mustard being regarded as a noxious and dangerous weed, due to its rapid and prolific growth.⁴⁸ For example, Pliny the Elder says that once it is planted, it germinates immediately and is incredibly difficult to eradicate from the soil.⁴⁹ Therefore, whilst it is the contrast of size between the beginning and end state that is specifically emphasised, concepts of rapid growth and multiplication, culinary and medicinal benefits, or perhaps even noxious undesirability may also have been brought to mind without them needing to be stated.

Yet, there is one aspect of the parable that does not fit well with its otherwise realistic character. Mark 4:32 tells us that the mustard shrub ‘puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade’. Despite the large size of a mustard shrub, it is an annual plant that does not have the strength or longevity necessary to make it a suitable location for nesting.⁵⁰ Many commentators sidestep this issue by noting that small birds do *perch* in mustard shrubs.⁵¹ However, the verb that is translated as ‘make nests’ in 4:32 (κατασκηνύω) denotes a stay for an extended period

⁴⁷ Hunzinger, *Σίναπι*, p. 289; Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, pp. 245–47.

⁴⁸ Witherington, *Mark*, p. 171.

⁴⁹ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History: Book 19*, chapter 54.
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:abo:phi,0978,001:19> [Accessed: 27th July 2022].

⁵⁰ Robert W. Funk, ‘The Looking-Glass Tree is for the Birds’, *Interpretation* 27.1 (1973), pp. 5–6; Roland K. Harrison, ‘Mustard’, in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia: Volume 3: K–P*, ed. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), p. 449.

⁵¹ See, for example, Cole, *Mark*, p. 155; France, *Mark*, p. 216.

of time.⁵² This, then, is an illustration of something that birds, in reality, do not do, and it causes the statement to stand out as an unexpected twist. Here, Mark's wording creates a strong link with a passage of scriptural prophecy, in the same way that the Growing Seed did with Joel 3:13.

It has been noted that Mark 4:32 could allude to multiple passages from the Jewish Scriptures,⁵³ but there is a particularly strong link with Ezekiel 17:23.⁵⁴ In this passage, Ezekiel records a messianic prophecy using the imagery of a great cedar growing from a small sprig (17:22–24).⁵⁵ Describing this cedar, 17:23 says that 'under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind'. The reference to birds making nests in the shade of the branches creates a particularly strong link between this verse and Mark's version of the Mustard Seed parable.⁵⁶ Yet, there is a significant difference between the 'noble cedar' planted on a 'high and lofty mountain' (Ezek. 17:22–23) and the mustard seed that is 'sown upon the ground' and becomes 'the greatest of all shrubs' (Mk 4:31–32). In the same way that the Growing

⁵² Wilhelm Michaelis, 'Σκηνή, Σκῆνος, Σκήνωμα, Σκηνόω, Ἐπισκηνόω, Κατασκηνόω, Σκηνοπηγία, Σκηνοποιός', in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Volume 7*, ed. by Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), pp. 387–88.

⁵³ For example, Ezek. 31:6; Dan. 4:12, 21.

⁵⁴ Rikk Watts points out that 'only Ezek. 17:22–23 combines small beginnings, eventual greatness, and an emphasis on boughs and shade for the birds of the air [...] in the context of God's activity'. See Rikk E. Watts, 'Mark', in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. by G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007), p. 157.

⁵⁵ For a fuller discussion of this passage, see Lamar Eugene Cooper, *Ezekiel*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), pp. 182–84. For a discussion of its understanding in Judaism, see Watts, *Mark*, pp. 156–57.

⁵⁶ Cf. Ezek. 31:6; Dan. 4:12, 21; Mt. 13:32; Lk. 13:19, all of which have the birds nesting in the branches rather than in the shade of the tree.

Seed starts with something very small – the sowing and growth of an individual seed⁵⁷ – but ends with the allusion to a great eschatological harvest, the Mustard Seed begins as ‘the smallest of all seeds’ but ends with allusions to the great messianic cedar.

Thus, it appears that Mark is making a statement about Jesus’ fulfilment of these prophecies, but not in the way that the people may have expected. The small beginnings and resistance that Mark has described in the first three chapters of his Gospel do not demonstrate that Jesus is not the promised Messiah or that the kingdom will not be properly established. Many people will either reject Jesus or fail to understand him (Mk 4:3–7, 11–19), but the secrets of the kingdom will be revealed to those who are receptive and listen (4:3, 9, 11, 22–25, 33–34). Despite these small beginnings and the seed that is apparently wasted, the fruitful ground will still produce the great harvest that has been prophesied (4:8, 20, 29) because the Messiah has come, not as a noble cedar, but as a shrub that many would regard as noxious.

Since the contrast in size is clearly emphasised, that must be seen as the main point of the parable in Mark,⁵⁸ but the implied connotations of mustard are striking within Mark’s context. For some, mustard is a cultivated crop that is beneficial medicinally and culinarily; for others it is an undesirable weed that rapidly spreads and is almost impossible to eradicate. Yet, whilst these two sides fit in well with Mark’s context of the divergent responses to Jesus, the opposition is not highlighted in these final two

⁵⁷ The words translated ‘seed’, ‘stalk’, ‘head’, and ‘grain’ are singular throughout Mk 4:26–28.

⁵⁸ Witherington’s statement that, ‘the point, then, is that the mustard bush, which never grows into a tree like the cedar of Lebanon, but rather into a large unpleasant bush, is not seen as something desirable’, seems too strong. Whilst the negative connotations are likely implied, if they were ‘the point’ they would likely have been openly stated. See Witherington, *Mark*, p. 172.

parables. Both begin with a seed sown in the ground, but the Growing Seed illustrates the kingdom's inevitable growth towards the eschatological harvest, and the Mustard Seed illustrates the contrast between the kingdom's tiny beginning and the ultimate end that will be a place of shelter and rest. Hooker points out that 'one would naturally expect the Kingdom to be spoken of in terms of judgement, of setting things right, and of obedience to God's will; instead, we have parables which imply that the Kingdom is present and yet not present'.⁵⁹ This is Mark's message. At this stage in his narrative Jesus' ministry did not appear to be the establishment of the kingdom that he was proclaiming (1:15). Tiny beginnings were growing into a controversial shrub rather than a mighty cedar. Yet its ultimate messianic and eschatological end was not in question.

⁵⁹ Hooker, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark*, p. 137.

3. Luke's Version of the Mustard Seed Parable (Lk. 13:18–19)

3.1. The Structure of Luke's Gospel

Luke is the longest and most detailed of the four canonical gospels, yet it follows the same basic structure as Mark. After Jesus' time of preparation (Lk. 3:1–4:13; cf. Mk 1:4–13), he ministers in Galilee (Lk. 4:14–9:50; cf. Mk 1:14–8:26), before travelling to Jerusalem (Lk. 9:51–19:27; cf. Mk 10:1–52) for his final week, his death, and his resurrection (Lk. 19:28–24:53; cf. Mk 11:1–16:20). The greatest divergence comes in Luke's 'travel narrative' section (9:51–19:27), which is considerably longer than the equivalent section in either Matthew (19:1–20:34) or Mark (10:1–52). Luke does not include a parable discourse like that of Matthew 13 or Mark 4; instead, he disperses the parables throughout Jesus' ministry, with the huge majority placed in this travel narrative.⁶⁰ Luke's account of the parable of the Sower and his explanation for Jesus' parabolic teaching closely parallels Mark's, and, as with both the other Synoptics, it is placed during Jesus' Galilean ministry (Lk. 8:4–18; cf. Mt. 13:1–23; Mk 4:1–25). Yet, Luke does not include the parables of the Growing Seed (which is completely absent) or the Mustard Seed at this point in the narrative. Instead, the Mustard Seed is recorded in an entirely different context, as part of the travel narrative in chapter 13. Before exploring this Lukan context for the Mustard Seed parable, we will first consider

⁶⁰ The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary lists forty-two parables of Jesus. Of the thirty-two that are contained in Luke's Gospel, twenty-four are in his travel narrative, with just six recorded in Jesus' Galilean ministry (New Patch on an Old Cloak, 5:36; New Wine in Old Wineskins, 5:37–38; The Wise and Foolish Builders, 6:47–49; The Two Debtors, 7:41–43; The Sower, 8:4–15; Lamp Under a Bowl, 8:16) and two whilst he is in Jerusalem (The Wicked Tenants, 20:9–16; The Fig Tree, 21:29–31). See Mark Allan Powell, 'Parables', in *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary (Revised and Updated)*, ed. by Mark Allan Powell (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2011), pp. 738–39.

his wording and the focus of the parable itself in comparison to what we have already discussed in Mark.

3.2. Luke's Variation from Mark's Wording

Agreement between Matthew and Luke, against Mark,⁶¹ has led those who hold to the two-source hypothesis to conclude that Q contained a separate account of the Mustard Seed parable.⁶² On this hypothesis, Luke most closely represents the account in Q, with Matthew conflating the material from Q and Mark. Consequently, of the two remaining accounts of the parable, Luke's version has the greatest variation from Mark, not only in context but also the parable's wording and content.⁶³

3.2.1. The Man and His Garden

In Luke's version of the parable, a man sows a mustard seed in his garden.⁶⁴ Whilst this detail may appear insignificant,⁶⁵ it effectively transforms the nature of the parable.

⁶¹ The reference to a man, growth of the seed into a tree, birds nesting 'in its branches' and pairing with the parable of the Leaven.

⁶² Richard N. Longenecker, 'Luke's Parables of the Kingdom (Luke 8:4–15; 13:18–21)', in *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, ed. by Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), pp. 137–38.

⁶³ Donahue points out that Luke's travel narrative (9:51–19:27) includes only Q and L material, with Luke completely abandoning his Markan source for this portion of his Gospel (*The Gospel in Parable*, p.126).

⁶⁴ The NRSV translation of Lk. 13:19 refers to '...a mustard seed that *someone* took and sowed in *the* garden' (emphasis added). Yet the use of the words, ἄνθρωπος (man) and ἑαυτοῦ (his own) suggest that it may be more appropriately rendered, '...mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden' (ESV).

⁶⁵ As previously noted in section 1.4, Blomberg's parable-oriented approach leads him to dismiss any consideration of the significance of the human character in either the parable of the Mustard Seed or

Traditionally, Jesus' parable corpus has been divided into four sub-genres.⁶⁶ These sub-genres are often difficult to define conclusively,⁶⁷ but most commentators regard Mark's version of the Mustard Seed parable as a simile or similitude.⁶⁸ However, Luke's introduction of a character and location, as well as his use of the aorist tense,⁶⁹ gives the parable a basic narrative, and means that, according to the classification criteria set out in the works cited above, it should be redesignated as a True Parable.⁷⁰ Yet, despite this, commentators often completely disregard the significance of this variation.⁷¹ Even where the man and his garden are discussed, the implications of their inclusion can still be overlooked. Blomberg, for example, highlights the fact that Luke's version is the only one to mention a garden, but he believes that this addition is purely

the Leaven, on the basis that the man's absence in Mark's account of the Mustard Seed demonstrates that the characters have 'no significant role to play' (*Interpreting the Parables*, p. 391).

⁶⁶ These are, 1. True Parable, 2. Similitude, 3. Example Story and, 4. Allegory (or Figurative Saying). For a discussion of these sub-genres, see Lischer, *Reading the Parables*, pp. 33–39; Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, pp. 107–27.

⁶⁷ See, for example, the differences in classification of specific parables between Jülicher and Bultmann, as outlined in Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, p. 121. For this reason, Snodgrass proposes his own classifications which he believes are 'less confusing and more helpful'. These are, 1. Aphoristic Sayings, 2. Similitudes (double indirect), 3. Interrogative Parables (double indirect), 4. Narrative Parables (of which there are three further subdivisions), 5. 'How much more' Parables (Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, pp. 11–15).

⁶⁸ See, for example, France, *Mark*, pp. 215–16; Lane, *Mark*, p. 150; Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, p. 216.

⁶⁹ Luke's use of aorist verbs such as ἡύξησεν (grew) and ἐγένετο (became), as opposed to Mark's present tense ἀναβαίνει (grows) and γίνεται (becomes), gives Luke's account the sense of a specific event, rather than the general observation implied by Mark's wording.

⁷⁰ Zimmermann picks up on this as part of his argument for dispensing with 'Similitude' as a sub-genre (*Puzzling the Parables*, p. 124).

⁷¹ See, for example, Walter L. Liefeld, 'Luke', in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. by Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), p. 972; Allison A. Trites, 'The Gospel of Luke', in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, Volume 12: The Gospel of Luke and Acts* by Allison A. Trites and William J. Larkin (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2006), pp. 202–3; Diane G Chen, *Luke*, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), pp. 195–96, none of whom discusses, or even mentions, the man or his garden.

to make the account 'more intelligible' to Luke's Greco-Roman audience.⁷² Yet Blomberg fails to notice that the inclusion of a man and his garden causes the parable to take on a completely different character. In Mark, the emphasis is on the properties of mustard in general,⁷³ but in Luke it is a narrative about a specific situation where a man *deliberately* plants a seed in his garden. Consequently, any potential connotations of noxious undesirability, or the uncontrollable growth of a weed, are immediately seen to be inappropriate. In fact, the reference to *mustard* seed specifically seems almost incidental. Even the stated contrast between the smallness of the seed and the large size of the plant are absent in Luke. Whilst the proverbial smallness of the mustard seed may still have been implied without needing to be stated, Luke does not emphasise the contrast in size in the same way that Mark does. Instead, the emphasis seems to be on what the seed grows into.⁷⁴

3.2.2. The Tree and the Birds

This lack of focus on the nature of mustard is also demonstrated by the absence of the plant. Luke is the only Synoptic writer who does not mention the large plant that

⁷² Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, p. 94. Blomberg states that it was forbidden for Jews to plant mustard in a garden, whereas Greeks often cultivated it there. Cf. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 27, n. 11.

⁷³ As previously noted, France says that the parable in Mark is 'not so much a "story" as an observation of the normal course of nature' (*Mark*, pp. 215–16).

⁷⁴ Ryan Schellenberg conducts a study of other ancient references to the proverbial nature of mustard, concluding that its smallness was not widely recognised enough to be assumed. It is for this reason that he believes Mt. 13:32, Mk. 4:31 and Gos. Thom. 20 have added a reference to the smallness of the seed that, in his opinion, was not a part of the original parable. Without this explicit reference, the connotation could not be assumed. Instead, he believes that the 'implicit contrast is not between the small seed and the full-grown tree but rather between the expected herb or shrub and the surprising tree'. See Ryan S. Schellenberg, 'Kingdom as Contaminant? The Role of Repertoire in the Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71 (2009), p. 542.

grows from a mustard seed. Instead, the seed grows into a tree, leading some scholars to assume that a different variety of mustard is in view.⁷⁵ Yet, the same word that is used by Mark (σίναπι) is also used by Luke (and Matthew), which strongly suggests that black mustard is still in view.⁷⁶ Thus, Luke's account also contains an unrealistic element, yet it is different from that in Mark. In Mark's account, birds nest in the shade of a mustard plant, which, in reality, does not happen. Luke, however, gives us a realistic image of birds nesting in the branches of a tree, but also the unrealistic element that the tree grew from a mustard seed. Therefore, the vivid contrast drawn from nature, that is, of a tiny seed that grows into a large plant, is entirely absent. Instead, a man plants a seed (which, at most, has implied connotations of smallness) and the seed (surprisingly) grows into a tree in which birds are able to nest. Thus, a stronger link is created with the previously mentioned passages from Ezekiel and Daniel than there is in Mark's version. In Mark, the allusion to Ezekiel 17:23 comes as a twist at the end of a contrast parable.⁷⁷ This twist relates to the large branches and the nesting birds, and it constitutes about a third of the parable's word count.⁷⁸ Yet, in Luke, the allusion makes up nearly two thirds of the parable's text⁷⁹ and the reference

⁷⁵ See, for example, the discussion on the mustard tree (*salvadora persica*) in John Hutton Balfour, *The Plants of the Bible* (London, UK; Edinburgh, UK; New York, NY: T. Nelson and Sons, 1885), pp. 57–60. See also Zimmermann's assertion that Matthew's version of the parable (which also references a tree) is pointing towards *salvadora persica* (*Puzzling the Parables*, p. 245).

⁷⁶ Hunzinger, Σίναπι, p. 289.

⁷⁷ See section 2.5.

⁷⁸ Mk 4:31–32 is made up of 43 words in the Greek text, with the phrase, 'and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade', comprising 15 of them.

⁷⁹ Lk. 13:19 is made up of 27 words in the Greek text, with the phrase, 'it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches', comprising 16 of them.

to a tree forms stronger links with Daniel 4.⁸⁰ Thus, the focus of the parable is placed on the end state – the birds nesting in the tree that the man grew in his garden.

We see, then, that the parable text differs significantly from that in Mark. In Luke's account, Jesus illustrates the kingdom of God by placing much greater emphasis on the scriptural allusion to Nebuchadnezzar's earthly kingdom that gave 'order and sustenance to the social structure and peoples of the earth'⁸¹ (Dan. 4:22). Yet, Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom was polluted with injustice, and the poor were being oppressed and neglected (4:27).⁸² Thus, in Nebuchadnezzar's vision, the magnificent tree was to be cut down, symbolising the judgement that God would bring upon him (4:14, 23–26). This element of the image is, however, completely absent from the Mustard Seed parable. Instead of a tree that is already fully grown and spoken of in terms of its own splendour (as in Dan. 4:10–12), Luke 13:19 describes a man growing a tree by planting it in his own garden (cf. Gen. 2:8–9). Thus, rather than the downfall of an oppressive world superpower, the illustration of God's kingdom draws together imagery of a hugely prosperous earthly state, with God's Edenic provision for mankind. The nature of the kingdom's growth may be surprising, but it ultimately becomes a

⁸⁰ Luke's wording more closely resembles the account of birds nesting in the branches of a tree (Dan. 4:11–12, 20–21) than it does that of birds nesting in the shade of a cedar (Ezek. 17:23), although the reference likely alludes to both passages. See David W. Pao, and Eckhard J. Schnabel, 'Luke', in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. by G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007), pp. 334–35.

⁸¹ Eugene Carpenter, 'Daniel', in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary Volume 9: Ezekiel & Daniel*, by David L. Thompson and Eugene Carpenter (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2010), p. 367.

⁸² Carpenter, *Daniel*, p. 363.

source of shelter and provision for all (Dan. 4:11–12, 20–21; cf. Lk. 13:19). This allusion to provision is also alluded to in the parable that immediately follows.

3.3. The Parable of the Leaven (Lk. 13:20–21)

In Luke (and Matthew) the Mustard Seed parable is paired with another short illustration of the kingdom of God, just as it is in Mark. However, whereas in Mark the Mustard Seed is the second in a pair of parables that begins with the Growing Seed, in Luke the Mustard Seed is the first, and is followed by the parable of the Leaven.⁸³ This parable also includes one human character; a woman⁸⁴ who hides⁸⁵ some leaven in three measures of flour, resulting in the whole amount being leavened. As with the Mustard Seed, the Leaven has a surprising element that may contain a scriptural reference, which will be discussed below. The surprising element is that three measures is a particularly large quantity of flour for one woman to be preparing. The

⁸³ The NRSV translates the word ζύμη as 'yeast' rather than 'leaven'. Whilst ζύμη can refer to any raising agent that is added to bread, the first-century usage is more likely a reference to 'leaven' (a piece of fermented dough) than 'yeast' (a fungal raising agent). See further Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 2000), p. 401. Therefore, the word 'leaven' will be used throughout this dissertation.

⁸⁴ Alternating between male and female protagonists is a consistent characteristic of Luke's style. See, for example, Zechariah and Mary (1:5–2:21), Simeon and Anna (2:25–38), the centurion and widow (7:1–17), Jairus and the haemorrhaging woman (8:40–56), the shepherd searching for his sheep and the woman searching for her coin (15:1–10). See Lischer, *Reading the Parables*, p. 97; Chen, *Luke*, p. 192.

⁸⁵ The NRSV, '...that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour...' is an unhelpful translation. The word translated 'mixed' (κρύπτω) means 'to hide or conceal', as in the ESV, '...that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour...'. For more on the Synoptic writers' use of the term κρύπτω, see Albrecht Oepke and Rudolf Meyer, 'Κρύπτω, Ἀποκρύπτω, Κρυπτός, Κρυφαῖος, Κρυφή, Κρύπτη, Ἀπόκρυφος', in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Volume 3*, ed. by Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1966), pp. 973–75.

resulting bread is thought to have been enough to feed at least one hundred people.⁸⁶ For this reason, and its pairing with the Mustard Seed parable, many commentators conclude that it is a contrast parable. Darrell Bock, for example, refers to ‘a pinch of yeast’ and ‘a huge batch of dough’.⁸⁷ Thus, it is said to represent the enormous growth of the kingdom from its tiny beginnings. Yet, this view does not do justice to either the parable text or to the situation it describes. The quantity of the leaven is not mentioned or alluded to⁸⁸ and Snodgrass points out that the amount of leaven needed to ferment such a huge quantity of flour would weigh approximately three or four pounds.⁸⁹ Whilst this is still much smaller than the quantity of flour, it does not seem a likely candidate for the same proverbial sense that was applied to a mustard seed. Instead, the characteristic feature emphasised in the parable is the leaven’s pervading nature. Once it is hidden in the flour, the whole amount becomes affected by it. Thus, the parable seems to teach about the permeation of the hidden kingdom of God. It is not about small beginnings contrasted with large results, but the effectual spread of the kingdom.

⁸⁶ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, p. 232.

⁸⁷ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Logos edition) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), Lk. 13:18–21 (this is an ebook with no page numbers given).

⁸⁸ Gos. Thom. 96 does refer to ‘a little leaven’ and Paul references a small amount in 1 Cor. 5:6 and Gal. 5:9, but in these cases the small amount is explicitly stated. Matthew’s version of the parable is almost the same as Luke’s, with no amount stated for the leaven (13:33). However, Matthew does refer to the small size of the mustard seed (13:32). This leads those who equate the two elements to carry the small size over and reapply it to the leaven as well. See, for example, Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, pp. 392–93; Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 148. See also, Hans Windisch, ‘Ζύμη, Ζυμός, Ἀζύμος’, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Volume 2*, ed. by Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), p. 905, who believes that the small amount of leaven is ‘presumed’.

⁸⁹ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, p. 232.

Yet, the fact that it concerns the production of food is likely to be an important element as well. The Hebrew scriptures also contain a reference to one woman preparing that amount of bread. In Genesis 18:6, Abraham tells Sarah to prepare bread from three seah's⁹⁰ worth of flour to feed three visitors who have arrived at their camp.⁹¹ Some believe that the parable intentionally alludes to this event, but it may also hold connotations of the future eschatological banquet that is expanded upon in the following passage (Lk. 13:28–30).⁹² Thus, whilst Abraham and Sarah were taken off guard by the arrival of the Lord (cf. Gen. 18:3, 6), which meant there was no time to leaven bread, the eschatological banquet is far less rushed and is being prepared even now through the pervading work of the kingdom. Either way, the parable illustrates the extravagant production of a large amount of bread. Whether this is intended as a reference to Sarah preparing nearly 30 litres of flour for three guests, or to the banquet where 'people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God' (Lk. 13:29), the extravagant nature of God's kingdom provision seems to be in view.

⁹⁰ Α σάτον ('measure' in Lk. 13:21) is thought to have been the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew seah, which was about 7.3 litres. See Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, 'Weights and Measures', in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. by Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), pp. 2135–39. Three seahs worth (21.9 litres) was probably the largest amount that one woman could make at one time. See D. A. Carson, 'Matthew', in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. by Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), pp. 319–20.

⁹¹ Whilst this seems to be a huge amount to cater for the arrival of three people, this bread, made at such short notice, would undoubtedly have been unleavened and, thus, made a much smaller quantity. See Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, p. 234, n. 286. Yet, despite this observation, it would still have been an extravagantly large amount for so few guests.

⁹² See, for example, Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 147; Longenecker, *Luke's Parables of the Kingdom*, p. 142. Snodgrass identifies an allusion based merely on the mention of a specific quantity of flour as unlikely, but the reference to the banquet is more probable (*Stories with Intent*, p. 234).

Yet, as with the mustard seed in Mark, there may also be negative connotations attached to the image in question. Leaven was created when a small piece of the old dough was kept back and left to ferment. This fermented dough was then added to the new batch to act as a raising agent.⁹³ The danger of this practice was that sickness and disease could be spread by a tainted lump of dough. The piece that was retained could contaminate future batches unless the chain was broken by cleaning out the old leaven (1 Cor. 5:7) and starting again.⁹⁴ This was done each year during Passover, when it was forbidden for Israelites to eat leavened bread, or even to have it in their homes (Ex. 13:7). In fact, leaven was not permitted in any bread that was to be offered to God on the altar (Ex. 23:18; 34:25; Lev. 2:11; 6:17), although it was permitted in peace offerings and those given to the priests (Lev. 7:13; 23:17).⁹⁵ Symbolically, then, leaven came to represent corruption and evil in Jewish thought (Hos. 7:4; 1 Cor. 5:6–8; Gal. 5:9).⁹⁶ This aspect of contamination does not appear to be Jesus' point in the parable of the Leaven, since no negative element is stated or clearly alluded to.⁹⁷ Yet, it is not Luke's first reference to leaven in this section of his Gospel. We will, therefore, consider this other reference and how it fits into Luke's wider context.

⁹³ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, p. 231.

⁹⁴ Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 401.

⁹⁵ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, 'Leaven', in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. by Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), p. 1320.

⁹⁶ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), p. 216.

⁹⁷ Despite the negative connotations mentioned above, both positive and negative references to leaven appear in antiquity, therefore, the specific context must be the deciding factor in deciding whether a reference is positive or negative (Schellenberg, *Kingdom as Contaminant?*, p. 541).

3.4. The Wider Lukan Context

In Luke 11:37–52 Jesus openly criticises the Pharisees and Lawyers for their hypocrisy. They subsequently respond aggressively by scrutinising Jesus and provoking him to try and catch him out in something he might say (11:53–54). Amid rising disorder in the gathering crowds, Jesus warns his disciples, ‘Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy’ (12:1 ESV).⁹⁸ This statement is paralleled in Matthew 16:6⁹⁹ and Mark 8:15,¹⁰⁰ but in both these parallels the disciples misunderstand what Jesus has in mind and they start a conversation about bread (Mt. 16:7–12; Mk 8:16–21). However, in Luke’s account Jesus follows up his warning by reiterating a statement from his parallel of Mark 4; ‘Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known’ (Lk. 12:2 ESV; cf. 8:17; Mk 4:22).¹⁰¹ Therefore, Luke records Jesus as speaking about leaven and about something that is hidden in both 12:1–2 and 13:21. Jesus’ point seems to be that the hypocrisy of the Pharisees is like leaven in that it has the same pervasive and corrupting nature that was discussed above. Yet, just as hidden leaven will ultimately be revealed by the rise in the dough, hidden hypocrisy will also ultimately come to light.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ The NRSV, again, refers to ‘yeast’, but it is the same word (ζύμη – ‘leaven’) that appears in 13:21.

⁹⁹ In Matthew’s account, Jesus includes the Sadducees in his statement about the Pharisees. What he means by this ‘leaven’ is not initially clear, but it is later said to be their teaching (16:12).

¹⁰⁰ In Mark’s account, Jesus pairs Herod with his statement about the Pharisees, but the text does not explicitly say what he regards this ‘leaven’ to be.

¹⁰¹ This is another statement that may have been recorded in both Mark and Q. In Matthew’s version, the passage that begins with this statement (Mt. 10:26–33) parallels Lk. 12:2–9. Thus, Luke appears to record the Markan version in 8:17 and the Q version in 12:1.

¹⁰² Joel Green says that ‘for Luke, the Pharisaic mind-set is represented as a contaminant with potential to invade even the company of Jesus’ followers’ (*Luke*, p. 480). He goes on to point out that the

Having used this imagery to frame his warning, Jesus follows it up with an exhortation about fearless confession (Lk. 12:4–12). In this, he includes a statement about the value that God places on his people. He does this by using the example of sparrows, which are of so little value to the people that five are sold for ‘two pennies’,¹⁰³ and yet God does not forget any of them. Jesus’ point is clear: ‘Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows’ (12:7).

Luke’s account backs up Jesus’ statement about fearless confession by emphasising the importance of placing value in the right things. He does this, initially, with the parable of the Rich Fool (12:13–21), before recording the admonition not to worry (cf. Mt. 6:25–34). In this, Jesus again points to the birds as an example: ‘Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!’ (Lk. 12:24). Having used the illustration of birds to demonstrate ‘how much more’ God cares for his followers, even when they are experiencing persecution (12:4–12), he again uses the birds as an example of God’s provision for them. If God provides for the birds, who do nothing to cultivate or store their food, how much more will he provide for his people.

transliterated term, ‘hypocrisy’, does not accurately convey the sense in which Luke uses it. Luke’s meaning follows the LXX as, ‘a person whose conduct is not determined by God and is thus “godless”’ (Luke, pp. 480–81). This kind of hypocrisy can have a corrupting influence that is initially unseen but will ultimately be brought to light (cf. Lk. 22:3–6, 47–48).

¹⁰³ The coin referenced here is an assarius. This was a Roman coin that was equal to one tenth of a denarius or drachma (James M. Freeman, and Harold J. Chadwick, *Manners & Customs of the Bible* (North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos Publishers, 1998), pp. 432–33). A denarius was the standard daily wage for a labourer at the time (Hazel W. Perkin, ‘Coins’, in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. by Walter A. Elwell, and Barry J. Beitzel (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), pp. 491), meaning that a single sparrow was valued at one twenty-fifth of a labourer’s daily wage.

Thus, we see that both the imagery of the pervasive nature of hidden heaven and the reference to birds as a comparative illustration for the way that God cares for, feeds and shelters people, has already been laid out in chapter 12.¹⁰⁴ These references begin and intersperse a section that is predominantly concerned with contrasting God's provision and care for those who remain alert and are faithful servants (Lk. 12:6–8, 11–12, 22–44), with false, material security and warnings for those who are unprepared, unfaithful, or hypocritical (12:1–5, 9–10, 13–21, 45–13:5).¹⁰⁵ This ultimately leads to another parable about a tree (13:6–9), which corresponds with the tree in the Mustard Seed parable to frame an account of a healing miracle (13:10–17). We will, therefore, discuss this parable and miracle story in greater detail, given that they form the immediate context for the Mustard Seed parable.¹⁰⁶

3.5. The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree (Lk. 13:6–9)

The parable of the Barren Fig Tree is uniquely Lukan, yet it has several correspondences and similarities with other passages in the Synoptics and particularly in Luke's Gospel. Its positioning shortly before the Mustard Seed parable and its agricultural theme immediately highlight certain similarities with the parable of the Sower,¹⁰⁷ yet the Barren Fig Tree does not appear to convey the same message. The

¹⁰⁴ See also Lk. 13:34 where, in the lament over Jerusalem that follows the Mustard Seed and Leaven parables and the section about entering via the narrow door and reference to the eschatological banquet, Jesus expresses his desire to shelter the people using the image of a hen with her chicks.

¹⁰⁵ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, p. 258.

¹⁰⁶ This connection with the Mustard Seed parable is made explicit by the use of 'therefore' in 13:18.

¹⁰⁷ In addition to the agricultural theme, it concerns fruitfulness (or lack thereof), with a three to one ratio of unfruitful/fruitful ground/years and, in both cases, the key to fruitfulness is the fertility of the ground (cf. Lk. 8:4–8; 13:6–9).

fruitless tree's location in a vineyard (13:6) alludes to several scriptural references relating to Israel and Judah.¹⁰⁸ This, and Luke's context, lead most commentators to equate this parable with a warning calling for Israel's repentance.¹⁰⁹ In addition to this, Green sees a reference to Isaiah 5:1–7 as likely, meaning that the vineyard should be equated with Israel, but that the fig tree may refer to their corrupt leadership.¹¹⁰ This would make sense within the context of Jesus' condemnation of the Scribes', Pharisees' and Lawyers' hypocrisy (11:37–52; 12:1–3) and particularly in light of how the synagogue leader is cast in the following passage (13:14–17, see section 3.6). Yet, this is not the first time that a warning related to fruitless trees has been given in Luke's Gospel. John the Baptist gives a similar warning in 3:8–9, where he equates fruitfulness with repentance and says that the consequences for the trees that do not produce this fruit are that they will be 'cut down and thrown into the fire' (3:9). The imminent threat of this is also made clear by his statement that 'the axe is lying at the root of the trees'. Therefore, it seems that the parable of the Barren Fig Tree is a reiteration of this warning, coming at a point in the narrative where Jesus has already talked about the need for repentance (13:3, 5) and to be aware of the times (12:56). Through the ministry and teaching of Jesus, the ground is being fertilised (13:8) and one last chance for repentance is being offered (13:9).¹¹¹ This image, of potential judgment on fruitless Israel, is well juxtaposed with 13:19, where the kingdom of God

¹⁰⁸ See particularly Jer. 8:13 where, in a declaration of judgement over the people of Jerusalem and Judah, the image of a fruitless vine and fig tree are used in parallel. Cf. Joel 1:7, 12.

¹⁰⁹ See, for example, Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, p. 363–67; Chen, *Luke*, p. 192; Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, pp. 259–60, 262–63; F. Scott Spencer, *Luke*, The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2019), pp. 496–97.

¹¹⁰ Green, *Luke*, p. 515, n. 126; cf. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, p. 364; Pao, *Luke*, p. 333.

¹¹¹ Chen, *Luke*, p. 192.

is metaphorically portrayed as a tree that, despite having sprouted from a mustard seed, has grown strong and fruitful enough to attract nesting birds. The contrast between these two images is then well illustrated by the short narrative that they frame.

3.6. The Healing of the Bent Woman (Lk. 13:10–17)

Luke relays a story about Jesus healing a woman on the Sabbath and the religious authorities criticising him. There are several examples of this happening in the canonical gospels (cf. Mt. 12:9–14; Mk 3:1–6; Lk. 6:6–11; 14:1–6; Jn 5:1–13), but Jesus' defence here is unique.¹¹² He argues that, since it was lawful to untie an animal on the Sabbath to let it drink,¹¹³ it should also be lawful to release a woman on the Sabbath who has been bound by Satan (13:15–16). The juxtaposition and implications are clear. The synagogue leader is accused of being a hypocrite because he prioritises the care of animals over that of people. He would bend the Sabbath rules to untie an animal that had been bound since the previous day, but he would not do the same for a woman who had been bound for eighteen years. Jesus, by contrast, demonstrates the 'how much more' teachings of 12:7 and 24; if God cares for the birds, how much more will he care for people.¹¹⁴ Surely God also cares for the ox and the donkey, but this only strengthens Jesus' reasons for releasing the woman on the Sabbath. In

¹¹² Although Mt. 12:9–14 and Lk. 14:1–6 both contain a similar argument that relates to pulling an animal out of a hole, rather than untying it to let it drink.

¹¹³ See *m. Šabb.* 5:1–4, which states that an animal may be taken out on the Sabbath if it is not carrying a load.

¹¹⁴ Green notes that Jesus builds his argument with a series of parallels that form an 'If...how much more...' structure. 'If an animal, how much more a daughter of Abraham? If one bound for a few hours, how much more one bound for eighteen years?' See Green, *Luke*, p. 524.

13:15–16 Jesus does not criticise the people’s care of their animals, but he argues that if they do this for an ox or donkey, how much more should they care for a daughter of Abraham (13:16). This account, then, serves as the perfect illustration of the difference between the godless¹¹⁵ leaders and Jesus – between unrepentant Israel and the kingdom of God – between an unfruitful fig tree on the cusp of destruction (13:7) and a tree that sprouted from the smallest seed, but forms a safe and secure nesting place for the birds (13:19). As previously noted in section 3.2.2, this final state of the tree and the birds is where the emphasis is placed in Luke’s version of the parable. We saw this when we considered the parable text in isolation, and this is confirmed by a study of the wider context. Thus, Luke’s message is about the kingdom’s shelter and provision. If God does this for the birds (12:7, 24; 13:34), how much more will he for those who beware the leaven of hypocrisy (12:1), heed the signs of the times (12:54–56) and repent (13:3, 5).

We see, then, that a study of the parable’s context and wording in Luke’s Gospel leads to a quite different interpretation to that of the same parable in its Markan setting. We will now compare these findings with the final account in Matthew’s Gospel.

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¹¹⁵ As previously noted in section 3.4, Luke’s use of the term ὑποκριτής means ‘a person whose conduct is not determined by God and is thus “godless”’ (Green, *Luke*, pp. 480–81).

4. Matthew's Version of the Mustard Seed Parable (Mt. 13:31–32)

4.1. The Structure of Matthew's Gospel

Matthew's Gospel, like Luke's, broadly adheres to the narrative progression laid out by Mark. Following his introductory material, Matthew describes John's ministry and Jesus' preparation for his own mission (3:1–4:11; cf. Mk 1:1–13). Jesus then ministers in Galilee (4:12–13:58; cf. Mk 1:14–6:13) and other regions to the north (14:1–16:12; cf. Mk 6:14–8:26), before embarking on his journey towards Jerusalem (16:13–20:34; cf. Mk 8:27–10:52). Matthew goes on to record Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, his final week there (21:1–25:46; cf. Mk 11:1–13:37), and, ultimately, the account of his passion and his resurrection (26:1–28:20; cf. Mk 14:1–16:8). Yet, despite these similarities, Matthew records considerably more detail than Mark, particularly in relation to Jesus' teaching. As well as Jesus' frequent sayings and conversations, which are woven throughout the narrative, Matthew records five extended discourses that some commentators believe indicate the author's intentional arrangement. Carson and Moo, for example, propose a structure that divides the main body of the book into five sections of thematic narrative followed by a discourse of teaching on the same topic.¹¹⁶ Whilst it is not universally accepted that the author intentionally

¹¹⁶ Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 135–36. Each one of these discourses then concludes with a variation of the phrase, 'When Jesus had finished saying these things...' (cf. Mt. 7:28–29; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1).

structured his gospel in this way, most scholars agree that this phrase signals, not only the end of the discourse, but progression to the next stage of the narrative.¹¹⁷

Within this proposed structure, the Mustard Seed parable is contained in the central, third discourse of chapter 13, which concludes the previous section of narrative beginning at 11:1. This section has close parallels with much of Mark 2–3,¹¹⁸ meaning that although Matthew’s parable discourse is included later in his Gospel, he retains much of the Markan context. Thus, the parable discourse in Matthew is also delivered at a point where there is mounting opposition against Jesus (cf. 11:19; 12:2, 14, 24). Yet, several accounts of healing miracles and the positive responses to Jesus that Mark records in this section are paralleled by Matthew in the block of narrative preceding the previous discourse of 10:5–42.¹¹⁹ Instead, Jesus criticises their generation for rejecting both him and John (11:16–19), he denounces the unrepentant cities where he has been ministering (11:20–24), and he condemns the Pharisees for demanding a sign (12:38–42). Even John seems to doubt Jesus’ identity, and he sends his disciples to ask if Jesus really is the one they have been waiting for (11:2–6). Because of this, the context of Matthew’s parable discourse seems more negative

¹¹⁷ See, for example, R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), pp. 3–5; Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, p. li. For a detailed discussion of issues related to Matthew’s structure, see Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), pp. 1–13.

¹¹⁸ The disciples pick grain on the Sabbath (Mt. 12:1–8; cf. Mk 2:23–28). Jesus heals a man with a withered hand (Mt. 12:9–14; cf. Mk 3:1–6). Jesus heals many more people (Mt. 12:15–21; cf. Mk 3:7–12). Jesus is accused of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebul (Mt. 12:24–32; cf. Mk 3:22–30). Jesus’ family come looking for him (Mt. 12:46–50; cf. Mk. 3:31–35).

¹¹⁹ Jesus heals many at Simon’s house (Mk 1:29–34; cf. Mt. 8:14–17). Jesus heals a leper (Mk 1:40–45; cf. Mt. 8:1–4). Jesus heals a paralytic (Mk 2:1–12; cf. Mt. 9:2–8). The call of Levi/Matthew (Mk 2:13–17; cf. Mt. 9:9–13). Question about fasting and parabolic responses (Mk 2:18–22; cf. Mt. 9:14–17). Jesus appoints the twelve (Mk 3:13–19; cf. Mt. 10:1–4).

than Mark's. This is a trend that appears to be carried through into the discourse itself, which is structured to focus attention on a uniquely Matthean parable about separation and judgement.

4.2. The Structure of Matthew 13

Matthew 13:1–23 includes the parable of the Sower and its interpretation, as well as a section about why Jesus taught using parables. This section closely parallels Mark 4:1–20, but with some notable exceptions. Matthew does not include the parables of the Lamp Under a Basket¹²⁰ or the Measure, and he places his parallel to Mark 4:25 in the section between the parable of the Sower and its interpretation (Mt. 13:12). Matthew also reverses the order of the crop production at the end of the Sower, resulting in the three amounts decreasing rather than increasing (13:8, 23; cf. Mk 4:8, 20),¹²¹ and he includes a fuller quotation of Isaiah 6:9–10 (Mt. 13:14–15).¹²² Yet, despite these variations, few scholars see a significant difference in Matthew's overall

¹²⁰ As previously stated, Matthew uses the parable to illustrate a different teaching in 5:15–16. See section 1.2.

¹²¹ Margaret Pamment suggests that Matthew may have reversed this order to avoid the climax that is created in the Markan version. She believes that this may be in order to 'leave the emphasis of the parable in the description of individuals' (Margaret Pamment, 'The Kingdom of Heaven According to the First Gospel', *New Testament Studies* 27.2 (1981), p. 218). However, she does not make it clear how reversing the order achieves this. W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison suggest that the three levels of yield correspond to the three variations of unfruitful ground. Thus, they assert that Mark's account creates a 'sort of chiasmus, with the worst seed and the best at the extremes, the best of the worst and the worst of the best in the middle' (*Matthew 8–18*, p. 385). However, it seems better to assert that Mark's version is placed in a parallel structure, with the two sets of three progressing from worst to best. Thus, it is Matthew's reversal that creates a chiasm, with the worst of each triad on the extremes, and the best in the middle.

¹²² Snodgrass believes that Matthew's use of the longer quotation is due to his emphasis on the importance of understanding (13:13, 14, 15, 19, 23, 51) and not just hearing (cf. Mk 4:3, 9, 12, 15, 16, 18, 20, 23). Thus, 'Whereas Mark asks, "Do you really hear Jesus' message?" Matthew asks, "Do you really understand with your heart?"' (*Stories with Intent*, p. 152).

message.¹²³ This similarity, however, changes at 13:24 where Matthew deviates from his sources in both Mark and Q, by including the uniquely Matthean parable of the Weeds, instead of the Markan parable of the Growing Seed (13:24–30; cf. Mk 4:26–29). Matthew returns to his sources for the parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven (13:31–33), as well as an abbreviated parallel of Mark’s concluding statement (13:34; cf. Mk 4:33–34), but he then extends his discourse by a further eighteen verses of uniquely Matthean material. This includes the interpretation of the parable of the Weeds, and four other parables,¹²⁴ one of which (The Net) is also given a very similar interpreted in the passage (13:36–53). Matthew’s inclusion of this material causes his parable discourse to follow an extended chiastic structure like the one we previously observed in the Markan parallel passage (see section 2.1). Yet, Matthew’s version is longer and even more clearly structured. Carson and Moo outline this structure as follows:

To the crowds (13:3b–33)

1. the parable of the soils (13:3b–9)

2. interlude (13:10–23)

(a) on understanding parables (13:10–17)

(b) interpretations of the parable of the soils (13:18–23)

3. the parable of the weeds (13:24–30)

4. the parable of the mustard seed (13:31–32)

5. the parable of the yeast (13:33)

¹²³ In addition to the works cited in the previous two notes, see, for example, Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, pp. 288–95; Donald A. Hagner, ‘Matthew’s Parables of the Kingdom (Matthew 13:1–52)’, in *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables*, ed. by Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), p. 103.

¹²⁴ Whether a commentator regards there to be three or four parables in this section depends on their categorisation of the statement in 13:52. France, for example, regards it as a parable in its own right, whilst Hagner does not. See France, *Matthew*, pp. 543–47; cf. Hagner, *Matthew’s Parables of the Kingdom*, pp. 120–22.

Pause (13:34–35)*–parables as fulfilment of prophecy (13:34–35)**–interpretation of the parable of the weeds (13:36–43)***To the disciples (13:44–52)***5'. the parable of the hidden treasure (13:44)**4'. the parable of the expensive pearl (13:45–46)**3'. the parable of the net (13:47–48)**2'. interlude (13:49–51)**(a') interpretation of the parable of the net (13:49–50)**(b') on understanding parables (13:51)**1'. the parable of the teacher of the law (13:52)¹²⁵*

Whereas, in Mark, the central section of the chiasm is the interpretation of the parable of the Sower (referred to as 'the soils' in the above quotation), we see that in Matthew, it is the fulfilment of prophecy and interpretation of the Weeds that forms the focal point. In addition to this, the parable of the Weeds and its interpretation bracket the Mustard Seed and Leaven, forming a triad that makes up the immediate context for Matthew's version of the Mustard Seed parable. Therefore, we will now consider this uniquely Matthean parable in more detail.

4.3. The Parable of the Weeds (Mt. 13:24–30, 36–43)

The parable of the Weeds, like that of the Sower, includes a detailed allegorical interpretation (13:36–43). It depicts the sowing of the 'children of the evil one' amongst the 'children of the kingdom' and the ultimate fate of the two groups at the end of the age. Whilst this parable is only recorded by Matthew, its position in the discourse and similarities in content have led some interpreters to conclude that it is Matthew's

¹²⁵ Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 139–40.

expanded version of the Growing Seed.¹²⁶ However, despite the similarities, it has a very different message.

4.3.1. The Weeds and the Growing Seed

Whilst writing about Mark's twin parables of the Growing Seed and Mustard Seed, Hooker comments that the two appear to have been placed together because they have the same message. She goes on to say that, due to their allusions to eschatological images of harvest and shelter, 'one would expect that the kingdom would be spoken of in terms of future judgement and of setting things right'.¹²⁷ Yet, this does not happen. As we saw in our study of Mark, the Growing Seed illustrates inevitable growth, ultimately resulting in the production of fruit ready to harvest (see section 2.4). Likewise, the Mustard Seed illustrates the growth of the kingdom from unlikely and controversial beginnings to an empiric source of shelter and provision (see section 2.5). Both appear to be exclusively positive illustrations of the kingdom. However, here in Matthew, we find something quite different. The illustration of future judgement that Hooker expects from Mark is exactly what is delivered by Matthew.

The parable of the Weeds does not depict only the positive growth of the wheat, but the malicious introduction and growth of weeds amongst the crop. Likewise, the harvest is not a simple case of reaping and collecting the grain (as it is in Mk 4:29),

¹²⁶ See, for example, Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), pp. 253–54. The two parables share the following elements: Kingdom, a man, sowing seed, sleep, sprouting, fruit, blade, wheat, and harvest. See also Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, p. 197.

¹²⁷ Hooker, *Mark's Parables of the Kingdom*, p. 97. See section 2.5 for reference to this quotation in its Markan context.

but of separating out the weeds to be burned (Mt. 13:30). Therefore, even if the two parables are compared without Jesus' interpretation (13:37–43), clearly a second strand of meaning is included. The elements of sowing, waiting, growing, and harvesting are all present, but with the added dimensions of sabotage and separation. Thus, we must consider the impact of this on our understanding of the Mustard Seed parable in Matthew's discourse. If, as Hooker suggests, its pairing with the Growing Seed in Mark demonstrates that the two parables are teaching the same thing, then Matthew's triadic grouping with two very different parables may, in turn, have different implications on his intended meaning. However, before we discuss the relationship with the Mustard Seed parable, we will first consider the relationship between the parable of the Weeds and the preceding parable of the Sower.

4.3.2. The Weeds and the Sower

As with the Growing Seed, the parable of the Sower also has similarities with the Weeds that go beyond simply the agricultural theme. Although it depicts the productivity of four types of ground, if the parable is viewed from the perspective of the sower, there are ultimately only two results: seed that is not fruitful (for three different reasons) and seed that is fruitful (producing three different quantities).¹²⁸ These binary results are illustrated in the previous chapter when Jesus speaks of good and bad trees that produce good and bad fruit (Mt. 12:33–37), but the theme is further expanded in the parable of the Weeds. Whereas the types of ground in the Sower

¹²⁸ Viewing the parable in this way may explain why Matthew specifically calls this 'the parable of the sower' (13:18) – a title that many commentators seem keen to 'correct'. See, for example, 'the parable of the soils' in Carson, *Matthew*, p. 304; Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, p. 365; 'the seed in the fourfold field' in Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, p. 235.

illustrate the difference in the receptivity of the hearer, all of whom receive the same seed from the same man, the Weeds depicts two different sowers with two different types of seed. Yet, the distinguishing feature is the same. Weeds are regarded as weeds because they do not produce good fruit, and the slaves in the parable only recognise that there is a difference between the two plants¹²⁹ when the good ones produce grain and the bad ones do not (13:26).¹³⁰ Thus, whilst the different types of ground in the parable of the Sower illustrate the different factors that influence a person's response to Jesus, the parable of the Weeds illustrates the enemy's influence, and the evil that is allowed to remain until the final judgement.¹³¹ Yet, despite the detailed interpretation that is contained in the passage, interpreters dispute what the parable symbolises.

4.3.3. The Weeds and the Kingdom

Jesus says that the parable represents the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 13:24) and that the separation of the wheat and weeds represents the Son of Man sending his angels to 'collect *out of his kingdom* all causes of sin and all evildoers' (13:41 emphasis

¹²⁹ The word χότρος (translated 'plants' in the NRSV) usually means 'grass' (cf. Mt. 6:30; Jn 6:10; Rev. 8:7), but Jesus uses the term in the parables of the Weeds (Mt. 13:26) and the Growing Seed (Mk 4:28) to refer to grain that has sprouted but is not fully developed yet. See William A. Williams, 'Agriculture', in *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, ed. by Douglas Mangum, Derek R. Brown, Rachel Klippenstein, and Rebekah Hurst (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014), χότρος (this is an ebook with no page numbers given).

¹³⁰ The identity of the weeds (ζιζάνιον) is thought to be *Lolium, temulentum*, more commonly known as darnel. Darnel closely resembles wheat in the early stage of growth, and the two are very difficult to tell apart. However, darnel, which is noxious and has narcotic qualities, becomes easily distinguishable when the fruit is produced, as it is both smaller and darker than wheat. Therefore, although the weeds produce fruit, it is bad fruit. See Balfour, *The Plants of the Bible*, pp. 180–82.

¹³¹ Davies and Allison similarly observe that the principal difference between the Sower and the Weeds is that the Sower illustrates human responsibility, whilst the Weeds illustrates the role of the devil in the 'apparent failure of God's Word' (*Matthew 8–18*, p. 408).

added). This stated focus on the kingdom has led some interpreters to conclude that it is an illustration of the mixed nature of the Church.¹³² Luz, for example, believes that, in its pre-Matthean form, ‘the narrative was related to the church itself and spoke of the appearance of evil *within* the community’.¹³³ This interpretation fits well with parts of the parable’s imagery, such as the enemy sowing the weeds *into* the good crop, but it is not a view that is widely accepted amongst scholars. Carson dismisses the idea that the parable illustrates the visible church. He points out that Matthew consistently regards kingdom and church as two distinct categories throughout his Gospel.¹³⁴ In Jesus’ interpretation of the parable, he says that the field represents the world (Mt. 13:38). Thus, Carson believes that the existence of good and evil in the world generally, and the separation of the two groups at the eschaton, is adequate explanation.¹³⁵ However, both Luz and Carson’s views seem to be needlessly polar extremes. Hagner expresses a more nuanced approach when he says that ‘the wicked are gathered from the kingdom in the sense that they were in the world and had existed

¹³² A. W. Pink reads the parable in light of Church history, but his strongly Reformed views subsequently lead to him equating the weeds with ‘Rome and her daughters masquerading under the guise of Christianity’ (Arthur Walkington Pink, *The Prophetic Parables of Matthew Thirteen* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2005), Chapter 2: The Parable of the Tares (this is an ebook with no page numbers given). Yet, Pink’s views are extreme, and few commentators interpret the passage in this way.

¹³³ Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, p. 255. Luz goes on to say that the interpretation in Mt. 13:37–43 is given because the original Jewish/Christian audience would likely have seen their lives alongside unbelieving Israel illustrated in the parable. However, this view ‘was no longer fitting, for in the meantime the wheat, the church, had to separate from the darnel, the synagogue.’ (*Matthew 8–20*, p. 256). There is indeed wide recognition amongst scholars of the Jewish nature of Matthew’s Gospel, and the belief that his audience was predominantly Jewish converts to Christianity. For a detailed discussion on the historical situation of Matthew, see Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, pp. 45–56. For a discussion of the *sitz im leben* of Matthew’s audience, see Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, pp. lxx–lxxi. For a discussion of this issue as it relates to the parable of the Weeds, see Petri Luomanen, ‘*Corpus Mixtum* – An Appropriate Description of Matthew’s Community?’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117.3 (1998), pp. 471–74.

¹³⁴ Carson, *Matthew*, p. 324.

¹³⁵ *Matthew*, pp. 324–25.

alongside the righteous. So they were even in the visible church, but are to be finally distinguished and separated from the righteous'.¹³⁶ Although the weeds (evil ones) are not a part of the kingdom in that they are not genuine followers of Jesus, they may be present and difficult to distinguish within the Church. Just as those who are represented by the third type of ground in the parable of the Sower appear to accept Jesus' message but allow the cares of the world to prevent it from bearing fruit (Mt. 13:7, 22), those who are sown by the enemy may be as difficult to distinguish from genuine believers as dandelion is from wheat in their early stages of growth. It is only by their fruit that they can be identified (cf. Mt. 3:8–10; 7:15–20; 12:33). This does not mean that the parable is exclusively an illustration of the Church, but nor does it mean that it cannot encompass the Church as a part of the world.

The parable of the Weeds, then, creates a very different context for the Mustard Seed, than the Growing Seed does in Mark's parallel. We will now consider some of the implications of this on Matthew's account of the Mustard Seed parable.

4.4. The Mustard Seed (Mt. 13:31–32)

As previously observed, Matthew conflates the accounts of Mark and Q to create a composite version of the Mustard Seed parable. Therefore, the seed is described as 'the smallest of all seeds' that grows into 'the greatest of shrubs' (cf. Mk 4:31–32), but it is also sown by a man, and it becomes a tree in whose branches the birds nest (cf. Lk. 13:19). Other than Matthew's characteristic change from 'kingdom of God' to

¹³⁶ Hagner, *Matthew's Parables of the Kingdom*, p. 112.

‘kingdom of heaven’,¹³⁷ the only notable element that is not in either of the other Synoptic accounts is that the seed is sown in a field rather than a garden.¹³⁸ Matthew, thus, includes the contrast in size that we observed in Mark’s version (see section 2.5), with the realistic image of a mustard seed growing into a shrub. However, *the shrub* then becomes a tree, meaning that Matthew’s unrealistic element comes at a different point to both Mark’s¹³⁹ and Luke’s.¹⁴⁰ This transformation from realistic to unrealistic has led some interpreters to conclude that the parable illustrates the kingdom becoming something that it should not be. G. Campbell Morgan, for example, believes that if the parable is viewed as depicting positive growth that exceeds expectation, then it contradicts the first two parables’ illustration of ‘partial and shaded success’.¹⁴¹ Morgan carries over the identification of component parts from the interpretations of the Sower and the Weeds, subsequently equating the birds with ‘the evil one’ (cf. Mt. 13:19) and stating that the growth of the tree is ‘unnatural’.¹⁴² Finally, he briefly applies this to the history of the Church, concluding that ‘wherever the Church has risen to anything like worldly power it has become a refuge for the things that are unclean and polluting and life-destructive’.¹⁴³

¹³⁷ For a detailed discussion of Matthew’s use of this term, see Robert Foster, ‘Why on Earth Use “Kingdom of Heaven”? : Matthew’s Terminology Revisited’, *New Testament Studies* 48.4 (2002), pp. 487–99.

¹³⁸ This is likely for the sake of continuity with the previous two parables. See John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, UK: Wm. B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2005), p. 550.

¹³⁹ The birds nesting in the shade of a mustard plant (Mk 4:32). See section 2.5.

¹⁴⁰ The mustard seed growing into a tree (Lk. 13:19). See section 3.2.2.

¹⁴¹ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York, NY; Chicago, IL; Toronto; London, UK; Edinburgh, UK: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1907), pp. 94–98.

¹⁴² *The Parables of the Kingdom*, p. 98.

¹⁴³ *The Parables of the Kingdom*, p. 105

There are aspects of this interpretation that seem to fit well with Matthew's context. If the growth is viewed as unnatural and the birds represent the imposition of evil, then it is easy to see parallels with the sabotaged crop and the weeds amongst the wheat from the previous parable. However, Morgan's assessment of the first two parables in the sequence seems unjustifiably negative, and he does not take into consideration the use of established prophetic imagery from Ezekiel 17 and Daniel 4.¹⁴⁴ Although the first three types of ground that are described in the Sower yield no crop, we are not told what proportion of the seed fell on them. If the sower were at all competent, then the majority would surely have fallen in the cultivated soil.¹⁴⁵ Thus, the huge productivity of the fertile ground would still constitute an excellent, if not miraculous overall return.¹⁴⁶ Likewise, although the parable of the Weeds depicts the work of the enemy, the wheat is ultimately undamaged. Although more work is required at the harvest, the landowner benefits from the production of fuel in addition to his intended crop.¹⁴⁷

Therefore, the first two parables support the interpretation of the Mustard Seed that we drew from Mark 4 (see section 2.5). Matthew's readers may be surprised by the

¹⁴⁴ For discussion on the images contained in these passages, see sections 2.5 and 3.2.2.

¹⁴⁵ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, p. 167.

¹⁴⁶ Many scholars consider this return to be a hyperbolic exaggeration that would far exceed normal agricultural expectations. For example, John Donahue says that an average harvest was a yield of seven and a half times, with a good yield being ten times. Therefore, the thirtyfold yield, that is the least of the three amounts mentioned in Mt. 13:8, 23, constitutes three times that of a farmer's best expectations. See Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, p. 33; cf. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 150. However, Snodgrass points out that whether the yield is miraculous or not, depends on whether it is the field or the individual plant that is in view. If it is the field, then it is indeed a miraculous yield; particularly with three parts of the seed being unfruitful, but if it is only the yield of the fruitful seed that is in view, as the parable suggests, then it would constitute a good yield, but not a miraculous one. See Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, pp. 154–55; cf. France, *Mark*, p. 192.

¹⁴⁷ Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 225. It is acknowledged that the interpretation does not give the impression that the burning of the weeds is a benefit, but nor does it suggest something *unexpectedly* negative about the kingdom (cf. Dan. 12:1–2; Zeph. 1:2–3; Mal. 4:1–3).

mounting opposition against Jesus (cf. 11:19; 12:2, 14, 24). Many people do not fully respond to his message (13:3–7, 18–22), evil is allowed to remain in the world (13:24–29), and the kingdom’s influence appears tiny and insignificant (13:31). Yet, the message of these parables is that the harvest will ultimately be abundant (13:8, 23), the crop will be separated (13:30, 40–43), and the kingdom will grow strong and prosperous (13:32; cf. Ezek. 17:22–23). This interpretation seems to fit well with the material already discuss, but we must also consider how it relates to the remainder of the discourse. Most significant in this, is the second parable of the pairing that Matthew retains from Q: the parable of the Leaven.

4.5. The Leaven (Mt. 13:33)

Matthew’s wording of the parable of the Leaven is virtually identical to that in Luke (cf. Lk. 13:20–21).¹⁴⁸ Thus, all that we previously observed in sections 3.3 and 3.4 regarding leaven’s pervading nature and its use as a symbol of corruption and hypocrisy, are also relevant to our study of the parable in Matthew. Despite this, most commentators only consider the Leaven in light of the previous parable of the Mustard Seed.¹⁴⁹ As a result, they offer an interpretation that carries over the stated smallness of the seed (Mt. 13:32)¹⁵⁰ and reapplies it to the piece of leaven. It is then seen as a reiteration of the Mustard Seed’s message of huge growth from tiny origins.

¹⁴⁸ His only significant change is the introductory statement, where Matthew makes his characteristic change from ‘kingdom of God’ to ‘kingdom of heaven’. See above note 137 for more on this subject.

¹⁴⁹ See, for example, France, *Matthew*, p. 528; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, UK: Wm. B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), pp. 352–53; Nolland, *Matthew*, pp. 553–54.

¹⁵⁰ On the small size of mustard seeds, see section 2.5.

Yet, whilst our study of the parable's Lukan context also led to the conclusion that leaven's negative connotations were not in view, the wider Matthean context, may suggest something different. Just as the enemy secretly sows the weeds in the field of wheat and the whole crop is affected (13:25–26), so the woman hides the leaven in the batch of wheat flour until the whole amount is leavened (13:33). This interpretation is appealing due to the clear similarities in the action depicted, the proximity of the two parables, and the retention of the negative symbolic nature of leaven.¹⁵¹ However, whilst this similarity of imagery seems clearly evident, it becomes problematic when the interpretation is applied. Although most of the parable of the weeds is devoted to the description of the sabotage and the conversation between the master and his slaves, the focus of Jesus' interpretation is overwhelmingly on the separation of the harvest and its correspondence with the eschatological judgement (cf. Mt. 13:24–30, 37–43). If the leaven is associated with the weeds and the flour is associated with the wheat, then no equivalence can be made with this interpretation. Once flour is leavened, it cannot be separated again. The two elements are not simply mixed, the leaven fundamentally changes the nature of the dough.

Yet, the logical conclusion of the parable of the Leaven is never reached either. The dough does not rise, nor is the bread baked.¹⁵² The focus, as in the Lukan version, is on the hiding of the leaven and its pervading influence. The similarity of action may

¹⁵¹ For the view that the leaven in Mt. 13:33 represents corruption and evil, see Morgan, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, pp. 109–28; Pink, *The Prophetic Parables of Matthew Thirteen*, Chapter 4: The Parable of the Leaven (this is an ebook with no page numbers given).

¹⁵² Contra Gos. Thom. 96 where the conclusion is reached, and the woman makes the dough into 'large loaves'.

explain its grouping with the parable of the Weeds, however the key to its interpretation appears to lie in the concept of hiding.

4.6. Κρύπτω in Matthew 13

Derivatives of the word κρύπτω (hide) appear three more times in Matthew 13.¹⁵³ Following its use in the parable of the Leaven (13:33), it appears once in the adapted quotation of Psalm 78:2 (13:35), and twice in the parable of the Hidden Treasure (13:44). The first of these occurrences seems particularly significant, not only because it immediately follows the parable in question, but because it appears to be a Matthean adaptation of the text. Matthew cites Psalm 78:2 as further explanation for why Jesus taught the crowd using parables. The first half of the quotation follows the Septuagint verbatim, but there is substantial alteration in the second half.¹⁵⁴ The Septuagint reads, 'I will voice riddles (πρόβλημα) from the beginning' (Ps. 77:2 LXX), whereas Matthew's quotation reads, 'I will proclaim what has been hidden (κεκρυμμένα) from the foundation of the world' (Mt. 13:35). This adaptation creates a link backwards to the parable of the Leaven and forwards to the parable of the Hidden Treasure. Thus, the kingdom is portrayed as the hidden entity, and the parables are the means of its revelation.¹⁵⁵ These two parables correspond to one another in the chiastic structure outlined above in section 4.2 and both illustrate the pervading effect of the thing that is hidden. Just as the large quantity of flour is leavened by the piece that is hidden

¹⁵³ For a detailed discussion of the term's use in the Bible and other ancient literature, see Oepke and Meyer, *Κρύπτω*, pp. 957–1000.

¹⁵⁴ Craig L. Blomberg, 'Matthew', in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. by G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007), p. 49.

¹⁵⁵ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, p. 240.

inside it, so the whole field is worth selling everything to obtain because of the treasure that is concealed within it. However, whilst the Hidden Treasure speaks of the value of the kingdom message,¹⁵⁶ the Leaven speaks of its influence. We see, then, essentially the same meaning as was conveyed in Luke's account of this parable, despite the difference in Matthew's context.

Thus, with the Mustard Seed and Leaven, Matthew not only conflates the material from Mark and Q, but through his own additions and redactional work, he also conflates the teaching. The message of the Mustard Seed is essentially the same as it was in Mark. The growth of a shrub from a tiny seed accurately reflects the apparently unimpressive results of Jesus' ministry at this stage of the narrative – results that are also reflected in the three types of unfruitful ground and the weeds mixed into the good crop. Yet the stated contrast of size, and the shrub's ultimate end as a tree that becomes a nesting place for the birds, illustrates the kingdom's ultimate eschatological end, just as the images of harvest and separation do.¹⁵⁷ These references to separation and judgement (13:30, 37–43, 47–50) are interspersed with illustrations of the kingdom's hidden, yet pervasive power (13:33) and immense value (13:44–46) to create a broader parabolic illustration of the kingdom than either of the other Evangelists convey with their parallel accounts.

¹⁵⁶ For a detailed discussion of this parable, see Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, pp. 275–78; Nolland, *Matthew*, pp. 562–65.

¹⁵⁷ For discussion on the images of the tree and the birds and their scriptural allusions, see sections 2.5 and 3.2.2.

Conclusion

Our Gospel-oriented study of the parable of the Mustard Seed has demonstrated the importance of each writer's context and wording in conveying their intended message. It has also shown that there is sufficient variation between the accounts to suggest that the writers of Mark and Luke were using the parable to illustrate different points. Mark's realistic agricultural image of a tiny seed becoming a large plant, vividly illustrates the contrast between the kingdom's seemingly insignificant and controversial present reality, and its ultimate eschatological fulfilment. Luke places a much greater emphasis on the final state of the tree and birds. This then works with the surrounding material to form a contrast between the hypocritical Pharisees and Jesus; where the old, oppressive religious system is juxtaposed with the coming kingdom of God. This interpretation rests entirely on the wording and context contained in Luke and is completely lost in a parable-oriented study that conflates the material.

Yet, even in our study of Matthew, the Gospel-oriented method has yielded valuable results. His retention of the contrast in size between the small seed and the large plant, and his preservation of much of the Markan context, results in essentially the same interpretation for the parable that we drew from Mark's account. However, Matthew's inclusion of the Q parable of the Leaven and his own unique material and structuring causes his discourse to have the added dimensions of eschatological judgement and the pervading nature and immense value of the kingdom's message.

This confirms our theory that conflating Gospel accounts into a unified study and making a parable an entity in its own right, can restrict the individual Gospels' ability

to convey their writer's intended message. This is particularly true with the Mustard Seed parable, since none of the Gospels has an overtly stated interpretation and there is substantial variation of wording and context amongst the accounts. Yet, a parable's intended meaning is so dependant on its context, that even in Jesus' wider parable corpus, the nuances of each Evangelist's account may be restricted or obscured by a parable-oriented approach. Thus, the Gospel-oriented method would be a useful tool for parable scholars to employ in future research.

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