

Jesus' use of Parables in Mark with Special Reference to Mark 4:10-12

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The controversial, and I should say unsettled argument among scholars as to what a parable really is will not be entered into here. The fact is that none of the so-called definitions is adequate—not even the time-honoured definition of a parable as being an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. It is therefore advantageous to concentrate our attention on the use of parables in Mark with a focus on Mark 4:10-12, which is the purpose of this paper. However, a study like this will not be complete or understood without reference to the use of parables in general including its background in the Old Testament.

Perhaps our Lord chose this method of teaching partly because he loved telling stories. He was, as we say, a born story teller. However, we must remember also that Jesus found this method in use. There are parables in the Old Testament. For example, when prophet Nathan determined to confront David with a message of God's judgment for his murder of Uriah and his theft of Uriah's wife, he did so by the parable of the rich man's flocks and the poor man's one loved lamb (2 Sam. 12:1-14). An unnamed "certain man of the sons of the prophets" confronted King Ahab with a grim parable that was partly spoken and partly acted out (1 King 20:35-42). One of the great passages in the prophecy of Isaiah is the comparison of Israel with a vineyard planted by the hand of God and tended with patience and devotion so that it should bring forth grapes but which brought forth at last nothing but wild grapes (Isa. 5:1-7). Other parables may be discerned in passages like Ezek. 17:1-10, 19:2-9, 10-14, 20:45-49; cf. Judg. 9:7-20.

Parables were also in use during the time of our Lord among the Rabbis—the Jewish teachers. It was characteristic of the Jewish teachers to convey truth imaginatively rather than in abstract argument. There were many familiar themes which were manipulated

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and applied in varying ways; the king who says or does something, the scene of a feast or a field or a vineyard. Dr Oesterley, who has made a special study of this subject, gives many examples of rabbinical parables in his *The Gospel Parables in the Light of their Jewish Background*. But he is at the same time convinced that Jesus' parables are superior. He has this to say: "Interesting and instructive as [the parables of the Rabbis] often are, they stand on an altogether lower plane [than the Gospel parables]. It is not prejudice that prompts us to say this—far from that—we have a warm feeling of sympathy with a great deal of the rabbinical teaching, but we are convinced that any impartial reader of the two sets of parables, the Gospel and the Rabbinical, will be forced to admit that the latter compare very unfavourably with the former."¹

Before we consider the difficult passage in Mark 4:10-12, the question of why our Lord used parables should be examined further. We have said that our Lord did not invent the parabolic method of teaching. But we must note also that our Lord would not have taken up this method had it not commended itself to him. Dr Oesterley has this to say about the parables of the Old Testament: "Whatever other uses a parable served, its prime purpose was to teach. . . In the large variety of what are called parables in the Old Testament. . . the great majority are easily understood, and are intended to be so."² As this was true of the parables in the Old Testament, so it was equally true of the parables of Jesus in the New. In fact, it is certainly desirable that it should be more nearly true of the preaching and teaching put forth by his interpreters.

Jesus drew his parables from the realm of nature that was very familiar to the people—his hearers. This alone indicates that he chose the method because it was the clearest and most forceful way of bringing home his message. The purpose of parabolic teaching is thus clear: "Its aim is to elucidate truth, not to obscure it, still less to conceal an issue or to serve as a punishment."³

According to Mark 4:33f., Jesus made considerable use of parables in his preaching. This was adapted to the deficient understanding of the simple people (4:33 *kathôs ēdunanto akouein*). As with the

¹ W. O. Oesterley, *The Gospel Parables in the Light of their Jewish Background* (New York, 1936), p. 11.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 5.

³ V. Taylor, *The Gospel According to St Mark* (New York, 1966), p. 250.

Rabbis, the parables were designed to make explicit intellectual concepts easier to understand by means of concrete illustrations from familiar fields. "This is particularly so in the case of Jesus because he realized that he was called at the most critical hour in the people's history to be God's messenger to arouse them to seize the hour"⁴ (cf. Lk. 12:54-56). The people were to make the required decision (Lk. 17:26-30). If his cries of warning were to be effective, they had to be clear (cf. I Cor. 14:8). He is a prophet seeking to kindle a fire (Lk. 12:49), not an apocalypticist speaking obscurely.

This means that in the primary situation, that is, in the original context of the preaching either by Jesus or the early church, the parables were directly apprehensible, and needed no interpretation, as is also true of the rabbinic use of parables. However, we must also suppose that the understanding of parables presupposes listeners who are willing to accompany the speaker in his thinking and who are capable of grasping the similarity between image and reality.

At this juncture a crucial point arises, more so as Jesus' ideas of the coming Kingdom and the nature of God were quite different from those current in Judaism. The parable may fail if there is no spiritual power to grasp its heart or if the revelation of God which it contains is rejected. From our knowledge of the Gospels Jesus experienced both those things. Nor does acceptance of the principle that Jesus used the parables as an aid to understanding rule out the fact that he sometimes used this form of speech to express his thoughts in veiled manner, especially if he was using it for self-protection, a point which we shall have occasion to discuss further (cf. Matt. 21:33-46).

There is no doubt, of course, that the parables are a fragment of the "original rock of tradition."⁵ We agree with Jeremias that not only do the parables of Jesus regarded as a whole represent a specially reliable tradition, but they also present the appearance of being entirely free from problematic elements. Nevertheless, the parables confront us with a difficult problem, namely, the recovery of their original meaning. This is why Mark 4:10-12 par.—the 'hardening' theory—presents a special problem.

⁴ F. Hauck, "Parabolē," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. V, ed. G. Friedrich, tr. G. W. Bromiley (Michigan, 1967), p. 756.

⁵ J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, tr. S. H. Kooke (New York, 1955), p. 9.

First and foremost, it has to be admitted that the interpretation of the parable of the sower itself must be assigned to a later stage of the tradition than the parable itself. But to say that Mark 4: 10-12 does not belong to the oldest layer of the tradition fails to exhaust the literary-critical problems with which Mark 4:10-12 presents us. But we agree with Manson and others that v. 11f. is probably an insertion into an older context and this is confirmed by the introductory phrases *kai elegen autois* (v. 11).⁶ This is one of Mark's typical link phrases (cf. 2:27; 4:2, 21, 24; 6:10; 7:9; 8:21; 9:1). The same thing can be suggested in the description of the audience who apart from the twelve are not specifically mentioned—*hoi peri auton sun tois dodeka*. Jeremias may therefore be correct in suggesting that this is a logion belonging to a wholly independent tradition, which was adapted by Mark to the *parabolai* (vv. 10-12), "and must therefore be interpreted without reference to its present context."⁷

Jeremias is of the opinion that this logion may not be earlier than the confession of Peter, "the period of the secret teaching of Jesus."⁸ It describes the perpetual twofold issue of all preaching of the gospel: the offer of mercy and the threat of impending judgement inseparable from it, salvation and destruction, life and death.⁹ But Mark, misled by the catchword *parabolē*, which he erroneously understood as "parable" inserted our logion into the parable-chapter.¹⁰ If, however, Mark 4: 11f. has no reference whatever to the parables of Jesus, then the passage affords no criterion for the interpretation of the parables, nor any warrant for seeking to find in them by means of an allegorical interpretation some secret meaning hidden from the outsiders. On the contrary, Mark 4:11f. asserts that the parables too, like all the words of Jesus, announce no special "secrets," but

⁶ T. W. Manson, "The Purpose of the Parables: A Reexamination of St Mark 4: 10-12," *Expository Times*, Vol. 68 (1957), p. 132. Also E. F. Siegman CPPS, "Teaching in Parables (Mk. 4:10-12; Lk. 8:9-10; Matt. 13:10-15)," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 23 (1961), p. 161; G. G. Boobyer, "The Redaction of Mark 4:1-34," *New Testament Studies*, Vol. 8 (1961), p. 59.

⁷ Jeremias, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁰ See A. M. Ambrozic, "Mark's Concept of the Parable: Mark 4:11f. in the Context of the Second Gospel," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 29 (1967), p. 220.

only the one "secret of the Kingdom of God," to wit, the secret of its contemporary irruption in the words and work of Jesus.¹¹

At the same time we must not be oblivious to the three stages of the tradition—Jesus, the primitive church and Mark. All these three are recognizable throughout the whole of Mark's Gospel, but nowhere so clearly as in chapter 4. Many of the parables are so vividly told that it is natural to assume that they arise out of some actual occurrence.¹² But subsequently, before they assumed a written form, they "lived" as it were in the primitive church, of whose proclamations, preaching and teaching, the words of Jesus were the content, in its missionary activities, in its assemblies, or in its catechetical instruction. It collected and arranged the sayings of Jesus according to their subject-matter created a setting for them, sometimes modifying their form, expanding here, allegorizing there, always in relation to its own situation between the "Cross and the Parousia."¹³ In many cases therefore it will be necessary to remove sayings and parables of Jesus from their setting in the life and thought of the primitive church, in the attempt to recover their original setting in the life of Jesus. But more importantly, as Pryor has rightly pointed out, Mark himself was no mere collector of *Einzelstücke* but a theologian in his own right and one who edited his Gospel to solve a particular problem.¹⁴ In this way, we have cause to believe that the allegorical interpretations which figure so prominently in many of the traditional patterns of the parables of Jesus are not original. Manson arrives at the same result by another way when he says in effect that the parables of the Synoptic Gospels are for the most part "genuine parables:" the few allegories are later interpretations "of what was originally a parable."¹⁵

It is rather a different matter that parables, when detached from their original setting, become riddles because the point of contact, which was plain in the original situation, is lost. In fact, it cannot be totally assumed that the original application was transparent. This is

¹¹ Jeremias, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

¹² T. W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus* (Cambridge, 1955), p. 77.

¹³ See C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London, 1936), p. 111.

¹⁴ J. W. Pryor, "Markan Parable Theology: An Inquiry into Mark's Principles of Redaction," *Expository Times*, Vol. 83 (1972), p. 242.

¹⁵ See T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (London, 1950), p. 35.

why it is necessary to observe that even in the Old Testament the word "parable" is sometimes used with a suggestion similar to what we have in Mark 4:10-12.

The Hebrew *mashal* has as its root meaning "to be like" and is applied most simply to popular sayings which convey comparisons universally recognised as true. But *mashal* can also have the meaning of an oracle or of a riddle or of a saying so dark that it will not be understood. "I will open my mouth and speak in parables," said one of the psalmists, "I will utter dark sayings of old" (Ps. 78:2). With that Old Testament background, we can assume that Jesus or Mark or the early Church intended in the parables to give a message that only the initiated could grasp, while to the crowd it would be no more than a bewilderment and rebuff. This would seem to be exactly what is meant in the present context. The disciples are described as custodians of an esoteric message whose mystery is purposely to remain obscure to those on the outside (Mk. 4:12). Its secret meaning is understood only through allegorical interpretation (4:13f.).¹⁶

Let us examine Mark 4:10-12 further. The crucial and difficult word here is *hina*, used in v. 12, as if the purpose of the parables is to harden the minds of people who hear them. Luke retains *hina* but he omits the *mēpote* clause (Lk. 8:10). Matthew, on the other hand, uses *hoti* to signify that Jesus speaks in parables because of the dullness of the people (Matt. 18:13); then he quotes Isa. 6:9ft, but according to LXX with *kai iasomai autous* instead of *kai aphēthē autois*.

Several attempts have been made to suggest that *hina* in Mark is a mistranslation. A few of these may be cited: (1) that *hina* misrenders the Aramaic particle actually used in the Targum which ought to have been rendered *hoi*, "who";¹⁷ (2) that the *hina* is used in the sense of *hoti* "in such a manner as"; (3) that *hina* is used imperatively in the sense, "let them". All these suggestions are possible.

¹⁶ Theodore J. Weeden, *Mark - Traditions in Conflict* (Philadelphia, 1971), p. 62.

¹⁷ Cf. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus*, p. 78. According to him v. 12 will read: "To you is given the secret of the Kingdom of God, but all things come in parables to those outside, who see indeed but do not know, and hear indeed but do not understand lest they should repent and receive forgiveness."

We, however, agree with Taylor that "whatever bearing they may have on the original saying, it may be doubted if they have affected Mark's meaning."¹⁸

Jeremias attempts a method of interpretation and suggests in effect that the *hina* clause of Mark 4:12 is imperative, that the words coming after *hina* should be regarded as a free quotation from Isa. 6:9f., as if in inverted commas.¹⁹ Hence the *hina* is not expressing the purpose of Jesus but that of God; in fact it almost "amounts to an abbreviation of *hina plērothē*, and therefore is to be translated 'in order that': in the case of divine decisions purpose and fulfilment are identical."²⁰ The verse therefore reads: "in order that (as it is written) they might see and yet not see, hear and yet not understand." Nevertheless we agree with Jeremias that the *mēpote* clause is ambiguous, as also is the *dilema* (Aramaic) which underlies it. Both words can mean, "in order that not" and "lest perhaps"—both meanings are common in the LXX. *Dilema* in addition can mean "unless". The *mēpote* from the LXX of Isa. 6:10 as a rendering of the Hebrew *pen* is better understood as "in order that not," but the *dilema* from the Targum on Isa. 6:10 as the rabbinical exegesis of Isa. 6:10 clearly proves, should be understood as "unless."²¹

If, as Jeremias observes, the wording of the end of Mark 4:12 shows a detailed agreement with the Targum paraphrase of Isa. 6:10b, the *mēpote* of Mark 4:12 must be rendered "unless". Hence, we must translate Mark 4:11f. : "To you has God given the secret of the kingdom of God; but to those who are without everything is obscure, in order that they (as it is written) may 'see and yet not see, may hear and yet not understand, unless they turn and God will forgive them.'"²² Hence we conclude that the logion is not concerned necessarily with the parables of Jesus, but His preaching in general.²³

¹⁸ See Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

¹⁹ Jeremias, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ H. L. Strack - P. Billebeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrash*, 4 vols., (Munich 1922-8), give four examples of the rabbinical exegesis of Isa. 6:10b; they all agree in understanding Isa. 6:10b, not as a threat of final hardening, but as a promise (Vol. I, pp. 622f.).

²² The passive *aphethe* is another case (like *dedotai* in Mk. 4:11) of avoidance of the use of the divine name by means of the passive.

²³ Boobyer, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

It appears, therefore, that the secret of the present Kingdom is disclosed to the disciples, but to the outsiders the words of Jesus remain obscure because they do not recognize his mission nor repent. Thus for them the terrible oracle of Isa. 6:10 is fulfilled. Yet a hope still remains: "If they repent God will forgive them." The last words afford a glimpse of God's forgiving mercy. . . "and their sins should be forgiven them" (Mark 4:12c).

Another different theory since Jülicher, who defended the parables against allegorical interpretation, is to say that the passage in Mark 4:10-12 itself is not authentic. It is claimed that it was influenced by Pauline teaching in Rom. 9-11 on the hardening and rejection of Israel, that it represents a time when the interpretation of the parables had become obscure, when opinion was also influenced by the Pauline teaching mentioned above. But we agree with Taylor that as the passage now stands, "there can be little doubt that it represents the belief of Mark,"²⁴ or probably that of the early Church, if not of Jesus himself.

For one thing how far Mark is influenced by Pauline teaching in Romans is more open to question, and for another he (Mark) does not speak of the hardening of Israel so much as he does of the blindness of the disciples (cf. 6:52; 8:17) and the Scribes (3:5). To be sure Paul does not even allude to the use of parables at all.

What our text does is to distinguish revelation to the disciples and concealment from the crowd, and for this, Taylor observes, Mark has warrant in the Q sayings in Luke 10:21 = Matt. 11:25f.; Lk. 10:23f. = Matt. 13:16 f.²⁵ It is the application of this teaching to the use of parables and the vigour with which he presents the quotation from Isa. 6:9f. which create the difficulty in question. So far from being a completely unauthentic saying, Mark 4:10-12 is best explained if it took its rise in something Jesus actually said and its strong Palestinian flavour and the genuine sayings mentioned above in Q support this conjecture.

The original form of the saying can only be conjectured. Even in strictly parabolic forms, we can only have a partial echo of Jesus' words. Nobody wrote down what he said when he was speaking. Many years later, when the Gospels came to be compiled, nobody could recall all the sentences he had used.

²⁴ Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

As we indicated earlier, probably Mark 4:12 has nothing to do with parables at all. Taylor suggests that Mark may have been mistaken by the enigmatic *en parabolais* which can mean "in riddles"²⁶ (see 3:23). But also it is possible that Jesus was impressed by the similarity between the results of his ministry and the experience of Isaiah and that he made use of the ironic words of Isa. 6:9f. after the fruitless activity in Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum (Matt. 11:20-24; Lk. 10:13-15).

The phrase "to the disciples it had been given to know the secret of the Kingdom, but to those outside everything happened in parables," can also be connected with another saying of our Lord about hiding revelation from the wise and revealing it to babes. "Familiar as Jesus was with the Semitic telic idiom in Isa. 6:10, there is no reason why he should not have used it himself since it was the will of the Father to hide the revelation from the wise and prudent and reveal it unto babes."²⁷ Taylor admits, however, that this suggestion cannot be proved, but that it is in every way superior to the view that Mark 4:10f. is a Markan invention.

The history of tradition itself reveals the fact that the evangelists and the early Church most likely regarded the idea in Isa. 6:9f. and hence the whole "hardening" idea as the fulfilment of the Scripture and therefore foreordained by God. We see this in the fact that only Matthew uses *hoti* instead of *hina*. In making use of Isa. 6:9f. Mark and Luke use *hina* (cf. Acts 28:26).

This in effect leads us to the question, why the allegorical form of interpretation of the parables arose. In the Hellenistic world it was usual to interpret the myths as vehicles of esoteric knowledge, and in Hellenistic Judaism allegorical exegesis was highly esteemed; hence it was to be expected that Christian teachers would resort to the same method.²⁸

In the succeeding period a stimulus was given to the tendency by the fact that there were four Gospel parables which had received a detailed allegorical interpretation of individual features (Mark 4:14-20 par.; Matt. 13:37-43, 49,50; John 10:7-18). But above all, it is likely that "the hardening" theory, which regarded the parables

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Weeden, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

as intended to conceal the mystery of the Kingdom of God from outsiders, led to the predominance of the allegorical method of interpretation.

There is another aspect of the use of parables or interpretation of them as we find it in Mark 4:10-12. This is the secrecy motif of the presentation of Jesus' messiahship in Mark. The parable theory forms one of the three major "stylistic devices"²⁹ by which the "Messianic secret" is presented. In the parable of the sower, it appears that Jesus intentionally delivered his parables as dark sayings and explained them only to a very limited circle (4:33f.).

The merits and demerits of the messianic secret cannot be pursued here as this is outside the purpose of this paper. Suffice it to say that, as in other "stylistic devices," the parable theory, as in for example the command to silence, is almost immediately contradicted in the same chapter (4:33f.). There is no wonder then that almost all New Testament scholars and commentators regard such devices as the result of an editorial process. In short, despite these devices including the parable theory, we still have enormous evidence of the proof of Jesus as the Messiah. In fact this is what the whole of chapters 1-8 is about. Dibelius is correct therefore in his paradoxical statement that Mark is the book of secret epiphany.³⁰

There is another point we should consider about Jesus' use of parables. This is the question of whether or not he used parables as a self-protection. There is no proof for this, but there is good reason to conjecture it. To be sure, there are not as many parables in Mark as in other Synoptic Gospels, but there is the tendency in the few we have to suggest that Jesus was using them as a self-protection. Take two parables for example, that of the sower and that of the wicked tenants of the vineyard. In short, we might say that, instead of confronting the Jewish listeners directly, he used parables as a self-protection. Indeed, despite the use of parables as a self-protection, the Jews sometimes perceived that he was speaking about them. "And they tried to arrest him, but feared the multitude, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them; so they left him and went away" (Mark 12:12).

²⁹ W. Marxsen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Philadelphia, 1968), p. 136.

³⁰ Martin Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*, tr. B. L. Woolf, (London, 1971), p. 230.

We have suggested three concrete and possible ways of looking at Jesus' use of parables in Mark, especially our difficult text in Mark 4:10-12. The three possibilities are, that Jesus looked at the failure of his ministry, the rejection of the Jews, and therefore made use of the hardening of Isaiah 6:9f.; that he was using the parabolic method as a means of self-protection; and lastly that it has to do with the Messianic secret.

However, in spite of these conjectures, our own understanding of Jesus' use of parables in Mark is that he made use of the method in order to drive home his point and to make the message explicit to his hearers. For example, if Mark 4:21-23 is authentic, it certainly has to do with the use of parables. Jesus said to them, "Is a lamp brought in to be put under a bushel, or under the bed, and not on a stand? For there is nothing hid, except to be made manifest, nor is anything secret, except to come to light. . ." Of course, one important factor which we have noted already is the fact that Mark's problem with regard to the use of parables is different from that of Jesus. We have the same problem in the so-called theology of secrecy in Mark.

One last point we should consider is the principle which we should adopt in interpreting the parables. We have, at least by implication, expressed the opinion that a parable has to be interpreted differently from allegories. We must not be deceived by the attempt we find in Mark 4:13-20 to allegorise all parables. This is obviously the early Church's formulation: this should not be applied to every parable. "To be distracted from the main point and possessed instead by the passion of clever speculations about details is to lose the essential meaning of the parable."³¹

It is well known that we owe to A. Jülicher the final discarding of the allegorical method of interpretation,³² although it must be admitted also that Jülicher left the work half done. His struggle to free the parables from the fantastic and arbitrary allegorical interpretations of every detail caused Jülicher "to fall into a fatal error."³³ In his view, the surest safeguard against such arbitrary treatment lay in

³¹ W. R. Bowie, "The Teaching of Jesus: The Parables," *The Interpreters Bible*, Vol. 7 (New York, 1951), p. 173.

³² A. Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu I* (Tubingen, 1910), pp. 203-322.

³³ See Jeremias, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

regarding the parables as a piece of real life and in drawing from each of them a single idea of the widest possible generality. The fact that a parable should not be allegorised does not remove the possibility that some parables may have more than one meaning.

Perhaps the interpreter of the parables may well make it his desire to do with them what *The Book of Common Prayer* bids men pray that they shall do with Scripture as a whole: namely, "hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them." Especially this last.