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MARK'S USE OF PARABLES AS REVEALED IN MARK 4:10-12

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O. B.
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Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to investigate Mark's understanding of parables as revealed in Mark 4:10-12, because parables occupy an important place in the Gospel of Mark. An additional clue to the significance of parables for Mark can be seen in the fact that an extended collection of parables appears near the beginning of his gospel.

Furthermore, it may be that Mark's sources represent part of a collection of parables which had arisen in the early Christian community. However, the present structure of Mark's gospel must be understood as the work of a redactor, since there is no evidence that other gospels had been written prior to the time of Mark's gospel. Therefore, one may conclude that the focal importance which this parabolic material occupies in this gospel must be understood as the result of the author's intention.

The writer feels that this is an important theological problem, because from this study we may see clearer and more meaningfully the purpose and function of parables as revealed in Mark 4:10-12. Since Mark 4:10-12 deals with the use and function of the parabolic method of teaching, it provides a logical point of departure for understanding the larger body of parabolic materials within Mark's gospel.

This paper is limited to the interpretation of Mark 4:
10-12 with reference to specific issues that may arise. Of course, such a paper cannot be written in isolation from the context of the entire Gospel. At the same time, attention is focused here upon issues directly related to this limited section of material with the hope that conclusions drawn from this investigation may provide insight which contributes to the understanding of parabolic material in the Gospel of Mark.

Some dimensions of the problems related to the interpretation of Mark 4:10-12 may be indicated as the basis for the procedure in this study. The significant issues which have emerged in New Testament research are:

(1) Did Mark 4:10-12 arise separately from the context in which it appears in Mark's Gospel?

(2) Does Mark 4:10-12 represent a creation of the early Christian community or is it to be attributed to Mark?

(3) How is the origin of Mark 4:10-12 to be understood; for instance, how does it relate to Isaiah 6:9ff.? Also, does the concept of secrecy reflect Pauline influence?

(4) Does Mark 4:10-12 serve as the basis for understanding parables in the Gospel of Mark?
CHAPTER II

HISTORY OF THE INTERPRETATION OF THE PARABLES

Traditionally, parables have been interpreted as allegories. Consequently each term expressed a cryptogram so that the entire parable had to be decoded term by term.

It must be admitted that the Gospels themselves give encouragement to this allegorical method of interpretation. For instance, Mark interprets the parables of the Sower and Matthew also interprets the Tares and the Dragnet on the basis of such principles.

However, Adolf Junicher applied a thoroughgoing criticism to this allegorical method. He showed that issue does not concern the overuse of the parable in specific instance. Rather the parables in general do not admit of this method at all. Indeed, he suggested that attempts of the evangelists themselves to apply it rest on a misunderstanding.

The parables could have been taken for allegorical mystification only in a non-Jewish environment. Among Jewish teachers the parable was a common and well understood method of illustration.

The parables of Jesus, according to the Gospels, are similar in form to Rabbinic parables. In the Hellenistic

\footnote{J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Charles Scribner's Son, 1963), pp. 12-13.}
world the use of myths, allegorically interpreted as vehicles of esoteric doctrine, was widespread. Therefore, it is not surprising that this practice developed in early Christian circles. Thus, there was some basis for this misunderstanding of the parables.

Parables are the natural expression of a mind that sees truth in concrete pictures rather than conceives it in abstractions. In its simplest form a parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness that leaves the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to activate the hearer into active thought.

The parables of the Gospels are true to nature and to life. Each story attempts to portray a picture of something that can be observed in the world of experience. The processes of nature are accurately observed and recorded; the actions of persons in the stories are in character; they are either such as anyone would recognize as natural in the circumstances, or, if they are surprising, the point of the parables is that such actions are surprising. There is doubtless something surprising in the conduct of the employer who pays the same wages for one hour's work as for twelve, but

\[^2\text{C. H. Dodd, The Parables of The Kingdom (New York: Charles Scribner's Son, 1961), pp. 4-5.}\]

\[^3\text{Ibid., p. 5.}\]
the surprise of the labourers at being treated in this manner gives point to the story.

However, it is the contention of Joachim Jeremias that the parables of Jesus are not literary productions, nor is it their object to lay down general maxims. Each of the parables were uttered in an actual situation in the life of Jesus, at a particular and often unforeseen point.

The parables, consistently, are concerned with a situation of conflict. They correct, reprove, and attack. For the greater part, the parables are weapons of warfare and everyone of them calls for immediate response.

Jesus spoke to men of flesh and blood: he addressed himself to the situation of the moment. Each of his parables has a definite historical setting. For instance, what did Jesus intend to say at this or that particular moment? What must have been the effect of his word upon his hearers? Such questions must be raised about parables so far as may be possible to, hopefully, recover the original meaning of the parables of Jesus, to hear again his authentic voice and in particular as revealed in Mark 4:10-12.

Needless to say questions do come to mind with Jeremias.

4 Ibid., p. 9.
5 Jeremias, op. cit., p. 21.
6 Jeremias, op. cit., p. 22.
thinking in reference to parables. For instance, what about the loss of content, the change of situation? Can we recover Jesus' words and should this be the goal? Or suppose Mark created 4:10-12. What would this mean? It is necessary to evaluate Jeremias' position with reference to parables since such questions do come to mind.
CHAPTER III.

MARK'S UNDERSTANDING OF FUNCTION OF PARABLES AS REFLECTED IN MARK 4:10-12

C. H. Dodd has suggested that the parable is a veiled revelation to those who heard the teaching of Jesus, under temptation and persecution, and because of such conditions parables function as indicated in Mark 4:10-12. These verses are also said to have been spoken in order to prevent those who were not predestined to salvation from understanding the teaching of Jesus.

Of course such a view is connected with the doctrine of the primitive church, accepted with modifications by Paul. This is because the Jewish people to whom Jesus came were by divine providence blinded to the significance of his coming in order that the mysterious purpose of God might be fulfilled through their rejection of the Messiah.

This is to say that the explanation of the purpose of the parables is an answer to a question which arose after the death of Jesus and when one experienced failure in efforts to win the Jewish people. But that he desired not to be understood by the people in general, and therefore clothed His teaching in unintelligible forms, cannot be made credible on

[Dodd, op. cit., p. 3.}
any reasonable reading of the Gospels.

Jeremias concludes that we may assume with certainty that Mark 4:10-12 is a very early logion. It is earlier than Mark, and comes from a Palestinian tradition.

A more striking fact pointed out by T. W. Manson is the agreement between Mark 4:12b and the Targum of Isaiah 6:10ff. Both agree with the Peshitta, and even more closely with the Targum. This agreement between Mark and the Targum extends to details. The recognition of this agreement creates a strong presumption in favor of the authenticity of our logion and is of fundamental importance for the exegesis of Mark 4:10-12.

Therefore, it is the opinion of some theologians that Mark 4:10-12 must be translated: '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 may "see and yet not see, may hear and yet not understand, unless they turn and God will forgive them."' Thus it may be concluded that the logion is not concerned with the parable of Jesus but with his preaching in general.

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9Jeremias, op. cit., p. 15.
Because of the sharp contrast between the disciples and the outsiders, the logion may not only represent the basis of Jesus' secret teaching, but it may also represent the twofold issue of all preaching of the Gospel. Preaching deals with the offer of mercy and the threat of impending judgement inseparable from it, or the deliverance and fear, salvation and destruction, life and death.

If, however, Mark 4:10-12 has no reference whatever to the parables of Jesus, then the passage affords no criterion for the interpretation or the function of parables. Nor does it warrant the attempt to find in the parables, by means of an allegorical interpretation, some secret meaning hidden from the outsiders.

On the other hand, Mark 4:10-12 may assert that the parables, too, like all the words of Jesus, announced no special 'secrets', but only the one, 'secret of the Kingdom of God', the secret of its contemporary irruption in the word and work of Jesus.

Vincent Taylor concludes that Mark 4:10-12 is a Markan construction; i.e., it is a passage put together by Mark himself on the basis of tradition. It has the appearance of a pronouncement story and yet verse 10 may have originally been

\[11\] Jeremias, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 18.

longed to Mark 4:13-20.

It is also argued that originally the saying was related to the teaching ministry of Jesus. Mark, believing it to refer to the purpose of parables, introduced it into its present context thus creating a difficulty which has persisted until modern times. It is felt that Mark has done this in consequence of his belief that Jesus used parables to conceal his meaning from 'those without', whereas in fact His purpose was to elucidate His message by prompting one to reflect.

This passage may also suggest the concept of a Christian secret or mystery, a favorite idea of Paul, who speaks of a 'wisdom of God in a mystery' which has been disclosed in many of his writings. This was hidden in the past from the rulers of this world but has now been revealed through the Spirit (ICor. 1:26-II Cor. 16). Although the word is not used, the idea is prominent in another passage, II Cor. 3:4-4:6. The secret is now open to anyone willing to receive it.

Although the language does not regard the Gospel as esoteric, it is rejected only by those who are unwilling to hear. This is shown by the way in which Romans 9-11 deals with the problem of Israel's rejection. Mark actually seems more pessimistic than Paul about men's possibilities to re-

\[13\text{Ibid., p. 255.}\]
spond to the Gospel.

But, in Mark, the secret concept includes the Kingdom of God. Only the inner group was originally, apparently, intended to understand it. The quotation "in order that they may look and not see..." is from Isaiah 6:10 and may originally have been ironical. Isaiah hoped to shock his hearers into obedience, not to mention that it was God's purpose for them to disobey.

Mark, however, seems to take the saying literally as expressing Jesus' purpose in giving parables. If Jesus spoke these words at all, he may have believed that this was the observed result of much of his preaching. Of course, the saying behind verse 21 certainly is a contradiction to Mark's idea for the purpose of a lamp is to be put on a lamp stand and to give light.

However, we are also confronted with the idea that Mark 4:10-12 was apart of the mystery religions. The thought of hidden, esoteric knowledge which those outside the religion could not know was so familiar that these popular religions of the time are known as the mystery religions. To reveal the secret mysteries of the cult to an outsider was one of the

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15Ibid., p. 91. (11)
most serious of all offences.

The idea of a Christian mystery paralleling those of these various cults is to be found in several New Testament writings. "To you it is granted to know the mystery of the Kingdom of God but not to outsiders." Translating verse 11, the idea is so exactly that of the Hellenistic religious world that its influence in the formation of the saying can hardly be denied.

The passage thus suggests the idea that to the inner circles of disciples and Christians there were truths and mysteries which others could not guess. This, apparently, became an increasingly popular idea with Christian writers as the apologetic and literary programme developed. It gave Christian writers, for example, an obvious advantage over their critics and opponents.

Burkhill offers another interesting possibility for Mark 4:10-12. According to St. Mark's fundamental doctrine, the Messiahship of Jesus is a fact, yet a fact which may not be openly proclaimed to the world until the Son of Man had risen again from the dead. And it is for this reason, as we learn from Mark 4:10-12, that Jesus addresses the multitude in parables.

For the evangelist's interpretation of parables, spoken by Jesus, are not meant to make plain the essential content of the message of salvation but to obscure it. The parables are a means of guarding the mystery or secret of the Kingdom of God.

It is also apparent that Mark 4:10-12 may be related to the "Messianic Secret" concept. According to Wilhelm Wrede, who was the first to undertake a thorough analysis of the problem of Mark's frequent references to Jesus' injunction to silence, Mark has borrowed a theological view current in certain circles to which he belonged.

A major difficulty encountered by early Christians was the problem that only after the resurrection did the disciples appear to understand that Jesus was truly the Messiah. Wrede concludes that Mark attempts to resolve the difficulty by representing Jesus as keeping His Messiahship a secret, and that this dogmatic construction is imposed on Mark's Gospel.

One final reference of Mark's use of parables as revealed in Mark 4:10-12 comes from John Bowman. The author con-

tends that it is possible that Jesus Himself dwelt on this chapter of Isaiah which tells of the call of a prophet accompanied with a warning of the lack of acceptance which his message would find.

The passage in Isaiah probably points to the doctrine of the 'Righteous Remnant' which had become important in all forms of post-exilic and intertestamental Judaism for the 'Sons of Darkness' of the Qumran Literature were not just Gentiles. Even the Mishnaic Rabbis use of the word 'Israel' is significant, because it often meant only themselves and their followers.

Consequently, another possible interpretation of Mark 4:10-12, if not that of Jesus Himself, is a significant piece of early Christian teaching. Just as the prophets were permitted to share in the secret counsel of God, so also the apostles shared in the mystery of the Kingdom of God.

For the opposition to Jesus' teaching as shown by the Pharisees is seen as having been Satanic. The same would apply to the opposition in general in Mark's time and would be reasonable enough for Mark to insert verses 10-12.  

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20 Ibid., p. 138.
CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

In light of the evidence, I personally take the position with C. H. Dodd that Jesus' use of the parables were not designed to be understood by the people in general, and therefore clothed in secrecy, cannot be made valid on any reasonable reading and investigation of the Gospel.

There is very little room for doubt that Mark 4:10-12 is the insertion of a redactor, especially since this section stands in contradiction with the whole of the Gospel. It is probable that Mark 4:10-12 was created by the early church, and that it was really a part of an earlier tradition than Mark. It seems evident that the redactor inserted Mark 4:10-12 as a defensive move to protect this new underground religion because of the threat and persecution of this new Christian minority.

Of course, if this was not the redactor's purpose for this insertion then this would raise many serious questions about this new underground religion called Christianity. For instance, was Christianity just for the new select group or the specially chosen? If so, we may very well conclude that Jesus' message was not for everyone.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


